



Human Behavior and Social Environments

**A Biopsychosocial
Approach**



Dennis Saleebey



Human Behavior and Social Environments

Foundations of Social Work Knowledge

Foundations of Social Work Knowledge

Frederic G. Reamer, *Series Editor*

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HUMAN BEHAVIOR
AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS

A Biopsychosocial Approach

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Preface

To write a book on a subject so wide and diverse, so full of uncertainties and intrigues takes more than a little hubris—a condition not smiled upon by the gods—and not a little humility as well. The book as I planned it in my head, as I thought about it for many years as I taught human behavior and the social environment to students, came to have something of a life of its own and evolved in ways that I could not have imagined. I hope, however, that it remains loyal to some presuppositions and assumptions I have about both the course and the subject matter. Let me share a few of these with you. Then, you can be the judge of whether or not I have stayed the course.

I hope the book reflects the excitement and wonder, the terror and puzzlement of human nature and the human condition. Good and evil, creativity and destruction, falls from grace and redemption, the struggle for freedom and the reality of oppression, the promise of the newborn and the wisdom of the elders, the ravages of disease and the miracle of regeneration, the potential of technology and the enlightenment of indigenous peoples, the corrosive effects of racism and the hope of plurality and inclusion—all these demand our fullest understanding and insight.

The book must relate to practice and experience, both personal and professional. The leap from theory to practice is fraught with peril, a kind of existential bungee jump. Eventually, though, what we think we know about humans, individually and collectively, must inform our practice and our policy. This kind of knowing has many sources—some, perhaps more reliable than others. The knowledge we use ranges from that which is a part of cultural lore, to the observations and experiences of various groups, to the knowledge wrested from the methods of science, to stories and narratives that have relevance and impact in people's lives, to hypotheses and theories yet unproven but plausible. All knowledge, no matter how apparently true or produced through the unself-conscious and distanced observations of science and scientists, requires human judgment, interpretation, and decisions and is played out against the backdrop of the limitations of our senses, our tools, and our presumptions about the world. We are obliged to understand this and to use whatever knowledge is available to us, and even though it seems to reek with pertinence, we must approach its use with care and

circumspection. And, as social workers, we must be alert to its effects on our clients and on ourselves, and we must ensure that the knowledge is in harmony with our professional values and commitments. One of the earlier views of social science was that it must somehow contribute to the well-being of humanity and that it must help us progress to a better quality of life, a more benevolent state of being. Although to contemporary discernment, such an idea might seem naïve, I believe that the basic instinct is correct: we must use knowledge that somehow clarifies the burdens of oppression and illuminates the paths of liberation.

Social workers, perhaps more than other professions, must be alert to the impressions and persuasions of context. We are a society at times hopelessly and unapologetically devoted to the idea of the ascendant importance of the individual. But we all live our lives buffeted and buoyed by the forces of other people, institutions, organizations, events, and chance happenings that swirl about us. Oddly, in a way, the things that make us distinct individuals are almost always (genes aside) contextual. Relationships with others, the sociohistorical moment in which we live, institutional opportunities and barriers, and the shifts and spurts of contingencies all sculpt the human being that we continue to become until we die.

I believe that much of what we know is provisional and fleeting, always evolving, and sometimes becoming extinct. I have no idea how many of the things I have discussed in this book are now being supplanted or shaped—even if only slightly—by new ideas or “discoveries.” But at the least there should be a handle to grab for further exploration on your part. The rapidly changing contours of the landscape in neuroscience or genetics, for example, requires us to continue to revise our map of the territory. I hope that you have some means and resources through your reading here to do that.

I do believe that pop culture, easy nostrums about improving yourself or the human condition, and handy and beguiling depictions of elements of human attributes have rendered us sometimes a little less critical about the complexities of understanding and application. For example, it would be nice to be able to think yourself into health—and perhaps we can do that. But we need to know how that happens and to understand the elegance and improbability of such a phenomenon in the natural world. Every day, books, magazines, television, the Internet, and newspapers lay before us ideas about human nature and the human situation that have little to recommend them—philosophically, scientifically, or humanely.

Finally, I intended at the outset that this book would be for graduate students. But I really do not know that that is a helpful designation. I want those who read the book to be challenged, to be encouraged to think critically, to imagine the application and impact of various ideas, and to be skeptical and to question what is laid out in these pages. It is tempting, these

days, to jazz up your offerings with “bullet-saturated condensations of complicated ideas,” cartoons, sidebars, graphs, and pictures. But there isn’t much of that here. This is a read—a fairly good one I hope—but nonetheless it is simply, a book.

I think my biases are fairly evident here. I have not attempted to hide or dress them up in academic garb. I believe, in the long run and in the most generous sense, that the business of social work is to work to ease or quell oppression and to engage those we help in the search for the liberation of spirit, soul, body—and community. I also am convinced of the magnificence of the capacity for rebound and resilience in people(s). Surely it can be compromised, even crushed, but it stands as testimony to our survival as a species, and to the inner beacon of the soul. I believe that, in the end, individual transformation depends to an uncertain degree upon the transformative power of social justice—the assurance of the social capital that underwrites the human development of all. Meaning-making is a singular capacity of human beings, an endowment that sets us apart from the rest of the animal world. Clearly, some mammals and primates have extraordinary capacities, maybe even limited symbolic ones, but nothing approaching that of humans. With the beauty and burden of meaning-making came the possibility of culture, that distinctive human arrangement that can move us in ways we can hardly imagine, and that gives us the rich ambience of everyday life. In this way, all cultures are precious. Finally, I believe that conventional science, wondrous as it is, has limitations in ferreting out the complexities of human spirit and essence. It is a very clever human construction, but, when it comes to us understanding ourselves, is only one path of discernment.

In the end, I hope that you are more appreciative of the human experience for having read this book. At the least, I hope that you enjoy it.

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I owe a special thanks to a man I never met, except through his astonishing books—the late Ernest Becker. The scope and daring, even danger, of his ideas has always been an inspiration to me and an antidote to my own intellectual temerity. If I were asked, “Is there any one book in social science that I should read?” I would answer, “*The Structure of Evil* by Ernest Becker.” A close second would be his *Denial of Death*.

Another special thanks to John Romanyshyn. When I got my first teaching position at the University of Maine in Orono, even though he moved to another University of Maine campus, he, whether he intended to or not, became my mentor. Few people that I have met since have his intellectual and moral honesty, the capaciousness of his vision, his firm belief in the absolute imperative of social justice, and his ability to bring everything he has to the classroom. If I have become even a shadow of his stature, I am gratified.

I am grateful to Frederick Reamer, who invited me to write a book for this series and who was so appreciative of my intentions and plans. John Michel, the executive editor at Columbia University Press, supported, encouraged, and guided me and demonstrated enormous forbearance when I flagged and got a little lost. Jeri Lambert, the project coordinator for the book at Impressions Book and Journal Services, has had a steady hand in making sure the book got through the necessary production stages, kept me on task, and ensured that the book had a handsome look to it. To Julie DuSablón, the copyeditor, who made a lot of garbled language and intention smooth and readable, I give my deepest thanks.

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Human Behavior and Social Environments

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Learning is a place where paradise can be created.

—BELL HOOKS

Newspaper headlines announce the perplexities, terrors, magnificence, and drama of human behavior every day. Rebels in Sierra Leone slaughter innocent civilians as civil society disintegrates; a man risks his life to save a cat trapped on a telephone pole; a young woman gives birth to a baby during her senior prom and after delivering it in the restroom disposes of it in the trashcan and returns to the dance; a man who suffered the most egregious abuse as a child now spreads the word to others about how he survives—even thrives—as an adult; the gap between the rich and the poor in the United States continues to grow and fourteen million children still live in poverty; 11,000 tons of flowers and other tokens are laid in front of Princess Diana’s palace in the week following her death; a family survives without food for a week after they were trapped in a mountain gully and are saved when their sixteen-year-old daughter ventures out into the freezing weather and walks ten miles to get help; a Kansas man, two months after being diagnosed with colon and liver cancer and having had much of his colon removed, receiving heavy chemotherapy, runs the Boston marathon in his personal best time. And so it goes. The sacred and profane, the mysterious and the obvious, the mundane and the magnificent, the frightening and the heartening, the destructive and constructive are all elements of human nature and the human condition. As social workers, students of human behavior, we are obligated to understand, as best we can, those forces that shape and drive, constrain and obstruct, the human experience.

Human behavior is a subject so vast that it would seem to defy our ability to comfortably and confidently grasp its varieties, nuances, shapes, and dynamics. But as professional helpers we will be called upon every day to understand and to make judgments about our fellow human beings, judgments that lead to activities that will significantly affect their lives. We also have an interest as human beings and citizens of the world in understanding the bewildering and bemusing diversity of people, groups, institutions, environments, and events that surround us in our daily round of life.

To provide some guideposts and landmarks along this cluttered and

twisting path, I will lay out in some detail a framework for approaching the subject matter. Of course, no perspective or framework guarantees truth. Rather, it is merely a means of providing some degree of order and direction to our journey. Perspectives allow us to see what has been hidden from us or to see the familiar in a new light or from a different angle. The framework I will provide is rooted in assumptions, biases, preferences, beliefs, and values that I have collected over the years. I know that for every certainty I hold someone may offer a convincing antithesis. I also realize that much of what we would like to understand about human behavior is shrouded in mystery, wrapped in complexity, or complicated by paradox. Furthermore, some of what we think we know about human behavior is provisional, other notions are probably just wrong-headed, some ideas or conceptions are in transition, and yet others are wishful thinking. Therefore, I ask you to take a critical stance as you encounter the elements of this framework. Think about what might be useful to you or simply interesting as a way of thinking about human behavior and about the physical and social environments that provide the theater for that behavior.

PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES

Principles direct us in our understanding and appreciation of human behavior and human experiences. They also provide a basis for exercising our moral imagination, taking ethical action, and responsibly consuming knowledge. Because they point our attention to basic attributes of the human experience and the conditions of being and becoming human, they are philosophical. But they are arbitrary, too. Someone else might choose a very different set of principles (or none at all). I have selected these principles because I think they are consonant both with social work values and with the values of humane conduct in general.

Liberation and Empowerment: Heroism and Hope

Liberation refers to the continuum of possibilities for individuals and groups, the opportunities for choice, commitment, and action, sought and pursued in relative freedom or in dire circumstance. Individually and collectively we have fabulous powers and potentials. Some are muted, unrealized, and immanent; others shine brilliantly about us. All around are people and policies, circumstances and conventions, that may nourish or release these powers or that may subvert or oppress them. All humans, somewhere

within, have the urge to the heroic: to transcend circumstances, to develop one's powers, to overcome adversity, to stand up and be counted. Though this is a precious urge, it is also a fragile one. Too often the economic, religious, and political systems of a society drive this craving underground or distort it so that it serves institutional, political, or religious purposes and movements. Nonetheless, the yearning for freedom and the heroic impulse abide. It is the task of the healer, the humane leader, the shaman, the teacher, and, yes, the social worker to promote the liberation of this spirit and this energy, to find ways for that impulse to express itself.

The heroic may be a problem in most societies. Things run more smoothly if people simply play their roles and pay their taxes. Liberation unleashes human energies, critical thinking, and the questioning of authority; challenges to the conventional wisdom; and new ways of being and doing. Not all of liberation is this dramatic. When liberation comes, most of us find ourselves trying out some new behaviors or trying on new thoughts and attitudes, or escaping the drudgery of a difficult relationship or demanding job, or sensing a more generous fund of self-esteem, or surmounting a persistent adversity. But in the cozy confines of our lives such emancipation often is of enormous importance.

Cultures, as Ernest Becker (1973) pointed out so convincingly, also have hero systems. These are available to all. Cultures can encourage and sustain real liberation of the human spirit. The rise of democracy, the spread of public education, the war against fascism, the civil rights movements, the many faces of feminism and liberation theology, for example, all mobilized millions to act beyond their roles, to sacrifice for the larger good, to make a statement about belief over convenience, to sustain epic struggles to survive, or to create something of lasting value for one's family, community, or society. But often cultures do not celebrate the immense capacity of the individual or group nor do they issue a full invitation to that spirit. In contemporary American society, many of our cultural heroics revolve around celebrity, fawning over and emulating those persons designated as famous or fabulous by the media or marketplace. This is not real heroism; rather, it is a kind of oppression.

The heroic occasionally turns nasty. To liberate oneself at the expense of others—either as a culture or as an individual—to find satisfaction in the imprisonment, hurting, or ridicule of others is, in one sense, heroic. It enables the individual or group to surmount, for a moment, the limitations of self. But the damage wrought far outweighs such transcendence. Far too many of the current heroics in the world today are countenanced at the expense of those least able to resist their persuasions and depredations. Whether it is the slaughter of innocents in the name of a political theology and its leader, or the cavalier slicing of the cord of resources to poor people in the name

of restoring the ethic of work and balancing the budget, such heroics do not liberate as much as they suffocate.

Liberation and the heroic depend mightily on hope. No matter how the possibilities of self are captive, hope is the beating heart of becoming free or freer. Paulo Freire, the great pedagogue of liberation, in his last book, a revisiting of his estimable *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1973), said this about hope (a factor he had earlier underestimated):

But the attempt to do without hope, in the struggle to improve the world, as if that struggle could be reduced to calculated acts alone, or a purely scientific approach, is a frivolous illusion. To attempt to do without hope, which is based on the need for truth as an ethical quality of the struggle, is tantamount to denying that struggle as one of its mainstays . . . Hope, as an ontological need, demands an anchoring in practice. . . . Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. (Freire, 1996, pp. 8–9)

More practically, but no less importantly, Nan Henderson (1997) says that we must replace our thinking about youth in trouble as “at-risk” and begin to think of them as youth “at-promise,” drafting them into a program of possibilities, hopes, and dreams. Freeing human spirit, energy, and capacity, no matter how modest the venue, is driven by the lure of the possible and shaped by the magic of the vision. Rebounding from serious difficulty, coping with a crisis, and changing the course of one’s life depend on an operating level of hope that is tied to the image of the possible. People overcome unimaginable barriers as well as small hurdles because they see the “possible dream.” The dream need not be panoramic either. It may be modest and focused but nonetheless potent. There are epiphanies and turning points in life as well: moments when the possible becomes suddenly and strikingly apparent. It might be an encounter with a teacher, a book, a self-revelation forged in the fire of real difficulty and pain; who knows what it might be? The practitioners of “solution-focused” therapy and the strengths perspective know well the value of the dream, the hope, the possibility. The “miracle question,” for example, invites the person with a problem to flirt with possibility and hope and to imagine the heroic in ordinary life:

Suppose while you are sleeping tonight a miracle happens. The miracle is that the problem that has you here talking to me is somehow solved. Only you don’t know it because you are asleep. What will you notice different tomorrow morning that will tell you a miracle has happened? (De Jong & Miller, 1995, p. 731)

Freire’s (1996) idea of “untested feasibility” also speaks to the reality of the possible. We are far too often naysayers, unwilling or afraid to consort with the imaginable and potential. Of course, without plans or action, to

move to the feasible is naïve, if not harmful. But to deny the plausibility of the possible is also a mistake. Freire's partner, Ana Maria Araújo Freire, says

Thus, the "untested feasible" is an untested thing, an unprecedented thing, something not yet clearly known and experienced, but dreamed of. And when it becomes something "detached and perceived" by those who think utopian wise, they know that the problem is no longer the sheer seed of a dream. They know the dream can become reality. (p. 206)

Empowerment as a philosophy and a practice refers to the work of helping others to see the wisdom and strength within and around and to use these resources in the journey toward the possible. Empowerment requires of us at the least a belief in the dreams and hopes of others, a respect for the basic and innate wisdom of others, a willingness to collaborate with others in the project toward achieving the "untested feasible," and a dedication to helping others understand the sources of their fears and the oppressive mechanisms that delay the realization of their prospects. Roger Mills (1995), in his compelling and effective approach to individual and community health and empowerment, says that the work of freeing people must begin with a profound and unremitting belief in the innate wisdom and health of the mind, body, and spirit. These may have been concealed with the esteem-blowing negative opinions, behavior, and attitudes of others in one's life. But at some level the wisdom and health always remain.

Stephen Rose (1994) says this about empowerment:

Empowerment . . . is a relationship among people, based upon mutual connection, designed to produce knowing, creative, connecting persons who experience themselves as *subjects* [emphasis added] and who work together to create a world . . . where subjects are welcome. (p. 35)

As social workers it is incumbent on us to keep alive the dream, speak to the wisdom, promote the health, exalt the possible, create the connections, and treat people as subjects, not objects. It must be so since we often find ourselves confronted with people, groups, and communities whose lives, at least for the moment, have been compromised by the suffocating actions and policies of others.

Alienation and Oppression: Anxiety and Evil

The evidence around us cannot let us deny the reality of severe and repressive institutions, relationships, circumstances, and regimes. War,

bigotry, hatred, condemnation, and, more subtly, setting people aside, acting as though they do not exist, making them invisible are all daily reminders of the reality of despotism and brutality. Why is evil the seeming companion to the heroic? There are no certain answers, but we can speculate.

A family or personal or a cultural or social history of oppression lends impetus to its continuation. Cruel individuals and brutal nations do not easily have a change of heart. To be raised in an environment where others who are different are defined as a threat and are to be dismissed or discriminated against is a difficult catechism to resist. The tradition of domination of certain others may be passed on from generation to generation. But where does that need come from? How often do you and I stand, mouth open, horrified, when we encounter in the news or through our own eyes incredible acts of violence or vicious acts born of intolerance? How, we cry, can this happen? Yet, it may be that some of us at one time or another have been encouraged to act or have been a party to actions that have inflicted emotional or physical pain to others, others who are often different from us. And this to assure our own place in the cosmos, the scheme of things.

Human beings are only motes in the eye of an enormous cosmos (Becker, 1973; Fromm, 1973; Wilber, 1995). We tremble at the smallness and frailty of our being in the face of the magnitude of time and vastness of space. On occasion our trepidation and fears are best handled by taking matters into our own hands and dealing the instruments of fear and trembling to others. Thus, we calm our own uncertainties and obscure our very smallness. It may even be, as some have suspected, that these acts of oppression and violence are “immortality projects” designed to blind us to the reality of our own organismic vulnerability and eventual collapse (Becker, 1973; Rank, 1941).

Another possibility hinges on the fact that as human animals we have no sure way to get into our world. Instincts for the most part fail us. We cannot walk with the assuredness of the cat nor fly with the effortless ease of the eagle. Our existential needs place us in the position of attempting to find security in a world we did not make, a world whose dimensions and unpredictability can be stupefying and frightening. Cats and dogs, bees and wildebeests probably do not hang around wondering about their place in the universe, their worth, or the meaning of life. Their places are fairly well secured by the knot of instinct. Clearly, the capacity to learn varies by species, but it is probably true that even the highest primates do not have the degree of self-consciousness and awareness that humans do. Such self-reflexivity does impose burdens on us, however. We must assess our place and position vis-à-vis others, past and present. We must find ways to mute the occasional anxiety and despair that overtakes us as we look at our situation honestly. We must find ways to develop beliefs and ideas about which we can have

conviction and that propel us in to the world of relationships and institutions, nature and organization with some degree of equanimity. We must find ways to impound the realization that we are small and frail and that someday we will die. To look, if we choose to do so, at the reality of the human condition can be a mind-blowing experience.

But it isn't just the dread that imposes a burden upon us. It is the existential responsibility to use the fabulous powers of mind and spirit that make us essentially human. That can be as daunting as the realization of our limitations and seeming insignificance in the universe. To be all that you can be, as the commercial would have it, is a heavy requirement should we choose to face it. After all, we don't want to get too big for our existential britches, do we? And if I do begin to tap into my possibilities and the obligations of my vision and talents, what steps do I take, where can I find support, and what if I fail?

So, for human beings the stakes are high. Fromm (1973) suggests that because of our self-consciousness and the need for us to learn how to be of and in the world as opposed to relying on instinct, we have a range of needs born of the requirements and conditions of our existence that we must meet. Two of the most important are the need for a frame of reference and objects of devotion and the need for roots (a place to be, a place to be from, and a place to belong). The first bespeaks the importance of having a system of meaning, belief, and values; a worldview wherein you ensconce yourself. To have a system of ideas, words, symbols, and images that provides you direction, insight, membership, and understanding makes life seem more solid, manageable, and resonant. The devotion to, and conviction about, such frames of reference—religious, political, social, or philosophical—thrusts one more confidently into the world. The frame of reference can be life affirming, spawning those emotions and intentions that draw us together—love, caring, respect, wonder, charity. Or it can be destructive, procreating those emotions that separate us—hatred, prejudice, aggressiveness, and envy. Cultures and social institutions for the most part carry these systems of meaning and rationale, belief and devotion to us. These infuse or shape our individual belief systems. The message here is clear. We can satisfy our existential needs through any variety of behaviors, identities, social institutions and programs, cultural inventions, and traditions, and these can range from the constructively humane to the destructively inhuman. Morally galaxies apart, the followers of Jesus and the followers of Hitler were travelling very different paths to the same end: the resolution of the existential dilemmas of being human. Each, of course, had profoundly different consequences for the human race.

But from the ashes of oppression and destruction, we still may witness the flourishing of the human spirit. Lewis Lapham (1998), commenting on

the predictions (and realities) of the direness that accompanied the approach of the millennium, says it well:

It is true that time destroys all things, but it is also true that against the usual heavy odds men [sic] preserve what they have found useful, beautiful and true. The annals of destruction bulge with reports of drowned cities, and although they duly take note of man's inhumanity to man, they also speak to the human capacity for regeneration. (p. 11)

We have taken a rather panoramic view of these principles, and they may seem far removed from the habits and rhythms of everyday life and practice. But the sweep of history and the grandeur of wholesale creation and destruction find their way inevitably into the nooks and crannies of our lives and the lives of those we help. You see a single mother and her ten-year-old daughter. They have come to the family service agency you work for. The mother is worried. Her daughter, once sweet and compliant, a joy to be around, is becoming morose, uncommunicative, anxious, and weepy. The quality of her work at school is plummeting, and friends seem unimportant to her. The father left the family suddenly and left them in dire financial straits. It had been a marriage of youthful misjudgments, the mother allows, but she says that in spite of the financial hardships maybe it is better that he has gone. The mother wonders if her daughter's current woes aren't related to his leaving about six months ago. You spend considerable time over the next weeks exploring the situation with the mother and daughter. Eventually you discover that for a period of almost two years the young girl had experienced physical and sexual depredation and brutality at the hands of her father. She had vowed—to herself!—never to tell anyone. Never to let him know how much he had hurt her. Never! And she maintained her vow until he left. Now she was falling apart, grieving, experiencing rage, and feeling the wounds of violation. But in the ashes of devastation, this young girl's spirit, against all odds, flourished. Now the mother and the social worker must make an alliance with this tiny, amazing soul.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

The chapters that follow will discuss each of these frameworks in more detail. Here they will be introduced and briefly discussed.

Meaning-Making: The Construction of Human Experience

We exist in many realms: the material (the world of objects and things), the organic (the body, the natural world), the social (the world of

relationships and institutions), and the mental (the world of ideas, symbols, and meaning). Although the arguments about the reality of each of these realms rage on, our concern in this brief section is to understand the mental or, more appropriately, the world of meaning and meaning-making. Human beings build themselves into the world symbolically. How we are to be is not a given. We do not come into the world with a ready plan for the unfolding of our being over three score and ten years (not to ignore, however, what our genetic endowments may predispose). Nor does the world reveal itself to us as nakedly obvious and thoroughly transparent. What we must do, it seems, in league with those who care for and instruct us, with our culture's predilections, and through our own ingenuity, is to fashion out of words, symbols, images, stories, and narratives a working, operating sense of the world of people and things, of the seen and unseen. There may be a physical world out there apart from us. However, we do not understand it, experience it, and participate in it without interpretive lenses on. This idea can quickly turn into some precious pedantry and philosophical debate if we are not careful. What it means is this:

When you awaken and begin your habitual routines of grooming and eating, or whatever you do to prepare for the day, you feel a sense of firmness and solidity about the world and your place in it. You look out on the street and see familiar sights, hear familiar noises, and no matter what your day may bring, the customary situates you in what seems to be a palpable and real world. But what you see (and fail to see) and how you define it or what you call it and how you experience its impact on you is an interpretation: a mixture of thoughts and words and pictures authored by you over time with a little help from your culture, your friends, your memory, and the reality itself. Other persons from the same neighborhood and culture might see and experience very different things. The lenses they wear, ground by their own experience and relationships and history, may let them see things you don't see, cause them to react to things you see with very different responses, or allow them to come to very different conclusions about what those two men across the street on the corner are doing. Or, assume that you have the same genetic endowment you now have, but you happen to have been born three houses down the block. The course of your life would be different—to what degree we can't imagine. But it is also likely that the ways that you interpret, see, and react to the world would be quite different—thanks to your family, the many environments and experiences you have been exposed to, and your own learning and need to understand. Only three houses down the street and you might as well, in some ways, be halfway around the world.

Children born in the same family, though they do bear similarities ("Now that's a Johnson kid, can't you just tell?"), experience very different environments. For that reason, the way they construct and construe their

what seem to be not-so-different worlds can be unique, in many ways, for each of them. The first child is, for a while, an only child, the object of affection of doting, though nervous, parents. The third child has two older siblings; more experienced, relaxed, and tired parents (Mom now works full-time); and they live in the 'burbs, not the city. What's more, the folks have given up going to the Lutheran church and have become Rastafarians.

So, your world is in part a theory; a creation of your culture, your relationships, your own interests and needs, your experiences, and your ingenuity. Theory means, at its root, "to see." How you see, as well as what you see, and what you make of it (its meaning) are fateful for how you act, feel, and relate. Many people(s) have had their meaning and understanding of the world forced on them from the outside. The use of coercion, threat, violence, or simply the power of the media can swarm our own sense of our experience. For too long in our society, people who are "outsiders," on the "margin," or of a very different culture have had their theories muted or distorted by others who have more power or who control social and political institutions as well as the media of communication. The power and freedom to make meaning, for individual or group or culture, is a priceless and delicate condition. To have it stripped away puts individuals and groups in a difficult and sometimes perilous state. If you want to smother and subjugate one person or a people, strip them of their meaning and control of their bodies and senses (Berman, 1989; McLaren, 1995). Does this sound like something that might happen in a "third-world" country? Maybe. But it is happening here, too. Nightly on television, in the movies and in other media, we are being given and accepting a distorted picture of the world, one that while it amuses, sedates, intrigues, pacifies, and titillates also subdues our own sense of the world and the constructions that might be forged out of our own experience. Peter McLaren puts it starkly:

Television reality is one in which men outnumber women three to one, where women are usually mothers or lovers, rarely work outside the home, and are the natural victims of violence. It is a reality where less than 10% of the population hold blue-collar jobs, where few elderly people exist, where young Blacks learn to accept their minority status as inevitable and are trained to anticipate their own victimization (they are usually portrayed as the white hero's comic sidekick or else drug addicts, gang members, and killers). (p. 9)

Mary Pipher (1994), in her sensitive and compelling portrayal of adolescent girls in America, shows how a variety of cultural forces buries the burgeoning sense of self fashioned out of experience, saps psychological energy, mutes hope, and sidetracks creativity. In its place comes the human manqué: a creation of advertising, television, peer pressure, and expectations from parents, from boys, and from the marketplace. Pipher observes

America has always smacked girls on the head in early adolescence. This is when they move into a broader culture that is rife with girl-hurting “isms,” such as sexism, capitalism, and lookism, which is the evaluation of a person solely on the basis of appearance. (p. 23)

So oppression is never really very far away. But neither is liberation. When we work with others who have lost credibility or conviction in their own sense of the world, we work to help them understand that their own system of meaning—their impression of things—has been debilitated and by whom and through what means (Mary Pipher does this directly with the young girls she works with; Paulo Freire (1973) calls the process conscientization). Then we work to help them restore their own meaning, their stories and understandings, and their narratives or maybe help them build better and bolder ones. In doing this we are invoking the power of language, and the powers of mind, in the project of coming to name one’s own world. Pipher (1994) cites Margaret Fuller in this regard: “What a woman needs is not as a woman to act or to rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded to unfold such powers as are given her” (p. 259).

Strengths and Resilience

The dominant culture, regaled in the media, institutionalized, and celebrated daily, seems increasingly preoccupied, if not obsessed, with pathologizing, problems, moral and interpersonal aberrations, violence, and victimization. To this mixture we must add the increasing tendency to “medicalize” and “pathologize” almost every trait, pattern, bent of behavior, or habit typical of the human condition. We have, thus, a frothy concoction of diagnoses, labels, and besmirched identities. An influential cartel of institutions, disciplines, professions, businesses, and individuals—from medicine to the pharmaceutical industry, from the insurance business to the media—assure us that each of us has a storehouse of vulnerabilities and failings born of toxic and traumatic experiences (usually occurring in childhood). These put us at risk for an astonishing array of maladies: from addictions of all kinds to post-traumatic stress syndrome, from major depressive disorder to borderline personality. Victimhood and recovery also have extended way beyond their original and legitimate boundaries and have now become big business as many adults, prodded by a variety of therapists, gurus, and ministers, search out their wounded inner children and memories of the poisonous ecology of their family background. This phenomenon blurs the distinction between people who have been seriously traumatized and victimized and those who experience the expectable trials and tribulations of daily life (Dineen, 1996).

All this is tragic enough but made worse by the fact that it has encouraged us to overlook another, more persistent reality: people who face trauma, catastrophe, difficulty, disappointment, even abuse often—*most often*—do better in the long run than most of us would have predicted. This does not mean that people who have eventually surmounted adversity, even to the point of thriving, have not suffered or do not suffer. Clearly, most have and do. But many also have carved out a satisfying and productive life. What we are only now discovering is how they did that. We know all too well how people get sick, fail, and reiterate family miseries and fallibilities in their own lives. But we know all too little about the majority who move away from and beyond the turmoil and pain of all kinds of human upheavals. Surely there is a level of stress and shock that can overwhelm any child, adolescent, or adult. But people do rebound under the most difficult of circumstances, they do demonstrate a degree of resilience and hardiness, and they do develop a cache of valuable personal traits and virtues hammered out on the anvil of calamity (Saleebey, 1997). An exciting development over the past two decades or so is the number of practitioners of all kinds, researchers, and journalists who have dedicated themselves to understanding the sources of resilience and the origins of the capacity to rebound. Others have begun to examine the considerable array of strengths and assets that individuals, families, and communities have accumulated as they have faced the dramatic and trying challenges of their lives (Katz, 1997; Mills, 1995; Rapp, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1992).

Steven and Sybil Wolin (1993), for example, have moved away from a practice and research philosophy that directed them to observe, assess, and minister to the damage done in childhood that created various pathologies in the adolescents and adults they saw. Though noble work to be sure, it seemed to lack completeness and energy. If people got better, it was a slow, painstaking, and halting process. One day, seeking to change the course of conversation, Steven Wolin asked one of the people he had been treating for a while and who, like so many others, had continued to recount the same litany of troubles and trauma, how, given all her misfortunes, had she managed to survive? In disbelief, and hesitantly at first, over time she slowly began to recount some of the environmental resources and personal adaptive capacities that had allowed her not just to survive—but even to flourish. What struck Steven Wolin was the unmistakable change in the level of energy and interest in the client and himself when they began to talk of the personal capacities and environmental resources that had produced a more propitious outcome than one would have supposed. On the basis of their research with survivors of a “damaged” childhood, the Wolins began to infuse their work with the conviction that most people who had suffered as children and had faced serious challenges to their integrity and well-being

developed personal capacities and traits that allowed them to overcome the adversity to the degree that the quality of life for them as an adult was far superior to what anyone might have predicted for them in childhood.

That is what the strengths/resilience conceptual framework obligates us to do. To search out and account for the considerable assets and resources that people have within and around them, especially those elements of character that have ripened as a consequence of coping with dire circumstance. To embrace a resilience/strengths model is not just a matter of acquiring some new techniques or a different vocabulary. Bonnie Benard (1991) observes that it is a matter of changing one's heart and mind—a personal paradigm shift. A paradigm, as we will discuss later, is a framework that is deeply embedded in our identity and colors our perceptions, thoughts, and actions—it shapes the world that we see. There are some important points to be considered in shifting to a strengths approach. First, you are not required to ignore problems, pains, past hurts, and trauma. But you are required to put them in perspective. Children, for example, “are wounded and they are left with scars as adults. But they are also challenged by troubles to experiment and respond actively and creatively. Their preemptive responses, repeated over time, become incorporated into the self as lasting resiliencies” (Wolin & Wolin, 1997, p. 26). The conceptual and linguistic distance between a pathology-focused model and one built on the idea of strengths and assets to some seems too immense to span. These should not be seen as opposites but rather as complements; one incomplete without the other. Second, the problem or disease paradigm seems to have way too much authority to challenge. It is rooted in the medical model that is spawned, in part, by the institutions and methods of science—with a big S. To illustrate: the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV TR* (Text Revision) of the American Psychiatric Association (2000) is an ever-expanding encyclopedia of disorders and pathologies. It is a best-seller. It has roughly 720 pages devoted to descriptions of mental disorders. It has become the lingua franca of the psychiatric/mental health professions, insurance companies, and HMOs. But it is tragically one-sided. It claims the imprimatur of science but many of its conclusions and categorical descriptions are products of clinical experience and the mutual agreement of panels of experts. By comparison, there is no Diagnostic Strengths Manual. The language of resilience and strengths is, as Goldstein (1997) points out, simple, plain, and virtuous but not particularly compelling to professionals. Third, there is a moral and ethical hesitation to seek out strengths, capacities, resources, virtues, and resiliencies in children and adults who have and are suffering. But “does emphasizing strengths in any way really dilute your obligation to those who are afflicted or tormented?” (Wolin & Wolin, 1997). In the end, what do you have to work with in helping individuals overcome adversity

and improve the quality of their lives? The resources and assets around them and within them. You surely will honor and respect their pains and scars, their struggles and tribulations, but the clearing of a pathway to their hopes and dreams comes from a similar respect for and awareness of their considerable capacities.

The Biopsychosocial Framework

Social work, over the years, has given itself credit for always being alert to the subtle and complex interactions between persons and their environments. In fact, some think that this is what makes social work different from other helping professions—the attention paid to the environment and the interplay between elements of the environment and the individuals, families, and groups within it. But, like other professions, social work has also succumbed, to a degree, to the enormous pressure to individualize and psychologize most problems and difficulties that people present. “Despite its environmentalist foundations, the central thrust in direct practice since the 1920s has been toward the conceptualization and refinement of interpersonal helping, constructed largely in psychological terms” (Kemp, Whittaker & Tracy, 1997, p. 45).

The systems and ecological perspectives have been among the most widely spread theories or frameworks in social work that provide designs for conceiving of person and environment transactions. General systems theory (Hearn, 1969) was the first broad conceptual backdrop for social work practice, but some found it too abstract, too mechanical, and lacking in the passion and compassion that fuels social work’s ethical interests—social and economic justice, the elimination of oppression, preservation of and respect for the dignity of all human beings—and lacking in the methodological imperatives and principles that would actually inform practice. A later development, meant to incorporate the breadth and transactional nature of systems theory but also to enliven the understanding of the interchanges and encounters between people and their environments was the life model of Carel Germain and Alex Gitterman (1980, 1996). They conceptualized the difficulties, the “problems in living” that people faced as occurring in terms of expectable or unexpected but stressful life transitions, maladaptive interpersonal relations, and environments that do not meet needs or sufficiently provide resources for adaptation. More recently there have been attempts to wed the two in the ecosystems approach (Gilgun, 1994; Meyer, 1983; Wakefield, 1996b).

While having made a serious contribution to social work theory and

practice, there still remains some degree of dissatisfaction with these characterizations (Gould, 1987; Morrell, 1987). They are seen as wanting in conceptual tools that would fashion a necessary critique of groups and institutions in any environment that are toxic and that oppress populations. They are seen by some as apolitical because they fail to acknowledge the role of power and power relationships in the transactions between environments and people. Finally, others critique these perspectives because they virtually ignore the other elements of the person/environment equation, especially the biological foundations of human behavior and the physical environment (Besthorn, 1998; Saleebey, 1992; Weick, 1981).

So it is incumbent on us to understand this elaborate relationship among individuals, families, and groups and their environments. It is also crucial for us to factor into this equation the compelling role of our bodies and our status as organisms with a genetic history. An example will preview our later discussion (chapter 4).

TEMPERAMENT, PERSONALITY, AND ENVIRONMENT

Temperament, long an interest of philosophers, psychologists, and fans of human behavior, refers to our basic patterns of neurophysiological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reaction to the external world. Though interest in basic temperament or orientation declined in the middle of the twentieth century (because many thinkers and observers saw it as primarily laid down constitutionally—a combination of genetic predisposition and prenatal factors—and, thus, somehow, antithetical to the American belief in the autonomous, self-inventing individual), the past two decades or so have seen an explosion in research and thinking about the whole idea (Gallagher, 1996; Kagan, 1994; Ornstein, 1993). There is some disagreement about the many constituents of temperament or even what basic temperaments might be, but at this point scientists and clinicians and others tracking these developments are closer to agreement on the following.

Inhibited/Uninhibited. At one end of an imagined continuum, some individuals (maybe two in ten) seem to be born with an inherent sensitivity, high arousal, and some distress reactions to various stimuli in the first year of life. In the second and third years of life, this expands to fear of strangers and/or avoidance of novelty. These highly reactive children may come to be seen or defined as shy. But their reactivity has a neurophysiological basis as well as emotional and behavioral manifestations. There is another group of children (about two in ten) who seem relatively relaxed or unfazed by stimuli and somewhat fearless and assertive as they move into their second and third years (Kagan, 1994). Physiological correlates of these temperamental

extremes abound and include reactivity of the sympathetic nervous system, body build, eye color, and facial structure among others. For example, high basal heart rates and higher levels of the excitatory neurotransmitter norepinephrine typify “shy” children, even though they may have parents who are generally confident and relaxed. But genetic predispositions to temperament are not carved in stone, impervious to the wash of environment. The behavior of parents, the appropriate comforts and demands in the environment, or the goodness of fit between environmental factors (importantly including parental attitudes and behaviors) and the child’s basic temperament can make a difference. Kagan found in his longitudinal research that temperament was a fair predictor of adolescent behavior. But he also found that, thanks to environmental factors, for example, one-third of the “shy” or reactive infants were not so by their second or third year. The environment includes a variety of elements: gender, intimate relationships, economic security, race, educational opportunities, and so on. These do not have a clearly predictable effect on temperament (Gallagher, 1996). But the message is clear. We come into the world with inherited dispositions of various kinds. These interact with our environment to produce patterns of behavior and adaptations to the external world. They are malleable to a degree, but they are mediated by neurophysiological and neurochemical processes. We must respect both biology and behavior in our understanding of human nature. Winifred Gallagher says it well:

Each [temperamental disposition] arises from constitutional variables in the nervous, circulatory, and endocrine systems that respond to the environment, affect one another, and change with development and experience, while preserving what psychologist Arnold Buss has prettily described as “the native individuality that shines through the overlay of learned tendencies.” (1996, pp. 14–15)

Difficult to define in any case, personality might be thought of as not just the bedrock of temperament but as the developmental accumulation of clusters and patterns of attitudes, values, traits, skills, emotions, opinions, and self-reflections born of experience and our capacity to think about ourselves. What is important to remember here is that who we are at any given moment is at least a result of the fascinating commerce among constitution, consciousness, and context.

INTEGRATIVE THEMES

These three frameworks will guide us as we examine some of the complexities, intrigues, puzzles, and enchantments of the human condition and

human nature. In addition to these frameworks, themes will help us tie together the great and daunting variety of human experiences and situations that we discuss. These are intended to focus our gaze on important elements of the human experience in all its diversity. The themes are related, as you will see, to the conceptual frameworks just outlined.

Capacity

It is thoroughly human and completely understandable that the odd, the frightening, and the aberrant would jump out at us when we examine situations or involve ourselves in any number of adventures and happenings. But we must also attend to the aptitudes and endowments of individuals and families, the assets and resources embedded in neighborhoods and communities of all kinds—their human and social capital, so to speak. So as we discuss, for example, the stresses that adolescence can introduce to the individual and to the family, we must also attend to the considerable abilities, interests, and ideas that they bring as well. As we examine the ample environmental pressures on adolescents and the seductions of the media and the marketplace, we will want to recognize the resources and supports available for adolescents and their families as well.

Context

We will work diligently to not fall heir to the unbalanced individualizing and psychologizing of human experiences and relationships. With particular interest in cultures and communities and in social institutions and civic ambience, we want to understand and highlight the continuing interactions and mutual effects of people(s) and their environments—physical and social. In a neighborhood in a major city, the incidence of diagnosed attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) seems to be rising dramatically. Attending *only* to family or individual factors, we might well lament the increasing disorganization of families or the lack of discipline, internal and external, that has come to characterize much of child–parent relationships in the contemporary world. But had we noticed an article in the paper about this very same neighborhood our attitude might be different. Once brimming with heavy industry, over the years plants had been shutting down, leaving in their wake empty lots and boarded-up buildings. Later, in many of these empty lots Environmental Protection Agency investigators discovered high levels of lead in the topsoil. Neighborhood children frequently played in

these lots. Lead toxicity can produce symptoms that look very much like ADHD. So, in this instance, a toxic environment, rather than toxic parent-child relationships, is the likely culprit.

Contingency

We often underestimate the role of luck, chance, and locale in human affairs. We have usually understood the unfolding development of human beings over the life span to be a matter of biological, psychological, and social tasks accomplished (or not) in a prescribed series of stages that are relatively universal. Kenneth Gergen (1983) argues that an aleatory (chance-related) understanding is more apt. An aleatory understanding acknowledges that there are psychobiological milestones, laid down epigenetically (a ground plan for development), that the developing human passes through (e.g., there is an optimum window of opportunity for the development of speech). But it also suggests that most of us are products of the sociohistorical time and place we live and the contingencies of our lives. Even the fact that we were born is an immense piece of luck. Aldous Huxley (cited in Ornstein, 1993, p. 36) put it this way:

A million, million, spermatozoa,
All of them alive,
Out of their cataclysm but one poor Noah
Dare hope to survive
And among that billion minus one
Might have chanced to be
Shakespeare, another Newton, a new Donne.
But the One was me.

Constitution

We are, after all, animals—members of a species—and we bring into the world, encoded in our bodies, not only the history of our species, but the history of our family. We carry, remarkably, in each of our cells, our history and our future unfolding. Environment and experience play a powerful part in this drama, but sometimes we fail to give the body—our biology—its due. Each of us, at any moment, is a manifestation of the ongoing and intricate communion between the world around and the world within. In a manner of speaking, we must always be as aware of the role of the molecules within as we are of the manifold influences without. Whether

our concern is mental illness or the attachment between mother and newborn, we must understand as best we can how body, mind, and environment interact.

Construction

Human beings are inveterate meaning-makers, story-tellers, constructors of myths, creators of theories, weavers of dreams and visions. Our lives are spun out, in large measure, through the devices of language, metaphor, narrative, story, and histories. Individuals, families, and cultures have their own *bildungsroman*, the story of their journey. The triumphs and trials, the falls from grace and the rise again, the migration and the settling, the adversity and the opportunity are told and retold, refashioned, and refurbished over time. Professionals tend to rely on reason, theories, perspectives, and formulas to figure out the existential puzzles and to make sense of the life problems that clients bring. But these, too, are interpretive devices, “stories” developed in a different, perhaps more methodical way than the stories we tell at family reunions. We will discuss the antinomies and similarities between narratives and “scientific” knowing in the next section of this chapter.

PARADIGMS, POSTMODERNISM, AND POSSIBILITIES

Professionals faced with the pains and distress and the hopes and dreams of people who come their way struggle to develop a kind of understanding that probably goes beyond the usual manner of getting a grip on things. In our culture, professional understanding brings to mind theories—data gathered and evidence accumulated—about a class of problems or group of people. These are presumed to be the most important intellectual resources drawn upon in helping people understand and solve their problems. Calculated explication, analysis, reason, logic, and objectivity are the patterns of thinking assumed to be most appropriate for professional knowing and doing. The personal motives, emotions, and agenda of the professional social worker must be removed or conserved so that the client can be seen unerringly through the lenses provided by theory and/or data. Such discernment relies on the assumptions of predictability about human striving, the direction of the life course, and the well-defined parameters of the human condition and experience. We assume that there are “causes” for behavior that can be understood and, from them, principles derived to direct the helping process. Furthermore, we believe our understandings at some point, thanks to

methodical proofs, will become established as truths as enduring as the Grand Teton range.

This “scientific” worldview has been a part of the Western world for centuries. Deeply embedded in our thinking, we celebrate its accomplishments from the revelations of the inner world of the atom to the wonders of the galaxies; from the miracles of modern medicine to the fascinations of information technology. We even ape the mannerisms and postures of science in advertising (“Tests show that Scourdent toothpaste is 30 percent more effective against plaque”) and public life (polls are taken about every conceivable interest and issue that comes our way). In the professions, we have sought to import not only scientifically derived knowledge into our professional lore but also to be more methodical in the development of the knowledge and methods that we employ every day.

Social work has struggled mightily over the years to become scientifically respectable, to have a knowledge base empirically demonstrated to have validity, and to amass a range of explanations that direct and rationalize our professional assessments and interventions. Social workers sometimes agonize over whether they meet the tests of intellectual and professional virtue: a rich body of knowledge, empirically derived and theoretically potent; a language and set of methods that are characteristic of social work in particular; and a demonstrated rate of effectiveness of our methods and interventions. We still smart from the charge of Abraham Flexner at the Conference of Charities and Corrections in 1915 (1915! Imagine that!) that we were not a profession (although he also charged us to go out and become one). So we have been working diligently for lo, these many years, to take our place in the pantheon of professions as equals to physicians, lawyers, and architects (Specht & Courtney, 1994).

The usual model of the professional knowing and doing has been called technical/rationalist by Donald Schon (1983). It is a child of the scientific worldview. Any profession is required to have a systematic knowledge base with four properties: (1) clear parameters and boundaries, (2) derived through the scientific method, (3) specialized, and (4) standardized. So you enter the school of social work. In the first year, you learn about some theories and frameworks for understanding humans. You might encounter these in human behavior class, foundation practice courses, and, to a lesser degree, in social policy class. Then you are introduced to the rudiments of the application of that knowledge—the principles and orientations to practice—in your foundation practice class. In your research class, you may learn how to evaluate your own practice and how to “read” research studies that might have useful information about various practices with various populations. Finally, you begin serious application through learning the attitudes, skills, and contexts of practice in your field practicum. During this whole process,

you are instructed about and exhorted to be loyal to the rootstock of the profession—its values and guiding ethic. Finally, those who would be your educators and mentors want you to understand the importance of culture, ethnicity, class, race, sexual orientation, and gender in determining lifestyles and life-chances and setting the ground rules for helping specific groups of people.

This sweeping and grand pedagogy is meant to be a conscious, highly structured process of moving from theory to principle to practice application, a process derivative of the scientific method. What you actually experience is, of course, something in many ways probably quite different as a process. In some very important ways your learning experience is like no one else's.

Paradigms

The scientific worldview is but one worldview. Extraordinarily important in the development of the commercial, industrial, and technological world, it may be understood as a paradigm. Paradigm is an often-defiled idea. Overused and bloated, it is almost as hackneyed as the word empowerment. Nonetheless, it is useful. It came to prominence thanks to the writing of Thomas Kuhn, a physicist turned historiographer of science. What began in the 1950s as a series of lectures was published as a volume in the series entitled the *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science* and eventually came out as *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970)—and it had immediate impact. Previous to its publication, the ascendant idea was that science in every field (biology, physics, astronomy, etc.) had been thought to be a progression; an increasingly refined and accurate accumulation of knowledge validated through investigation and bundled together with theories. Theories were examined continually (through the testing of hypotheses—theory-based predictions). Supporting evidence made them more precise and potent as representations of the world of that science's interest. If this were the case in the social sciences, we would come ever closer to the understanding of what human beings, across cultures and time, are actually like. And the more that we would know for sure, the more effective our interventions would be.

Kuhn argued otherwise. He claimed that *normal science* (that body of knowledge in a given field celebrated in the journals, at conferences, and in the public mind) is essentially a mopping up operation, focusing in more and more detail on subjects of concern to the discipline. At one time, every normal science began as a revolution; it existed outside the walls of the prevailing scientific conventions. It was an alternative perspective on the

world—a different paradigm. When it challenged the prevailing wisdom, it caused a rupture in the fabric of that science’s understanding, creating tension, insecurity, and conflict. Since a paradigm is a way of looking at the world and is constructed with its own language, principles, assumptions, and methods, it is also an important matter of belief and conviction for its supporters. And if it happens to resolve some problems of understanding or method of study that conventional science cannot, it gathers supporters and gradually supplants the prevailing wisdom. This view of the evolution of any scientific establishment (although Kuhn did not talk about social science—others did) was, in its time, revolutionary and created quite a stir among scientists. Kuhn also argued that external forces—economic, political, social—have an impact on the evolution of scientific paradigms in different fields. The development of astronomy was coincident, for example, to the needs of the newly emergent ocean-going commerce in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Kuhn, 1970).

As paradigms become more ingrained and established, they migrate deeply into our consciousness. We may not even be consciously aware of the directive power of the paradigm. Paradigms also exist outside of science. We have cultural paradigms. The dominant culture in America venerates money, acquisition, accumulation of wealth and property; individualism and accomplishment; progress and the control of nature; social status and celebrity; and religious faith and positive thinking to a degree that we hardly even think about. Shopping in a mall, cutting a good deal, going back to school, doing better economically than your folks, developing and improving your “self,” cheating a little on your income tax, jogging to forestall a heart attack, and going to church seem as natural as sleeping. It is not that these are “right” so much as they are taken for granted, barely thought about except by critics, dissenters, and assorted cranks. In our culture we tend to think that we can solve nature’s mysteries. We believe that it is okay to tinker with nature. We do not doubt that technology (and science) can solve most problems—from finding a cure for human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) to a means for cleaning up toxic waste. But every culture has an “underside.” For all our veneration of science and its powers, we have a tremendous hunger for the comforts of various kinds of spiritualism, faith, nostrums, and panaceas that border on magic—from the belief in horoscopes to the idea that you can lose weight and stay healthy merely by eating grapefruit. Though we are devoted to positive thinking about ourselves and future, we are also fascinated with the dark side of life, the seamy and tawdry, the weird and inexplicable. It is important to understand in this discussion that I am speaking of the dominant culture. The fact is there are many cultures in this land. As Renato Rosaldo (1989) has pointed out, many of us live in the borderlands between

cultures. So the culture is not monolithic. It is permeable, and there are other cultural traditions and paradigms that guide and influence people.

Cultures as well as different fields of science have their own paradigms, each having devoted adherents. But, in time, any paradigm and its beliefs and methods cannot solve some of the problems that come its way or explain some of the phenomena it encounters. Usually when this happens, there are other mixtures of ideas, beliefs, and methods waiting in the wings that are encouraged by the new failures of the old paradigm. Another “revolution” has begun.

Social work has its paradigms and its lenses. Some of them are about methods of practice, some are about theories and frameworks for practice, some are about how we come to learn as professionals, and some are about values and philosophy. For example, we take pretty much for granted the person–environment perspective as a way of orienting ourselves to the worlds of our clients. We hardly ever think about how difficult it is to recognize and understand those transactions between people and their worlds. We also sometimes are not careful enough in thinking about what we include in environment. Fred Besthorn (1998) observes that we rarely include the physical and natural environment as a significant element of people’s lives. Carolyn Morrell (1987) makes another criticism. She claims that our characterizations of the interactions between environments and people are largely “conservative”—meaning that they support the status quo by implying that most of the work of adaptation is the individual’s or family’s responsibility—regardless of the stresses and demands of the environment. To illustrate, a major employer in a small town decides to “downsize” (read “fire”) the workforce, and some 312 families are suddenly without a breadwinner. We see some of these individuals and families in our practice and we make some decisions based, to a degree, on our paradigm. We may decide to see their “symptoms”—family tension, depression, drinking, abuse—as the focus of our efforts. We might, in effect, virtually ignore the traumatic reality of being laid off from work that one has relied upon for years. We may not look at the effect on the community as a whole and the importance of resources and supports to help families, individually and collectively, right the course of their lives. We may not collaborate in the development of communal approaches to begin the work of healing. We may not help organize protests and actions that may help resurrect some employment opportunities or help provide, in the long run, some new ones. We may not develop enhanced employment opportunity networks. We may not. But we could.

Paradigms and frameworks direct our attention, concentrate our interest, and influence our actions as social work professionals. As a student, you are learning elements of the dominant paradigm as well as smaller

paradigms or models or points of view that fund our profession. You may also be learning about alternatives or challenges to “normal science” in social work. Let us talk about one of these challenges. As I said, for the most part, social work subscribes to the technical/rationalist approach (Schon, 1983) to professional knowing and doing. Remember that means several things. First, we social workers believe that the knowledge we use meets the test of objectivity, derived apart from the values, interests, emotions, and prejudices of the scholars who build it and the professionals who use it. Second, we believe that this knowledge is essentially a valid representation of the real world. Third, it seems to be inherently logical, rational, and reasonable and not confused with superstitions, passions, prejudices, and fancies. Fourth, we think that if we apply this knowledge faithfully it will work.

There are those who disagree with this pristine picture of our profession as a kind of applied social scientific effort (Goldstein, 1990; Heineman [Pieper], 1981; Imre, 1982; Saleebey, 1979; Weick, 1987; Witkin, 1991). They argue that it is impossible to be objective, dispassionately removed from human experiences and situations that we study or act upon. They insist that we always see the world through the lens of our own beliefs, emotions, cultural roots, personality, gender, ethnicity, social class, and experience. We can partially be aware of these influences but cannot displace them completely. They are firmly nestled in our consciousness. No matter where we stand, we are also a participant in the situations and relationships that draw our interest. There are, the argument goes, many ways of knowing and, thus, doing. Some elements of this view of knowledge and understanding include the following.

- There are many paths of knowing, which means that the scientific method is one way of understanding some things, but it has limitations as well as biases and assumptions. If I want to know about the incidence and prevalence of HIV/AIDS during certain periods of time in different parts of the country, the conventional science methodologies of epidemiology are appropriate. But if I want to know about the experiences of individuals and families who are struggling with HIV/AIDS, I might want to take a more narrative or literary approach to understanding.

- There are not necessarily privileged methods of knowing. In some circumstances, the inherent, intuitive wisdom of a social work practitioner might be more useful in unlocking the sources of rage in an angry thirteen-year-old than the knowledge about adolescent rage taught in a developmental psychology course.

- We, as social workers, must not only respect but try to employ the ideas, rituals, philosophy, and values of other cultures in our practice. These

are elements of “folk” psychology (see chapter 2), part of every culture’s attempt to understand and explain its world of experience and its history.

■ We might realize that much of what we know and understand about ourselves, the world, and other people is a product of interaction, negotiation, and relationships between people—a social, interpersonal “construction.” When we don’t understand what is happening with a family member, we might well seek the views and perspectives of a variety of people, and together we might come to a satisfactory conclusion about what is happening.

■ Knowledge-building is a dynamic, changing, sometimes political process. As a young social worker, I was steeped in the knowledge and lore of psychoanalytic thinking. Represented as the truth, or as close to the truth about human nature that we had available at the time, compelling as a distinct and fascinating take on the human condition, it swept through the helping professions and the larger culture both. It prevailed as well because the people who controlled the relevant professional journals, university departments, and professional societies had a stake in maintaining this worldview. They passed on this wisdom because, for them, it served useful purposes and brought significant personal and professional benefits. It also helped some people.

The point? Human behavior is so complex, of such variety, and so tied up in relationships that it is hard to get it to stand still enough long enough to be studied, analyzed, and measured in a controlled, objective way untarnished by human motives, passions, and beliefs. Someone once remarked on the folly and the glory of the human brain trying to understand itself. And science itself is what? A human creation, a beautiful and bountiful demonstration of the cleverness and inventiveness of the human mind. But so are literature, music, folklore, dance, sports, philosophy, ritual, and myth. Science brings understanding of a sort; but there are other ways to understand that make use of the capacity of humans to tell stories, imagine, empathize with others, intuit, negotiate, and engage in discourse and disputation. In our endeavor to understand, at least in this book, we will make use of all these human inventions and resources.

Postmodernism

We cannot linger here too long, but the idea that we have entered into a new era, at least in the Western world, the Postmodern era, is relevant to our discussion of paradigms. Some authors (Callinicos, 1997; Gergen, 1991)

contend that we have experienced now three major cultural revolutions since the Middle Ages—the Romantic, the Modernist, and, now, the Post-modernist. Disagreement abounds about the usefulness or accuracy of such designations but they are worth a quick look. The Romantic era saw the effusion of the idea of the essence of self; that each human being had, deep within, a soul, an essence, the true self, be it sacred or profane. This self became most apparent and alive in love, in faith and devotion, in creativity and genius, or in evil and savagery. The language of the Romantic era was the language of the soul, of passion, genius, inspiration, and mystery (Gergen, 1991). We still today have strong remnants of such a view of the world: from country music to depth psychology to new age philosophies. And if such a language were to disappear, we would probably feel that life had less purpose and opulence.

The Modernist view, probably emergent in and erupting from the rise of the sciences and the improvements in the quality of physical life wrought by technology, from the development of commercial enterprises and the importance of money and exchange as a measure of worth and relationship, was much more practical and overt. The Modernist appreciation was a celebration of reason, logic, and calculation. The language of progress and conquest of nature and of science and technology, the metaphor of the machine, and the importance of empirical knowledge and data in the search for inviolable truths so common today were revolutionary departures from the ideas and lexicon of the Romantic era with its focus on the enigmatic and visceral. Whereas the Romantic saw the cause and course of human behavior coming from deep within, the Modernist was convinced that human behavior was, like a machine, explicable and understandable. The causes of behavior were primarily external sources—from the behavior of parents to the positive or negative contingencies in a person's life. Though Freud might have been the mind that spanned the Romantic (behavior is largely driven by powerful and unconscious forces of which we have little knowledge) and the Modern (through the methods of psychoanalysis we can come to a full understanding of human behavior), it was the behaviorists and the early cognitive theorists who convinced us that, for example, we can manufacture the kind of children we would like to have through manipulation of environmental and internal processes (like thoughts about the self). In chapters 6 and 7 we will review some of the basics of these theories as they currently are understood. There is still a very strong strain of that kind of thinking in our culture. We see it in policy proposals to reduce adolescent violence or in the many books explaining how you can be a more desirable, attractive you, to the ten things you can do to have a happy intimate relationship, to the methods for overcoming anxiety and panic. The idea of the romantic self and its mystery has given way to the idea that the self can be

manufactured and that mastery of the environment is not only possible but our ethical obligation. There is a kind of hope and belief that, in the Modernist vision, science and rationality can save us, that technology will help meet most of the wants of all of the human race, and that, in the end, life will not only be manageable—but good.

But there is a fly in the ointment. Just as we think we are firmly steering the rudder of certainty, technology, particularly information processing technology, floods our world of certainty with thousands of voices, worldviews, demands, opportunities, and stresses. As a teenager, most of my relationships were face-to-face with others in my immediate world. As an adult, I communicate with people and institutions I never really see—via voice mail, E-mail, faxes, the telephone, radio, TV, the Internet. Even television (our family got our first set when I was twelve) in its early innocence expanded the relationships we had. We felt as though we “knew” Hopalong Cassidy or Ozzie and Harriet. We awaited their adventures every week. We talked about them as though they were members of our community. Now we have similar experiences, but as Gergen (1991) and Beaudrillard (1987) allege, they have expanded extravagantly. We have become caught in a complex web of multiplying relationships. These, as Gergen points out, saturate us and bring us widely and sometimes insanely variant points of view, values, and possibilities for being and doing. Thus, we have, or so it seems sometimes, little firm ground to stand on. Where for the Modernist there was the comfortable, solid chair of truth to ease into, for the Postmodern citizen, there seem to be many competing “truths” and values, beliefs, and philosophies, a giddy array of places to rest one’s weary bones.

Possibilities

For many the Postmodern era brings anxiety. Certainties are dashed against the hodgepodge and evanescent shoals of diversity. Many voices are heard. Many truths are put forward. Many values are counterposed with each other. “The center won’t hold!” Peter Marin (1996) puts it this way:

America is a huge and relatively young nation. We are an immigrant society with permeable borders and a population in constant flux. We draw our moral and cultural notions from many conflicting ethnic traditions, and these in turn are beset by astonishingly rapid rates of technological, economic, and cultural change and by a popular culture more powerful in its effects than our formal institutions are. (pp. 42–43)

This is the Postmodern condition.

For some this probably seems a stupefying melange. For others, it presents an impressive array of opportunities for self-definition, relationship formation, points of view, ways of thinking, and methods of doing one's work. Robert Jay Lifton (1993) puts it this way:

Rather than collapse under these threats and pulls, the self turns out to be surprisingly resilient. It makes use of bits and pieces here and there and somehow keeps going . . . We find ourselves evolving a self of many possibilities, one that has risks and pitfalls but at the same time holds out considerable promise for the human future. (pp. 1, 2)

Surely the possibility for singular truths in any discipline or area of culture seems more difficult, but the promise of tasting and exploring other ways of understanding and being or, in our case as social workers, of doing our work, seems exciting. In the chapter 2, we will explore the importance of meaning-making to human beings and some of the impact of the emergent Postmodern world will become evident.

*M and M Dialogue*¹

MEREDITH: I find some of these ideas either puzzling or hard to grasp.

MITCHELL: Such as?

MEREDITH: Do you have a couple of hours? Let me just pick two. Take the idea of heroes, cultural hero systems, and evil as well as good being attached to them. Like how would that apply today, in real life?

MITCHELL: First, I agree that these are difficult ideas and add that I am not sure I can really answer your question but I will give it a shot. When Princess Di was killed in an automobile crash, the outpouring of emotion and grief from around the world was astonishing. This from people who did not know her—except at a distance—and for a young woman who not too many years earlier had been dismissed as shallow and self-serving. How do you account for this?

MEREDITH: I asked you first!

MITCHELL: Right. For some reason or another, perhaps it was her change of lifestyle, her turn toward more socially conscious, beneficent pursuits, her genuine concern for the aggrieved whether it was AIDS victims or

1. At the end of each chapter, you will read a report of imagined conversations between Meredith, a reflective, interested, dedicated student and a single mother, and one of her teachers, Mitchell. These conversations are meant to address some of the ideas and concerns raised in each chapter.

suffering children in the third world, and her station in life plus her beauty that encouraged people to invest some degree of existential capital in her personage. To regard her as heroic is to say something about what you believe, what you dream, how you would be if you could, and it takes a little existential weight off the burdens of your own life.

MEREDITH: Well, maybe. I must admit that as a teenager, I couldn't get enough of Di. Whether it was picture books about her life or TV stories about her, I was fascinated. But I don't think I regarded her as heroic. I liked the way she looked and she was royalty and she rose from being a commoner. But hero? I don't think so.

MITCHELL: Maybe not. But heroism indicates that you are willing to invest emotionally, morally, existentially in that person's image (you did not really know her as a person), to surrender a little bit of the struggle to be yourself to being like someone else who clearly represents something. Perhaps a better example can be found in political, national leaders who throughout history have been able to mobilize the energies of millions, perhaps even to ask for the sacrifice of their lives in the name of some principles or beliefs. People do not just do it because they are forced to or because they have similar beliefs, they do it because, in part, they are willing to surrender the authority for their lives to a figure who embodies, in a strange way, the promise of immortality.

MEREDITH: Well, I think I get your drift, but could we bring this closer to home? What has this got to do with social work?

MITCHELL: Beats me. Just kidding. Many of the people you will see, and this is a part of the human condition, not something weird, have, for good reasons and bad, surrendered some degree of moral and existential authority for their lives to other people, institutions, beliefs, etc. They don't think they have the right or the energy to assert themselves. A woman who is abused and victimized is sometimes stuck in this way. The larger-than-life figure in her life is heroic in that sense but great harm to her. And he relies, unwittingly, on the existential power that he has that is derived in part by denying it in the victim. Part of what you do, in helping them, although you would not necessarily use these terms, is to help the abused person find her own existential authority for her life, in her beliefs, her hopes, her imagination, and the resources that she has.

MEREDITH: That helps a little. Let me try another idea. What you said about the postmodern self was a little unsettling, too. I mean I sense my self as a pretty solid, durable entity and I believe I am pretty much the same self to my kids as I am to, say, you.

MITCHELL: Well, you may be. But the point of all this is that becoming and staying a durable self these days is more difficult than it has ever been.

It is probably harder for kids to take hold in today's world. Think of the barrage of values, lifestyles, voices, possibilities, lures that come their way through the media, the marketplace, their own relationships, even the communication devices at hand—E-mail, the Internet, faxes, not to mention phones and voice mail. All these different voices bring with them different and often competing values, beliefs, ways of thinking and being so that one may be confused about how to be. Or one might be several selves, depending on who one was with, what the social surroundings were, who knows what else?

MEREDITH: I can see that. I see it in my own kids. But, in the end, I think that if I am a stalwart Mom and they are lucky, they will turn out to be recognizable selves.

MITCHELL: Possibly so. Certainly to you they will be recognizable in a familiar way. But I know many parents who, at some point, do not fully recognize their kids as they grow older. They have become in some way different. And they may be quite different depending on who they are with. So the pouty, sullen kid with a nose ring is a laugh-a-minute party guy with his friends; a rebel in the classroom; a reliable, hard-working employee; and a gifted, determined soccer player. Were you to follow him around and see him in these different situations with these different people you might not know, in terms of behavior and demeanor, that it was the same kid. Then two years down the road, he goes off to college and discovers a variety of new values and ways of being and adds another "self" to his repertoire.

MEREDITH: Whew. You make me want to run home and check my kids.

MITCHELL: They'll be fine, I'm sure. Let's talk more later.

MEREDITH: Great . . . I think.

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CHAPTER TWO

Meaning-Making

I construct myself continually and I construct you, and you do the same. And the construction lasts as long as the material of our feelings doesn't crumble and as long as the cement of our will lasts.

—PIRANDELLO

Jerome Bruner, long a luminous figure in developmental psychology and personality development, contends that meaning-making and storytelling are essential elements of the human experience.

I argued in favor of a renewal and refreshment of the original revolution [in cognitive psychology], a revolution inspired by the conviction that the central concept of a human psychology is *meaning* [author's emphasis] and the processes and transactions involved in the construction of meanings. (Bruner, 1990, p. 33)

Without a fundamental core of meaning about which we can have conviction, life becomes problematic. Let us imagine two people confronting the death of a loved one. They may have very different responses to such a grievous occurrence in their lives. Their reactions, of course, flow from many sources: the preparation for and anticipation of such an event, the amount of interpersonal support available to them, their physical health and biochemical response to stress, the circumstances and nature of the death itself (was it sudden, grotesque, expectable, peaceful?), the quality of the relationship with the deceased, and the socioeconomic consequences of the death, for example. One person may get beyond grieving and mourning to reconstruct life and the future, and the other might sink into a deep, prolonged depression. The course of this grieving depends, very importantly, on the fund of meaning available and its relevance to the individual's circumstances.

The fact that we need meaning suggests that, unlike animals who can rely on a fund of instinct, we are very much reliant on symbols—words, language, narratives, artifacts, depictions, signs, icons, images—to situate ourselves somewhat comfortably in the world to which we were born. In this sense, meaning is critical to our sense of self; our belonging and connections to others; our awareness of the natural, physical, and human ele-

ments of our world; and, to a degree, our very sanity. The world we come into is largely a product of our culture and the social contexts (social institutions such as family, community, church, and school as well as the physical environment) that surround us. Culture gives us a language and other tools for understanding and orienting ourselves in the world. It does so from the very beginning. Although you probably do not remember a whole lot about being a fetus, culture was already preparing you for your entry into the open air of separate physical existence. The way your parents thought about what a baby meant to them, what they believed you required in the way of nurturance, what their ideas of parental obligations and behaviors were, what interpretation of gender guided them (how anxious we often are to determine what the gender is even before birth—that tells something of the enormous importance of gender as a signifier of place, status, and meaning), and the cultural definitions of and guideposts for all of these coalesce as a linguistic, behavioral, and emotional arched gateway awaiting your grand entrance into the universe. So we do not come naked—symbolically speaking—into the world.

To the as-yet-unborn, to all innocent wisps of undifferentiated nothingness: Watch out for life. . . . I have caught life. I have come down with life. I was a little wisp of undifferentiated nothingness, and then a little peephole opened quite suddenly. Light and sound poured in. Voices began to describe me and my surroundings. Nothing they said could be appealed. They said I was a boy named Rudolph Waltz, and that was that. They said the year was 1932, and that was that. They said I was in Midland City, Ohio, and that was that. . . . They never shut up. Year after year they piled detail upon detail. They do it still. You know what they say now? They say the year is 1982, and that I am fifty years old. (Vonnegut, 1982, p. 1)

Irony and satire aside, Vonnegut's fictional Rudolph (in the novel *Dead-eye Dick*) is describing the fact that much of what we make of the world comes from the words, stories, opinions, and beliefs of those who surround us. When we are small, they present their impressions and pictures of the world through instruction—the catechism of family membership and citizenship (“This is how you are supposed to be and this is what you need to know to be that!”) is powerful and dramatic. We are so small and uncertain, unformed, and they are so big and self-assured. From them as well as other sources that immediately impinge upon us—the culture as it comes at us from the media, our neighbors, church, school, relatives, for example—we get a pretty good idea of what we are and how we are supposed to be. But these characterizations and definitions are provisional as well. As we grow and find ourselves in different circumstances and among different people and

as the culture changes, we rethink and restyle ourselves—maybe not fully consciously, either.

Many have tried to capture the dramaturgy of childhood and growing up. Sigmund Freud (1932) pitted the power of the parents (as representatives of the civilized world) against the primitive, unbridled instincts of the newborn. It was an unfair battle; taming the instinctual energies of the hapless infant was, basically, no contest. As we grew up we paid for it, however, with a residue of frustrated unconscious urges and wishes that compelled us in ways that we were unaware of. We became civilized but the price we paid was neurosis—a level of anxiety and uncertainty and self-ignorance that was our lot and, surprise!, only the method of psychoanalysis could provide a way of understanding and, though limited, freedom from our unconscious. Freud's ideas were ingenious (we'll discuss them more thoroughly, along with the newer versions of them, in chapter 6) and complex, but the theme is basically that described above.

Other and later depictions of this developmental process were less dramatic than Freud's. Many of them revolved around defining the shaping elements of environment, including parents and other caretakers, social institutions, and culture, and analyzing their impact on the given (through heredity and constitution) cognitive, behavioral, and physical potentials of the child. But in this chapter we will explore some more transactional views of the development of the self and meaning.

SELF

Traditionally, in our culture and among social scientists, the self seems a fairly autonomous project; a palpable something within that unfolds according to an epigenetic plan and the formative influences of the environment. The idea is that there is an essence of personality (remember the Romantic view of essence?) we call the self. In *American Pastoral*, Philip Roth introduces the protagonist, "the Swede":

The name was magical; so was the anomalous face. Of the few fair-complexioned Jewish students in our preponderantly Jewish public high school, none possessed anything remotely like the steep-jawed, insentient Viking mask of this blue-eyed blond born into our tribe as Seymour Irving Levov. (1997, p. 3)

The Swede's athletic prowess, his riveting good looks, stoic ingenuousness, and good nature bode well for his future. He successfully manages and extends the success of his father's glove manufacturing company, marries Miss New Jersey, moves to an idyllic rural setting, and has a captivating,

bright young daughter who, although she struggles with her own demon of stuttering, is curious, full of energy, creative, and loves her dad and mom and her life. Later, all this explodes in his face when his daughter, Merry, now a teenager and distraught for months on end by the Vietnam war, the suffering of the Vietnamese people, and the duplicitousness of the American government, Lyndon Johnson in particular, blows up the local post office, killing Dr. Fred Conlon and destroying the general store. She then vanishes from sight. He undergoes a wrenching struggle over the years to figure out why she did it; how she could do it; what went wrong; what did he do or not do?

Five years pass, five years searching for an explanation, going back over the circumstances that shaped her, the people and events that influenced her, and none of it adequate to begin to explain the bombing until he remembers the Buddhist monks, the self-immolation of the Buddhist monks. . . . Of course she was just ten then, maybe eleven years old, and in the years between then and now a million things had happened to her, to them, to the world. Though she had been terrified for weeks afterward, crying about what had appeared on television that night, talking about it, awakened from her sleep by dreaming about it, it hardly stopped her in her tracks. And yet he remembers her sitting there and seeing that monk go up in flames—as unprepared as the rest of the country for what she was seeing, a kid half watching the news with her mother and father one night after dinner—he is sure he has unearthed the reason for what happened. (p. 152)

But has he? A thousand more reasons will pop into his mind. None will ever set with certainty there. The Swede's struggle to account for his daughter's behavior, so departed from what he thought her character to be, so destructive of the sure course of their lives, is like our struggles in trying to explain the evanescence and the complexity of any human behavior, as professionals or as interested individuals. So the Swede, like parents everywhere, finds himself trying to make meaning and sense out of the incendiary change of course in his daughter's life. In our lives we surely will have to account for the sudden or subtle changes in relatives and friends over the years. In some ways we are all like scientists attempting as best we can to explain why people, even those nearest us, do what they do. Explanations may take shape as a story or, more composed and organized, as a theory (theories are, in some ways, kinds of stories designed to explain or describe intricate or puzzling phenomena). Whatever the case, our understandings are, in the end, constructions and fabrications, tales woven with memory, logic, emotion, and linguistic devices. Some of our accounts may have "data" and

evidence to support them and may even be confirmed by others. Other chronicles are more stark, lonely, and incredible. In the end, it is those versions that seem right to us, or assented to by others, or more plausible, or more culturally acceptable that we offer to ourselves and to others. How many parents in the dark of night, reliving the past, have asked, “Why?” “Why did he have to be killed by that drunk driver?” “Why did she start on drugs? She was always such a good kid.” But the questions don’t always arise around tragedy. Good fortune, too, begs for interpretation. “How did she make it through college and do so well? I never thought she’d finish high school.” “Did you ever think that Tom would become such a good father?” The questions and puzzles that clients bring you are often of this kind. People often want help in sorting out the debris of a shaken life and restoring a sense of proportion and relevance now and in the future.

The point? The self and its evolution are in critical ways like narratives. They are continually revised constructions of our experience, probably designed (and none too consciously, I would guess) to protect and extend meaning—that sense of ourselves and others about which we can have conviction. The narratives rely on the symbolic stuff—the meanings—that come from within and those that are delivered by culture. Donald Polkinghorne (1988) puts it this way:

We achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story. We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added [think of the Swede here] to our lives. Self, then, is not a static thing or a substance, but a configuring of personal events into an historical unity which includes not only what one has been but also anticipations of what one will be. (p. 150)

In the Modernist view, the self seemed a thing within that expressed itself to others reliably and consistently. It had many dimensions, and it was thought that some of these even could be measured accurately and objectively. For example, we have tests that measure levels of self-esteem, particular traits and styles of being that form personality, motivational levels, inner-and-outer-directedness, and so on. Our formal and informal psychologies bred a potent strain of individualism and essentialist views of the self. However, as we play more and more roles, as we are inundated with other points of view and images of other ways of living, as we communicate across the world with untold, often unseen, numbers of people, as values and ideologies compete with each other for our loyalty at a furious rate, it seems harder and harder to sustain a singular view and sense of the self. Consider

“channel surfing.” In a matter of a few minutes, you might encounter, with varying degrees of interest and emotional and cognitive involvement: televangelists promising hellfire for the unbelieving and deliverance for the faithful; astrologers forecasting significant intimate relationships to come in your life; a plumber teaching the installation of a toilet; a gourmet chef demonstrating the fine art of making croissants; two wrestlers engaging in wildly choreographed mutual pummeling; four pundits debating the role of independent counselors in the balance of powers between the judicial and executive branches of government; a Spanish language film; a couple revealing their innermost sexual fantasies to a moderator of a talk show; and a news report on ethnic slaughter in the Balkans. In a sense, this is a metaphor for the array of selves we are asked to play and that we encounter on a daily basis. Kenneth Gergen (1991) contrasts the Modernist and Postmodernist sense of self as follows:

In the traditional community, where relationships were reliable, continuous and face-to-face, a firm sense of self was favored [and, I would add, appropriate to the circumstances]. One’s sense of identity was broadly and continuously supported. Furthermore there was agreement on patterns of “right” and “wrong” behavior. One could simply and unself-consciously *be* [author’s emphasis], for there was little question of being otherwise. With social saturation¹ the traditional pattern is disrupted. One is increasingly thrust into new and different relationships—as the network of associates expands in the workplace, the neighborhood is suffused with new and different voices, one visits and receives visitors from abroad, organizations spread across geographical locales and so on. . . . How is one to act polite, rational, firm, humorous, or affectionate, for example, with people from other countries, ethnic and age groups, economic backgrounds, religions and so on? As one shuffles and searches for appropriate forms of action, identity is more likely to be questioned than confirmed. (pp. 147–48)

Gergen’s possible class bias aside (his description seems more representative of those who are in the middle and upper classes), his argument seems to establish the currency of a “constructed” self or selves, forged in relationships, constantly subject to change or shaping. What may be true and substantial in one relationship may be stylistic or irrelevant in another. In your role as student, you may legitimately and sincerely argue the meaning of

1. This is Gergen’s term for the Postmodern condition we described earlier—many roles to play, overwhelming sources of information, relationships, and stimulation—saturating the self with multiple influences on a daily and unrelenting basis.

different traditions, patterns of behavior, sources of behavioral and mental disorder, the definition of social justice. As you do so, you may take on a somewhat different persona. You might even come to be regarded and think of yourself as something of an intellectual rebel. But that “self” may be only viable and relevant in the classroom. With your spouse or parents, or even in the field practicum, other kinds of performance and behavior are expected or encouraged or just “naturally” engaged in. It isn’t just that you keep your mouth shut in these different relationships but that other behaviors and attitudes just seem to naturally flow within them.

Although the possibilities for expansion of the self seem more promising (or more frightening) in this era, the idea that the self is a relational and social and cultural phenomenon (it exists and finds expression primarily in relationships with people and institutions), rooted in a confusing jumble of competing values and points of view, can mean real trouble. One more worrisome outcome is the protection and promotion of the self at all costs. Mary Pipher (1996) characterizes the situation in this way:

We have a crisis of meaning in our culture. The crisis comes from our isolation from each other, from the values we learn in a culture of consumption and from the fuzzy, self-help message that the only commitment is to the self and the only important question is—Am I happy? We learn that we are number one and that our own immediate needs are the most important ones. (p. 26)

Although Gergen’s and Pipher’s views of self seem contradictory, they do relate to each other. With the “self under siege” (Gergen, 1991), it is only expected that people, less rooted in communities and less committed to a stable set of values, would focus on trying to preserve and promote the self. Although we may play many roles, as Gergen suggests, we often may not develop deep and abiding relationships with others, as Pipher contends. The rudeness that we see, for example, between politicians, athletes, pundits, and other public and private figures is perhaps one symptom of this (Pipher, 1996). The diminishing of civility and engagement in public and private encounters changes the character of communal life, as Putnam (2000) argues. Civility, among other things, is a part of social capital—the physical, human, and philosophical resources that make a community livable and sustainable. In an era when frenetic self-promotion rather than devotion to communal ideals and norms is the standard, public morality, such as it is, may devolve into self-protective and self-aggrandizing maneuvers. This kind of “narcissism” means, as Christopher Lasch (1984) has written, that people are more willing to “travel light” with fewer interpersonal and public encumbrances and commitments. If this is true, then it has enormous consequences for the stability of families and communities.

The current views of the self and meaning that we have touched upon here involve some key notions.

- The self is a shifting conglomerate of meanings and understandings that have come from the institutions and symbols of the larger culture, embedded in relationships with the people around us; is dependent on our ability to interpret and reinterpret present and past experiences; and is affected by the exigencies of the moment (those unexpected experiences and events which have a serious impact on us).

- The self is both historical and in process. Although we may sense a kind of durability and persistence about our selves, it seems to be that the self is tied, for most of us, to the sociocultural, historical, and intimate contexts we live in. As those change, the self is subject to change. The self begins as a social phenomenon and then later is experienced as a subjective phenomenon over which one seems to have agency and control.

- We are interpretive beings, and the meanings we derive in our effort to understand and comprehend our situation and experiences have a real impact on how we act and what we think of ourselves.

- Meaning(s) is not just something that occurs in our heads. It affects our ability to act. As a matter of fact, acting upon objects (people and things) depends on a reliable fund of meaning, and having acted upon objects often changes meaning. Just think of a time when you encountered a situation you had no familiarity with or understanding of. Figuring out how to be—emotionally, behaviorally, intellectually—may have been a problem. For the first time in your life, say, a person with whom you have had an abiding and intimate relationship dies—suddenly. You have nothing currently in your frame of reference to explain, account for, or rationalize such a devastating loss. You are at sea, struggling to make sense of it all. But the lack of supportable meaning here compromises your ability not only to understand but to act. So, protectively, you begin to restrict the range of your actions. Soon, you find it difficult even to do the simplest of tasks or maintain the closest of relations. You are, in effect, depressed—a victim of spreading self-restriction. Although there may be biochemical elements to it, to come out of your depression—ontologically (this essentially refers to your sense of self and being)—requires more than Paxil or Prozac. It may well involve reassembling a sense and structure of convincing meaning that allows you to move in the world of people and things with a greater degree of constancy and confidence.

If the self is a kind of performance that only makes sense in a particular web of relationships and cultural surroundings, then the separation of the subjective (inner) world and outer action is a false dichotomy. Even in the solitude of prayer we are always enacting, reflecting, rehearsing, anticipating,

and remembering social actions and relationships. “Oh God,” I pray, “let me stop hitting my kids. It’s hurting them and killing me.” Those words only make sense in the agony of the relationship within the family and the culture and in terms of this man’s remembered history. The images that accompany the words are the images of performance.

By . . . treating psychological discourse [read: thinking and talking] as performative and embedding performances within relationships, we are now positioned to see the entire vocabulary of mind constituted by and within relationships. (Gergen, 1999, p. 133)

CULTURE

“There is no such thing as human nature independent of culture.” So says anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 49). To put it another way, if meaning-making is the central activity of human beings, there is no meaning-making without culture. The development of meaning is, to a large extent, public and shared. Culture depends on shared meanings of all kinds. They may come in the form of values, ideologies, beliefs, myths, and rituals. Cultures also provide the modes and instruct in the methods for negotiating differences of meaning. It is our participation in culture that gives us the symbolic resources and tools (language, story, etc.) and direction for developing meaning. Very importantly, as Jerome Bruner (1990) maintains, cultures provide a system for explaining what makes human beings tick—a

“folk psychology” . . . a set of more or less connected, more or less normative descriptions about how human beings “tick,” what our own and other minds are like, what one can expect situated action to be like, what are possible modes of life, how one commits oneself to them, and so on. (p. 35)

Folk psychology does not mean primitive or naive psychology. Rather, it means that these descriptions and explanations are a central part of any culture, from the smallest, most modest agrarian culture to the most complex, technologically dense, metropolitan culture. In terms of meaning, we tend to believe that the world conforms to these interpretations, that some things are more valuable than others, that some things are more important than others. These beliefs are seen as sufficiently coherent so as to provide a system of beliefs and devotions, “ways of life” (Bruner, 1990, p. 39), commitments, and dispositions that we come to associate with various roles that we and others play—mother, employee, boss, victim, soldier, etc., as well as status markers such as gender, age, and race and ethnicity.

But we are not simply hapless actors in rote cultural scripts. We are agents as well. Perhaps with not perfect freedom to act on our own but certainly with a sense of options and possibilities, hopes, and future states of being and mind as well as a fund of memory, we confront the world. Rosaldo (1989) points out that those who study human behavior (he was referring primarily to those within his discipline, anthropology) are sometimes stumped because of the continuing tension between agency and culture. The intersections and junctures between culture and self are many, shifting, and confusing.

Consider the person mentioned earlier who lost a loved one suddenly and became depressed. The idea of depression² and the elements that define it (consult a novel, the *DSM-IV-TR* [American Psychiatric Association, 2000], or a text in basic psychology to see different examples of these definers) are rooted in the culture, change over time, and vary according to social roles and states (spouse and gender, for example); in some ways, they are a kind of performance (Gergen, 1991). That is to say, culture prescribes ranges and kinds of behavior that involve the performance of emotion in specific contexts and situations. So, if it is my spouse who died and I am a young man, we had no children, I am white, I am a construction worker, and I am not especially religious, my expression and performance of the emotions that constitute depression will be different than if I am older, am a woman, have many grandchildren, and am African-American. And if we are a friend of our grieving compatriot, there are only a handful of prescribed responses that culture scripts. So though we as the aggrieved certainly are gripped by the emotions that we define as depression, our depression only makes sense in the larger scenario of engagement with others. It is also the case that we recruit biology to be a part of our performance (Gergen). That is, our biological nature constrains and may be a condition for the expression of emotions but, in the end, “it is culture and the quest for meaning within culture that are the proper causes of human action [including, I would add, emotion]” (pp. 20–21). Although our depressed state may involve a dysregulation along the hypothalamo-pituitary-adreno-cortical (HPAC) axis (see chapter 4 for a fuller discussion), the roles and rules that define us, the stories and myths that are embedded in the daily context of our lives, and the relationships that we hold will dictate how we “behave” such a dysregulation. Likewise, the degree of that HPAC dysregulation may be dictated to an unknown degree by sociocultural factors (e.g., a young woman who, because of her past with an abusive father, thinks of herself as a victim and is socially isolated—factors that may produce the kind of stress that can amplify the biological irregularity).

2. I am using the term depression in an imprecise and fairly common sense, one which might include grieving and mourning.

Self and Culture

So where are we? We have been confronting the Modernist idea that the self is some sort of internally generated, autonomous conception, rooted in biology, constrained somewhat by culture, following a somewhat predictable developmental course over time, a solid thing that an individual “works on” over the course of life. Although some of these ideas may remain useful, let us propose, from the standpoint of meaning-making, a slightly different view that is more reliant on the culture (and historical era) that the self finds itself in.

We might think of different facets of self or different kinds of selves or different intersections between the self and the surrounding world. The following discussion benefits from Dan McAdams’s (1996) extensive work on the subject.

First, there does seem to be some evidence—increasingly convincing—that there is a *constitutive self*—that is, a set or pattern of traits and temperament that is laid down by genetic and constitutional factors (for a more complete discussion of these refer to chapter 4). Genetic predispositions are not kismet but possibilities. They construct parameters or ranges for the development of complex behaviors. But how these are influenced by the environment tells the final story—over time—about what shape they will take. Constitutional factors include the intrauterine events, processes, and challenges that affect the fetus’s development (e.g., whether the mother used alcohol or had a traumatic fall); the circumstances around the actual birth (e.g., how difficult was labor? was the birth a breech birth?); and those significant influences in the early days and weeks of life (was there sufficient time for bonding between the child and parents?). Let us say, for example, that these genetic dispositions and constitutional factors might add up to a child’s self that begins life with an inclination toward wariness, a discomfort with novelty and change, and a careful and cautious approach toward strangers (someone who, at age five, we might call shy). These patterns and traits are, for the most part, observable to others and although they are implanted early, they are, to an unknown degree, modifiable (Kagan, 1994).

Second, there are *personal concerns*—a range of skills, abilities, values, motivations, and coping mechanisms that are learned and are specific to place, time, and the domains of one’s life (work, intimate relations, public service, etc.). These

personal concerns are typically couched in motivational, developmental, or strategic terms. They speak to what people want, often during particular periods in their lives or within particular domains of action, and what life methods people use (strategies, plans,

defenses and so on) to get what they want or avoid getting what they do not want over time, in particular places, and/or with respect to particular roles. (McAdams, 1996, p. 304)

So, at some point in my life I decided I wanted to be a social worker because I had learned and developed certain values and beliefs that I thought would mesh well with those of the profession. I also had developed some interpersonal skills through coping with various traumas and losses in my own life. I came to believe these would be useful to me in this profession. All of this may have some unknown relationship to my temperament, but these personal interests and concerns arise out of the context and passages of my life.

Third, and most important for our discussion here, is the idea of the self as an integrated, historical, and unfolding identity—a “*Me*.” Not all societies and cultures seem to require the formation of a distinctive identity or regard it as a serious question. Some societies provide pretty much pre-fabricated identities (or, more narrowly, role performance requirements). But, for many people and many cultures during the past 500 years or so, the construction of an identity is serious business. Answering the question, Who am I? becomes solemn work for adolescents and young adults. The purpose of an identity is to lay the groundwork for an synthesized self—a self that integrates roles, statuses, values, traits and dispositions, and cultural requirements. The self thus has a past, present, and future. There is much disagreement about how this all takes place—how the self identity is constructed. But there is a growing sense of agreement that many selves are sewn with the fabric of story and narrative (Bruner, 1990; Goldstein, 1997; Laird, 1998; McAdams, 1996).

In how many ways has it been said that life can be told only as a story? And in how many ways is it possible for us to see our lives unfold as stories in which random events are purposefully entwined and chance is defined as fate? As in any creative act, the intended image, plot, or message of the story we tell may be fashioned in any of a multitude of styles and forms to preserve our identity, worth, belonging—in effect, our existence. Our stories can be distilled into explanations of our survival, our purpose, and our values—all that truly counts in life. (Goldstein, 1996, p. 1)

Here Howard Goldstein is giving us a sense of the importance of a life story or stories as the dynamic of a continuing identity. These stories are continually revised—we rethink or rewrite our past, present, and future as we encounter new travails, new opportunities, or experience new successes. What matters is not truth but relevance; the nourishment of meaning, belief, and action. We may value the “truth” that is brought to us by the methods

of science but, in one sense, there is no truth without the telling. Susan Sontag (1963), the philosopher, puts it this way:

It is always something that is told, not something that is known. If there were no speaking and writing, there would be no truth about anything. There would be only what is." (cited in Goldstein, 1996, p. 2)

In this sense, without the story and narrative of lives, there would be no identity; we would be only what we do. Without relationships, there would be no story. Like the writer of fiction, our constructed stories do have plots, characters, themes, settings, movement; they are laced with passion, irony, satire, and tragedy and are bursting with culture and embedded in relationships.

Although authored and revised by the teller, stories are also framed and "authorized" within the context of a culture. Different kinds of stories make sense in different cultures and no sense in another. Different groups are given different narrative opportunities and dealt constraints as well. For example, groups who are oppressed politically, economically, and/or militarily by dominant others frequently have their stories suppressed, distorted, or "written" by those others. During the debate on welfare reform in 1996, there was a lot of loose talk and pejorative characterizing of single mothers on welfare. The stories told about them came not from those mothers but from largely upper middle class white men who were responsible for developing the legislation. They had little or no experience or few or no encounters with the varied realities of actual single mothers on welfare. The narrative that emerged was unremittingly negative and, to a large extent, although subtle, dominated by racist thinking. It also reflected more about the intimate world of the politicians than that of the welfare recipients. Whether or not welfare reform turns out to be a good thing, the narrative constructs upon which it was based were not indigenous (that is, of the people who actually experience being on welfare).

Having control of writing one's own story is an element of power and authority. Joan Laird (1998) has pointed out for years that women's stories have been suppressed and others' stories about them have been celebrated and taken for granted. In order for women to assert themselves, one of the things they must do, Laird insists, is to "re-story" themselves. In this way, re-storying is restoring power and control. The empowerment, celebration, and elaboration of women's stories is one of the persistent themes of feminist thinking (Aptheker, 1989). Carol Christ (1980, in Aptheker, p. 42) wrote this about the importance of women's stories being surfaced and shared:

Without stories there is no articulation of experience. Without stories a woman is lost when she comes to make the important

decisions in her life. She does not learn to value her struggles, to celebrate her strengths, to comprehend her pain. Without stories she cannot understand herself. Without stories she is alienated from deeper experiences of self and world that have been called religious or spiritual. (p. 1)

Stories also vary by the context of relationships wherein they are told. The story you told about yourself on a first date is probably, in at least a few details, significantly different than the one you told on your first meeting with your clinical social worker. But however these stories differ by relationship and context, they do express facets and interests of your self. In any case, these stories must be believable, authoritative, relevant, and useful to the author—you!

Though our stories change as we live, and in response to the demands and contingencies of our lives, and though the need to manage the impression we give off changes in different situations, the self is not a totally malleable, ephemeral, and evanescent construction. It does have a sense of solidity and durability. That fact gives us the sense of cognitive continuity that we rely on to get through life. If it did not, we would probably quickly go bonkers. But, over time, the self undergoes some fairly dramatic transformations, thanks to the many experiences we have; the many relationships we have; the biological changes we undergo; the historical, cultural, and social forces that impinge upon us (think of the importance of the Great Depression or the Vietnam war in the stories of people's lives); the limitations and fancies of memory; and the situations that we met unexpectedly. For many people, too, there are moments that they can point to that turned out to be great epiphanies or turning points (Mischler, 1986) and, in looking back, seemed responsible for great changes and shifts in the life course and life story.

So, a folk psychology is fashioned out of the

culturally shaped notions in terms of which people organize their views of themselves, of others, and the world in which they live. Folk psychology . . . is an essential base not only of personal meaning but of cultural cohesion . . . folk psychology is not so much a set of logical propositions as it is an exercise in narrative and storytelling. It is supported by a powerful structure of narrative culture—stories, myths, genres of literature. (Bruner, 1990, pp. 137–38)

Our self, then, is an outcome at a given time of the necessary process of making meaning. The self is manufactured in a complex web of relationships with others, built out of the building blocks provided by culture and, to a lesser extent, our own ingenuity. It isn't built only in response to the present, but it has, as culture does, a history and an anticipated future.

Whatever else we are, we are meaning-making animals who must thrive on the nutriment of culture and social institution. But we are also resourceful, and some of us have both the cleverness and the courage to go against standard constructions of the self laid aside for people of our race, sexual orientation, gender, age, or physical makeup. My guess is that some of you gentle readers have gone through circumstances that shook your existing sense of self, your identity, to its very foundations and have had to go about constructing a dramatically revised sense of meaning and, thus, self. In my experience, when people return to school at great cost to themselves, financially and personally, it is often because of a long-standing dream (the subjectivity of stories is important—the lure of future possibilities) or based on a crisis of meaning or life-course changing epiphany.

SELF AND OTHER: A NOTE

Edward E. Sampson (1993) has written brilliantly on the rule of the “celebratory self” in this culture—the male self, that is, or the white male, powerful self. The propensity to construct others—whether on the basis of gender, race, disability, sexual orientation—to one’s own liking, to achieve one’s own purposes, and to extend one’s own worldview is the work of the monologue. This monologue has ranged relatively free until recent years. Beneath it lies a broader assumption: that this view of the world, however it hurts and dominates others, is true and unassailable. The other—you if not like me—serves my purposes and is shaped by my perception—“the male gaze” (pp. 8–9). This perception is understood as universal, true, rational. You—the other—exist to meet my needs and serve my impulses and motivations. And whatever else you are, it is clearly not rational, true, strong, or even moral.

A dialogic view of the world, however, requires that there be two separate “presences,” each with a point of view, a standpoint, expressing its distinctiveness, but in the service of coming to some common ground or to engage in some mutually defining project. We are only “created” in dialogue; our nature unfolds in relationship to each other and can only be more fully realized in dialogue. We only exist as social beings within an interconnected web of other beings, in relationship to each other. This has ethical dimensions as well.

Not only does [dialogism] provide us with a correct view of how human nature is formed and sustained, but in addition, in linking person with other as mutually determining beings, it recasts the meaning of freedom: we are free jointly to construct our lives together, and are therefore of necessity responsible beings by

virtue of this feature. “I” cannot be free; only “We” can be free. (Sampson, 1993, p. 171)

STORY, CONNECTION, RITUAL, AND MYTH

I have made a lot out of the idea of story particularly as it relates to meaning-making and the identities of self. Stories serve many purposes. They are about discovery, dreams, trouble, love, courage, redemption—every element of human experience. They provide a sinew of connection to those who share them. Stories that pass from generation to generation, within a culture or within a family, survive because they instruct, elevate our spirits, and remind us of our roots, in short, because they have human value and humane consequences. We are prepared by our own history as a species and as individuals to respond to the medium of stories. Peggy Miller (1982) has shown in her research that children, at an early age, are both responsive to narratives and prepared to use them to explain their actions or account for events, especially those that may be different or troubling. Typically they learn narrative form in context, usually within the family and in part by playing their roles in the family drama.

One of the important functions of stories is that they help seal and affirm the connections between people. Stories emerging from or that make an accounting of the experiences of people who care about, respect, and love each other help educate us about the possibilities, responsibilities, difficulties, and complexities of being human. They provide a ligament between us. Good stories grounded in our experiences can elevate us, direct us, and put us firmly and comfortably in a bed of familial, intimate, and cultural relationships that are of our own making—not somebody else’s.

The point is to change the values and the rules and to change the process by which they [stories and other ways of knowing] are established and enforced. The point is to integrate ideas about love and healing, about balance and connection, about beauty and growing, into our everyday ways of being. We have to believe in the value of our own experiences and in the value of our ways of knowing, our ways of doing things. We have to wrap ourselves in these ways of knowing, to enact daily ceremonies of life. (Aptheker, 1989, p. 254)

So says Aptheker about the importance of women reclaiming their stories and re-establishing their connections to each other.

As I said earlier, children to a significant and probably incalculable degree

are socialized by stories and narratives. Mary Pipher (1996), as usual, has some very wise things to say about the predicament children find themselves in today:

Now the adults who are telling stories [read: the media] do not know the kids who are listening, do not love them and will not be there to comfort them if they are confused or upset by their stories. Another problem is that the stories that are told are designed to raise profits, not children. Most of the stories children hear are mass-produced to induce them to want good things instead of good lives. . . . [Instead] We need stories to connect us with each other, stories to heal the polarization that can overwhelm us all and stories to calm those who are frightened and who hate. These stories would offer us the possibility of reconciliation.” (pp. 270–71)

Some single mothers in a public housing community were encouraged to tell their stories of survival and courage (O’Brien, 1995). They were reluctant at first, and in some ways they reiterated the public and media stories about people who lived in public housing, like they did. Their initial attempts at story were not very complimentary. But once they got into it, it was clear they all had distinctive, often buried, stories to tell about how they had survived—often with great difficulty (some of it admittedly self-imposed)—and these were stories of courage, wiles, faith, relationship, struggle, and uniqueness. These women were not saints; they simply were human beings who, facing the enormous difficulties of being poor, isolated, unemployed often, and raising children alone had managed somehow to survive. As one resident said:

It also depends on you, too. Now if you just want to sit around and do nothing and not go anywhere in life . . . if you have a negative attitude of not doing anything with yourself, then life is going to be hard. . . . But if you want to survive and struggle and do better, it will be hard, but it won’t be that hard, so terrible, you can always see a way around things. (p. 177)

This was an example of a pervasive theme in resident tales—resilience. One other observation here is important. It was critical for these women to tell their stories. Most times they were not asked how they saw their worlds. Without the encouragement to tell, some of their world was unconstructed or not of their “making.” It was also important for their children to hear these stories. These were in some ways cautionary tales admonishing the listener—children, too—on the dangers out there and how to avoid them. They were ennobling as well. Listeners were instructed on the overcoming of adversity and living under sometimes siege conditions.

Myths are stories of epic proportions. They represent important themes woven in the everyday fabric of life. For example, in American culture, maybe the Western world in general, the myth of progress plays a very important role, not only in the life of individuals and families but in the institutional life of society. The myth of progress instructs us that with the proper application of reason, knowledge, method, motivation, and discipline we will come to know more and more about the world within us and around us. As we come to know more we will gradually but inevitably inch toward some better, even ideal, condition. This myth plays out in thousands of ways in our lives. Work hard, study hard, and your life will be better (you will make more money or become a professional or have all the security you need). Even the stages of individual development (see chapters 9 and 10) so favored by psychologists and clinicians are stories of progress from brute nature to blessed maturity. The narrative of progress is a myth in the sense that it is a rhetorical (persuasive) device that appears in many forms, and it has a potent socializing function. This substantial myth also drives much of the scientific and technological enterprise. It certainly has been a part of most professions. In social work, we have sought the Holy Grail of scientific authenticity and professional respectability based on the myth of progress—the more we know through the accumulation of validated knowledge the more effective we will be as professional helpers. The dominion of this myth shrinks other ways of thinking about, let us say, personal worth. The homeless person we see—disheveled, seemingly disoriented, stumbling along the street, aimless—is not thought by many to be a person of much worth (even though we have no real idea who he is, who he was, or what his story is). Although he appears to be the antithesis of the myth of progress, he, in a peculiar way, shows its authority. We look at him as a failure or, more charitably, as a victim. He has regressed. Not smart enough. Didn't work hard enough. Blew his money on booze and drugs. Maybe a victim of combat and post-traumatic stress disorder. Our attitudes and even policies toward him and his ilk are funded, in part, by the compelling narrative of personal growth and responsibility—progress.

Rituals are the activities, relationships, events, memorials, celebrations, remembrances, and observances that are the “technologies” of meaning-making, story, and connection. Since 1979, the Saleebey family (my father's side of the family) has had a reunion in San Diego every two years. It is a gathering of the clan, spread far and wide, an intermingling of generations, a celebration of what we mean collectively and what we mean to each other individually, not to mention just sheer fun. For those members of the family who do not have a regular face-to-face association with family, this is an opportunity for connection and reconnection. For the young it provides some exposure to the tales and stories that help define family roots, and it

brings them closer to the wisdom of the elders. It also allows the younger generations to establish their own ground of experience, meaning, and relationship and to build their own rituals. For everybody, even the “feuding members” of the clan, the reunion provides a symbolic affirmation of the importance of being part of an intimate, live, changing collectivity and community. There are, of course, tensions between different individuals, but to drink from the wellspring of story and myth about who we are, and who we were, goes a long way toward nourishing an essential part of our personal identities.

Helping and Story

As I have said, social realities are socially constructed, constituted, and mediated through language and revealed and maintained through stories and narratives (Freedman & Combs, 1996). The meanings that individuals and families have forged over time are crucial for their conduct, actions, and demeanor in the world. But not all stories and ongoing narratives promote positive action, self-regard, relevant decisions, and smooth transitions. Some tales are about defeat, impotence, being stuck, or being reviled. Likewise, some stories are buried under the detritus of other’s interpretations and understandings of the individual or family (or even culture). Much of what professionals do, often unthinkingly, is to substitute their story for the native story of those they help. To label a person a schizophrenic is too often to unwittingly begin a narrative not indigenous to the person. The narrative is often one of chronicity, incapacity, abnormality, limitation, and deficit. As that narrative becomes internalized as a discourse about the self, it is lived by the person and reinforced by the actions of others. And think of what those in power have done to “others” and their cultures. The stories told about African-Americans, indigenous peoples, and poor people, for example, have not only been insulting and hobbling but, on occasion, have overwhelmed native tales and meanings. Liberation often consists of people reclaiming their own stories and the right to create new narratives of freedom, power, respect, and pride.

Roger Mills (1995), in his health realization approach to helping individuals, families, and communities, has had extraordinary—truly extraordinary—success in bringing about change. His approach is based on the fact that many downtrodden and demoralized people are consumed with a kind of thinking about themselves that comes, originally, not from within but from others. For far too many people, these stories from the outside are stories of failure, trouble, problems, deficits, screwing up, being stupid, and they are lived out, unthinkingly. But, says Mills,

The most exciting thing is realizing that people have this resource within them, no matter how downtrodden, what their past has been like or their circumstances now; they have equal access to an innate mental health. Everybody [he does mean everybody] can regain a healthy psychological vantage, and they can do that directly. . . . people don't have to spend time going back into their past or analyzing where their problems came from. . . . We bypass all that and go right to the healthy part. (Benard, 1996, p. 15)

When people do tap into their native wisdom, their innate capacity for regeneration and health, they are in a position to begin to rewrite their own story.³ And this, according to Mills, is a process in perpetuity. In the economically and socially distressed communities (public housing in Miami, Coliseum Gardens in Oakland, and the South Bronx) where Mills and his colleagues have worked, the growing atmosphere of health and possibility, of the subjunctive surfaced, and of new plotlines for life have led to dramatic decreases in the indicators of risk, illness, and disorganization—violence, abuse, alcohol and drug use, truancy, and school failure (see Mills, 1995).

As social workers, we have the opportunity to do two very powerful things for those whom we would help. First, we can actually invite, listen to, and “hear” people’s stories. In their stories we may hear the whispers of strength, hope, and possibility through the screams and tears of trouble and disappointment. You will be surprised, I think, as you become more experienced and run into veterans of the social service system (clients, I mean), that if you invite the telling of their stories, they will often tell you that no one has ever asked before. Second, we can listen “deconstructively” (Freedman & Combs, 1996) with an eye to helping people find other meanings in their narratives, perhaps discovering empty spaces wherein they might fertilize new plots of meaning. In the end, it is all about authored possibilities. As helpers we don’t do the writing but we might do a little directing, producing, and coaching. But the importance of people being heard, validated, acknowledged, affirmed, and worked with and not on cannot be overstated. In the end, however, we rely upon the cleverness, courage, and resourcefulness of individuals, families, and communities to come to terms with the past but, more importantly, to script a future more consonant with their means and dreams. Walt Whitman (1993), in *Leaves of Grass*, put it this way:

3. Mills doesn’t use the metaphor of story. But reading his accounts of how people have changed strongly suggests the rise of authorship for one’s own narrative.

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with
me,
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into
a new tongue. (Stanza 21)

Relativism, Multiculturalism, and Tolerance: A Note

The discussion of meaning-making above is splashed with the notions and orientations of a constructionist view of things. In recent years, from many fronts and on many grounds other than constructionist thinking, the charge of relativism, or, worse yet, moral relativism has been leveled at the idea the social realities are somehow relational. The notion that there is no essential or foundational truth or reality in the realm of human action and knowing does not commit us to the idea that anything goes and that one idea, one truth, one theory is as good as another. The realities that we assume and rely upon are the “results of prolonged and intricate processes of construction and negotiation deeply imbedded in [our] culture” (Bruner, 1990, p. 24). But the constructionist asks us to ask ourselves what are the consequences of these beliefs, this perspective, this theory, these commitments? What are the effects on my life and the lives of others I touch in believing this?

For example, let us say that you believe, and there is research to support such a statement, that schizophrenia is a brain disease, it occurs in all societies, and it is a serious and chronic illness with no cure. The constructionist position requires that you ask yourself several questions (or that we debate them). First, what does it mean to believe this—for the people who are presumed to suffer from it, for those who would treat it, for the social policies that affect it? Second, what assumptions and values lie beneath these assertions? Could it be that we are seeing this complex and difficult human behavior through a particular lens? The medical model perhaps? Third, what do the basic terms here mean: schizophrenia, brain, disease, cure? Fourth, what are the behaviors, thoughts, feelings, etc., that are thought to represent or indicate schizophrenia and do they vary with the social context of their performance? Fifth, are there other understandings of “schizophrenia” in other cultures and other times? We discover, for example, that in some cultures what we call schizophrenia is regarded as bringing uncommon insight and power, is thought to represent a connection to a supernatural world, or is thought to be a temporary alteration of the senses and consciousness that brings with it special acumen into the very nature of things. So eventually the constructionist wants to ask how we came to view this

human condition in this way and how political, economic, social, and spiritual matters affect our sense of it. It is not to say that whatever anyone thinks about schizophrenia is okay or any view is as appropriate as my own. Rather, it is to say that we are obligated to examine the sources, assumptions, and consequences of our own view. This is, in part, what deconstructing amounts to. In the end, we are to confront a serious question of values (Taylor, 1989).

Values are commitments, deeply insinuated in our identity, that tie us to culture, to other people, to social institutions, and to our own actions. We must be as clear as we can about the content of our values, the consequences of believing them for us and others, the choices and decisions they support, and the future they direct. We are, to the extent we are sincere, answerable to our values and, thus, for what we know and what it compels us to do. Such an obligation then is not moral or intellectual relativism. Rather, it is a framework for understanding our own commitments and those of others and their impact on society.

One of the debates raging today, and especially loudly on college campuses, is the idea of political correctness, multiculturalism, relativism, and dogmatism. Supporters of the importance of spiriting the views of many cultures into a curriculum, to correct for their historical absence and the predominance of a singular point of view, are sometimes accused of not only thoughtless relativism but of attacking the citadels of Western thought. These individuals often accuse their attackers of being patriarchal dogmatists who stand to gain by the defense of the “canon.”⁴ This is not the place to enter this debate, but I do want to mention one aspect of it: multiculturalism. If you have accepted the importance of the role of culture as described in these pages, then you have some idea of the importance of cultural ideas, myths, stories, knowledge, rituals, and tools for the lives of the members of that culture. These ideas, this fund of knowing and acting, are significant and “true” on the face of it. They direct human activity within the culture; they celebrate and recall moments of historical importance; they recount the exploits of makers, founders, heroes, and villains; they promote and instruct people in the important methodologies and technologies of understanding and controlling their world; and they place the culture firmly in the larger cosmos. Is one culture truer than another? Who really knows? Is the wisdom of Black Elk more sagacious than that of Socrates? Is the Lakota understanding of the relationship between people and the earth more veritable than that of the urban middle class in the Northeast United States? Is the psychological,

4. Canon refers here to the ideas and perspectives that have been institutionalized and sanctified by history and the powers that be. Canon is beyond reproach and attack from different ideologies.

professionally based approach to raising children better than the Afrocentric approach? These are not really the issues. The questions are, What are their consequences? What values do they promote? What do they reveal about the character of the human condition and human nature? How do they support and affirm life? What do they allow us to know and to do?

But there is a cautionary note to be struck here. Although we are more comfortable with celebrating cultural diversity and pluralism in the United States, and although more and more cultural groups make their claims and cry for understanding and respect, they all are subsumed under a dominating, steamroller of an overriding culture: advanced capitalism ruled by the marketplace and spread through the media. Thus, the survival of one's culture is problematic and may explain some of the enthusiasm for discovering one's cultural roots and staking one's cultural claim. Russell Jacoby (1994) says it with a degree of acerbity:

The search for "roots" and for distinct histories and cultural identities may be evidence less of real diversity than its opposite: as people feel threatened by standardization, they search out and cultivate differences. (p. 159)

No one would deny that different cultures have surrendered some beliefs and practices, some history and autonomy in the face of the siren call and institutional pull of the dominant culture. But a genuinely liberal education, a truly democratic culture, and a passionately open-minded society must respect the many ways of being, the diversities of many folk psychologies, and the fruits of many perspectives (Bruner, 1990). We require many paths of knowing in confronting either the seemingly implacable forces of dominance (no matter from whence it comes) or the mysteries of the human predicament. As for me, I want to know how other cultures figure this out. I must be tolerant if I am to hear their voices and drink of their knowledge.

CONCLUSION

We hunger for meaning, purpose, possibility, a place in this enormous universe. Our experience in the world is wrapped in the cloth of cultural, familial, and individual meanings. These understandings, senses, beliefs, schemes, stories, and narratives are not static. They undergo change and revision constantly. My childhood as now told by me to my children is a set of stories and tales shaped and reshaped through later experiences and understandings—not to mention the limitations of memory—and by the purposes of telling such stories (to instruct my children through the exemplar of my own experience, for instance). My understandings and personal or

family encyclopedia of meanings are also shot through with cultural lore and interpretation. Also, the meanings to which I subscribe—whether about self or country or culture or family—are shaped and expressed in the medium of interpersonal relationships. In this way, the self is a relational phenomenon more than an autonomous, free-standing artifact of our mind.

The understanding of the constructed (or continually constructing) self means that from birth to death, we all are a work in progress. On the one hand, such an idea can be tremendously liberating. Think of it. A self that we can actually have a hand in molding; not constrained, except minimally, by our history or the limitations of our body. On the other hand, how frightening is this? There is no durable self, the guarantor of stability across the expanse of our life. In this regard, Polkinghorne (1988) observes:

That which differentiates a person from all other persons is a construction as well as a discovery, for the person's story is open-ended, not finished. The realization of self as a narrative in process serves to gather together what one has been, in order to imagine what one will be, and to judge whether this is what one wants to become. Life is not merely a story text: life is lived and the story is told. (p. 154)

M and M Dialogue

MEREDITH: Hmm, I find some of the stuff in this chapter a little unnerving.

Like the idea that the self is some kind of social thing that is always changing and doesn't really exist inside the head.

MITCHELL: What's so unnerving about it?

MEREDITH: Well, like I said last time, I've always had this sense that there was a real me and it was always there and I looked out on the world from the vantage point of this self. Of course, it could change, but it would be the result of something that I did or something dramatic that happened to me.

MITCHELL: Like Alan Watts once said, we in the Western world are real comfortable with the idea that the self is an ego encased in a bag of skin, peering out at the world through our peepholes. But the idea that we are interconnected with everything we encounter and that I don't exist in this moment without a you to have a relationship with is, well, for Westerners, just weird.

MEREDITH: Yes, weird is the word. On the other hand, I am getting close to 35 years of age and the seeming freedom of inventing, writing, and rewriting "my story" I must say is seductive. More so than being "stuck" with the same old self.

MITCHELL: Taking responsibility for some degree of self-invention, I think is a heavy ethical and spiritual duty. It means that we do have some choice about what paths we will take and how we will become. One of the things that I find discouraging about our culture these days is that so many people, in trouble or in pain or having made decisions that have hurt themselves and others, act as though somehow they are not responsible; that they were driven to it by their past history or by biology. Many today claim the mantle of victim as a way of escaping the enormous burden of self-correction or redefinition or reunion with the community.

MEREDITH: But there really are victims—children who have been sexually abused, women who have been raped, soldiers in combat, survivors of natural disasters. I think it is wrong to say that they have somehow failed to respond maturely or ethically to life circumstances.

MITCHELL: Yes, of course. What I mean to say is that far too many people, who have not really experienced such devastating or traumatic circumstances, let themselves off the hook by taking on the self-definition, “victim.”

MEREDITH: So, if I understand you, even though culture provides guidelines and limits, as do other social institutions like the family, you are saying that how we become as a self is a big ethical obligation.

MITCHELL: Yes, exactly.

MEREDITH: Well, then, it seems to me that you are making the self the same kind of autonomous thing that you accuse the modernists of having done.

MITCHELL: You got me. I think what I am trying to say is that having the relative freedom to create and shape how you will be and become is a serious burden. But it is only accomplished in the bosom of relationships and culture. In that sense, it is intersubjective—a product of your encounters, conversations, experiences, and relationships with others. There is also a physical reality to contend with. If you believe you can fly and jump out of a twelfth story window, you will be a bag of pulverized bones, like it or not. So while we have these amazing possibilities and change is ever possible, we still bark our shins on the hard corners of sensory reality and culture.

MEREDITH: I remember reading Tom Robbins’s *Skinny Legs and All*, and in that novel a character, Ellen Cherry Charles, talking with her inner voice says, “You mean we’re just making this all up?” “We make it up. We made it up. We shall make it up. We have been making it up. I make it up. You make it up. He, she, it makes it up.” At the time, I thought it was funny, a little ironic maybe. Now I think I see it differently. We really *are* making a lot of this up, aren’t we?

MITCHELL: I'm afraid (or glad) so. Shall we talk again?

MEREDITH: If you are game, I am too.

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CHAPTER THREE

Strengths and Resilience

I dwell in possibility.

—EMILY DICKINSON

Why is it that we are we so fascinated with aberration, catastrophe, pathology, disorder, and sickness? Why is it that in so many of our encounters with others, through the media, or in our professional life, we are drawn to what is amiss, deviant, weird, corrupt, or even disgusting? We see in our daily round of life, in newspapers, on television, in the movies, and in our personal experience examples of human frailty and evil that astonish, discourage, and, yes, fascinate us. We cannot deny, either, that in our professional concerns, ideologies, and theories we have celebrated the pathological and the abnormal in individuals, families, groups, and even communities (think of our fascination with the “inner city” or the “underclass”). But we also see that much of human behavior is motivated by kindness, goodness, unselfish motive, concern for others, devotion, and sacrifice. Alfie Kohn (1990) observes

Every day people near your home steal wallets, and every day other people go out of their way to return lost wallets to their owners. Schools are vandalized and blood is donated. On the one hand, “I’ve got to look out for Number One”; on the other hand, “What can I do to help?” (p. 35)

In this chapter, we will examine some of the more admirable qualities and remarkable capacities of humans, individually and collectively, and try to place them in the context of everyday life.

The tension between the altruistic and the selfish, between hope and discouragement, between the noble and contemptible is such a perplexing part of the human condition. But I think it fair to say that we know much more and perhaps want to know more about the darker reaches of human nature than we do about the elevating and heartening side of it. Our cynicism about the human condition seems nearly defensive in tone. No one wants to be a naïf, an innocent child in the face of the terrible depredations of individuals and nation states. Perhaps assuming and expecting the worst mollifies our insecurity or uncertainty. Maybe seeing the dreadful and

appalling in others (especially those who are different from us) provides us with a sense of superiority or worldliness. It certainly is not my purpose here to strike a blow for disregarding the depraved or the calamitous or to sugarcoat the difficulties that ordinary folks confront every day of their lives. Rather, it simply is to ask you to consider why we are so enamored of corruption and fallibility and find it so difficult to see or acknowledge, even in ourselves, virtuous traits and noble acts. Are we all products of so-called dysfunctional families who gave us as our legacy self-contempt and doubts about our worth? Are we standing at the precipice of the destruction of civilization, the coming apocalypse for which we had better be prepared? Or are we propelled by a deeper dynamic?

In each historical period or social group, man [sic] thought that he lived absolute truth because his social life gave expression to his deepest innate hunger. . . . If anyone doubts this, let him try to explain in any other way the life-and-death viciousness of all ideological disputes. Each person nourishes his immortality in the ideology of self-perpetuation to which he gives his allegiance; this gives his life the only abiding significance it can have. No wonder men go into a rage over the fine points of belief: if your adversary wins the argument about truth, *you die* [author's emphasis]. (Becker, 1975, p. 64)

So, in Becker's view, the stakes are high. Seeing the limitation, the evil in others preserves our ideology, our belief system, and our immortality policy. We sacrifice and scapegoat others in the service of assuring our place in the cosmos and expiating our own guilt about our existential shortcomings (Becker, 1975). But we can also stanch the ebbing of our life force through acts of self-sacrifice and altruism. This path, however, at least historically, seems more difficult to take.

Although people may act selflessly in the service of others, the more cynical among us suggest that they do so for two primary reasons: there is something to be gained (self-interest), or it is the product of a reciprocal relationship in which it is requisite to keep the accounting straight and balanced (you do for me and I do for you and let's not let it get out of hand). But there are other views. David Collard (1978) observes that the remarkable thing is that people sacrifice themselves for others, pay taxes, give blood, and rush to the aid of victims of disasters. These acts could be explained disingenuously as acts of self-interest. He argues, however, that the more we see acts of this sort in the face of pressures to act selfishly, that "it may now be appropriate to turn the usual argument on its head: it is not that selfish men [sic] sometimes appear to behave unselfishly, but that unselfish men sometimes appear to behave selfishly" (p. 69). At the end of his

wonderful treatise on altruism as a central part of human nature, Alfie Kohn (1990) declares that

No imported solution will dissolve our problems of dehumanization and egocentricity, coldness and cruelty. No magical redemption from outside of human life will let us break through. The work that has to be done is our work, but we are better equipped for it than we have been led to believe. To move ourselves beyond selfishness, we already have what is required. We already *are* [author's emphasis] what is required. We are human and we have each other. (p. 268)

We must live, then, with the hard realities of cruelty and injustice. We must confront the tribulations that fate or contingency send our way. But we must also honor and celebrate, encourage and enhance the noble and altruistic impulses that are a part of human nature and the human condition. Whether it is the socialization and education of our children or tributes to those who have sacrificed for a moral cause and purpose beyond the self, bringing the admirable and meritorious side of human behavior to the forefront of our consciousness is one way to ensure its recognition and foster its expansion.

STRENGTHS AND RESILIENCE: IMAGES OF ALTRUISM AND HUMANITY

Hardy Blooms: Resilient Children

In her memoir, *Wait till Next Year*, Doris Kearns Goodwin (1997) recounts her father's "haunted" childhood in which he lost in his young life two brothers, his mother, his father, and his sister. She wants to understand her father's remarkable ability to carry on, in spite of these catastrophic losses that he endured as a child and young man.

For reasons that I will never fully comprehend, my father somehow emerged from this haunted childhood without a trace of self-pity or rancor; on the contrary, he seemed to possess an absolute self-confidence and a remarkable ability to transmit his ebullience and optimism to others. There is an old Jesuit maxim: "Give me the child for the first seven years and he will be mine for the rest of his life." Perhaps the love he was given by his parents in his early years gave him the resources he needed to confront the trials he later faced. Or perhaps he was simply born with a sanguine

temperament, a constellation of positive attitudes that became as much a part of his make-up as the color of his eyes and the shape of his nose. What is clear is that at some point my father determined he would write the story of his life himself, rather than let it be written for him by his tortured past. (pp. 31–32).

In this long quote, Goodwin outlines what has emerged over the past twenty-five years or so as a significant body of literature on the resilience of children who must deal with often stunning adversity and trials in their young lives. Although we must always acknowledge the reality of genuine pain and trauma in anyone's life, especially a child's, we should also begin to better understand the sources for rebound and recovery from often unimaginable ordeals in children's and adults' lives. Some of the suppositions Goodwin makes about her father are in tune with the research, clinical, and theoretical work on the phenomenon of resilience. Early and abiding love, affection, and regard by parents (or even one parent) is certainly an element of hardiness in children. Even the presence of a caring adult when parents are unable or unwilling to devote themselves to their tasks as parents can be a lifesaver for children. Goodwin may be right, too, about the importance of temperament, inner capacities, and resources. They may be inborn and help some children stand firmly as they confront disorganization, loss, abuse, and even violence in their own families (Garmezy, 1993; Smokowski, 1998). Whatever the case, we are only now beginning to unravel all the elements that lead to good enough outcomes for children for whom "rotten outcomes" had been predicted.

Steve and Sybil Wolin (1993) have added to our knowledge about resilient children who survive difficult circumstances and manage to become well-functioning adults. In their view, the prevailing perspective on children in agonizing family situations is the "damage model." This model is essentially pessimistic, focusing as it does on the pathologies and wounds of children who struggle in these disorganized, violent, and/or substance-abusing families. The families are seen as toxic, and the children as forever marred by their pathetic struggles in this intimate snarl of pathology. Laboring, even fighting to develop, as they grow they begin inexorably to accumulate various pathologies and deficits and, in the end, as adults they are not much better off than their parents. In essence, the child has succumbed to the knots, tangles, and rot in the roots of the family tree. This essentially despairing view sentences these children to a life of victimhood and argues that they are forever damaged goods unless, perhaps, they are fortunate enough to find a patient therapist.

The Wolins' "challenge model" does not deny the harm that parents can inflict upon children. Abusive and neglecting parents are a danger to the well-being, even life, of any child. Although children are vulnerable to

the damage that parents can do, they are also challenged by their parents' perfidy, and some of these children become active agents in their own survival and growth. Certainly left with injury and pains that do not necessarily disappear completely, these children also develop personal qualities and traits as they attempt to limit the range of damage (Wolin & Wolin, 1996). These strategies may come, along with other knowledge and skills, to stand them in good stead in adulthood. The Wolins (1993) suggest that there are seven possible resiliencies that children may shape from the mud and sticks of their tribulations. These include insight, morality, creativity, humor, initiative, independence, and the capacity for nourishing relationships. Any child may develop one or more of these, and they do evolve in complexity as children grow and change (for example, insight begins in childhood as a kind of sensing or intuition about others; in adolescence it evolves into knowing; and in adulthood it becomes full-fledged understanding of others). On the resilience of the human spirit, Anaïs Nin observes:

One discovers that destiny can be directed, that one does not have to remain in bondage to the first wax imprint made on childhood sensibilities. Once the deforming mirror has been smashed, there is the possibility of wholeness. There is the possibility of joy. (cited in Wolins, 1993, p. 65)

Far too many children in our society suffer abuse of all kinds as well as neglect, indifference, violence, and abandonment. This is a reality that should prompt this wealthy nation to shame, if not to tears of anguish. But we must be alert to the emerging story that we have ignored for so long. When children (and adults) confront persistent and malign circumstances in their lives, the possibility of the spirit being broken is, of course, indisputable. But what we are now learning is that far more often than we have imagined, many children and adults rise from the ashes of their victimization, even personal horrors, to conduct good enough, even exemplary, lives. Wouldn't you like to know how this ostensible "miracle" happens? Aren't you curious about the events, people, inner qualities, and propitious factors that promote rebound, resilience, courage, and resolution in the face of misery, even calamity? And wouldn't it be useful to transform what we are learning about these characteristics and put them to use in policy and practice? What follows is an accounting of some of the circumstances that may offer children some degree of protection from adversity. We will also examine some factors, however accidental they may be, that may actually propel people toward growth and wellness.

RISK FACTORS

No discussion of this topic would be complete without some accounting of the elements of risk in families and environments that jeopardize

children's welfare and health. These may vary and occur in a variety of different configurations in different environments. But at some time or another, these have been identified as conditions that undermine and threaten the quality of life for children and expose them to the increased possibility of forbidding outcomes, such as mental illness, substance abuse, poverty, criminal activity, and the like. The list is long and includes child abuse and neglect, family violence or disorganization, single-parent families, substance abuse on the part of parents, poverty and economic distress, physical and learning disabilities, mental illness in parents, lack of support systems, modeling of risky behaviors on the part of adults, engaging in risky behaviors—early and unprotected sexual activity, substance overuse, for example—physical toxins in the environment, high crime and low employment in the neighborhood, high mobility and/or population density in the neighborhood, and absence of natural resources and health and social services in the neighborhood. The more of these in a child's life, the more likely a distressing childhood becomes an anguished adulthood (Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990). Or so we think. Yet there are many children who confront some number of these risks and who do better than anyone might have predicted.

George Vaillant (1993) in his study of the maturing of the ego and ego defenses (see chapter 5) examined data gathered over the years on three very different samples of people¹ who were studied over long periods of time. His purpose in the Study of Adult Development was to determine if there were commonalities among those individuals who did well over the course of a lifetime, especially if they did not have particularly fortunate beginnings. One of the many interesting elements of his critical review of these studies was to look at a sample of men in the Core City study² who, as children, shared some of the most damaging risk factors and fewest protective factors of any of the 456 men in the total sample. The sample of eleven men Vaillant chose from this group had stunningly dismal prospects thanks to poverty, lack of education, dysfunctional families, low self-esteem, high mobility, and

1. The College sample (Harvard University health services, begun in 1938) of 268 sophomores who have been followed for half a century, the Terman sample of 90 young women chosen because of their intelligence in 1910 and who at age 78 had done extremely well on many fronts and had about half the mortality of what would be expected of similar women in their age cohort, and the Core City sample of 456 males from working class, high-risk neighborhoods in Boston.

2. The 456 members of this sample, all white and all male, from Boston inner city schools, were initially studied in junior high school by Eleanor and Sheldon Glueck (1950), and follow-up interviews were conducted at ages 14, 25, 32, and 47. Remarkably enough, only 6 percent were either lost or opted out of the study. A later report was written by the Gluecks in 1968.

the like. At age twenty-five these eleven men were still clearly “broken beyond repair” (Vaillant, 1993, p. 287). But when these men reached the age of 50, what Vaillant and his researchers found was that “by middle life [eight of the men] had self-righted themselves and were often blessed with a modicum of joy.” Such findings prompted Vaillant to say, “Man [sic] is born broken. He lives by mending. The wisdom of the ego provides a significant share of the glue” (p. 287). After battles with nettlesome and hurtful circumstances, relationships, and environments, a surprising number of people in all three of these studies who seemed early in their lives careening down the road to ruin ended up healthier than anyone would have expected. Were you to have observed them later in life you would probably not have suspected the struggles they grappled with earlier in their history. Some of them were not necessarily happy, but all were resilient and in some ways indomitable.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

It became clear to those researchers and clinicians who early on were studying how children fared when confronted with enormous challenges in their lives that risk alone could not account for the eventual outcomes. It also became clear, as I indicated above, that investigators were amazed at how well many of these children turned out in young and later adulthood. After all, the ascendant idea that led many of these early researchers to their labors was that children damaged and abused in childhood, facing an array of stresses in their young lives, would be at risk for many afflictions, including mental disorders, physical illnesses, threats to longevity, or compromises to psychosocial integrity.

One of the first studies to document the course of children’s lives from impasses and obstacles to resilience and self-righting was the Kauai longitudinal study of Emmy Werner (she has been called the grandmother of resilience research) and Ruth Smith (1982, 1992). They followed the life course of 685 Pacific Asian children born in 1955 in this northwestern most island in Hawaii. Data on the children and their families were collected during the prenatal period, at birth and at ages 1, 2, 10, 18, 32, and 40. One of three of these children were exposed to four or more risk factors, such as poverty, parental mental disorders, perinatal complications, and family discord. Two-thirds of these “high risk” children developed serious learning and behavioral problems by the age of 10 and at 18 had records of delinquency, poor school performance, or mental health problems. But by the time they were 32 and 40, a little more than one-third of these children had developed into competent and caring adults. Factors that seemed to be correlated with this propitious response included a high degrees of sociability,

some degree of optimism and hope, and the ability to recruit the interest of caring adults. The resilient children also seemed to have an internal focus of control, a sense that they could be agents in their own lives. They also benefited from a degree of maternal competency. Even though some mothers were abusive, there were times when their skills at being parents were boons to their children. Finally, these children had a degree of cognitive and reflective capacity and intelligence that allowed them to appraise situations accurately (or beneficially) and to figure out adaptive strategies for dealing with trouble.

As a small sub-sample of their larger study of all the children born on the island, Werner and Smith have followed the life course of twenty-two children first diagnosed as seriously learning disabled at the age of 10. These youngsters had cognitive and learning problems, and 75 percent were living in poverty as well (these twenty-two were matched by age, gender, racial background and socioeconomic status with twenty-two other children who did not have learning disabilities). Re-evaluated at the age of 18, the prospects for these youth were not at all promising. Eighty percent had had some contact with community agencies—social service and educational ones principally. Only 25 percent had improved their lives to any appreciable degree, and those who had did not give much credit to public agencies and services. Rather, they attributed their improvement to others who had helped boost their self-esteem and had given them sage advice and sustained support. But by the age of 32 to 34, roughly 75 percent of the “at-risk” group were doing well, having made an advantageous adaptation to their learning disability, for the most part, and having enjoyed a degree of educational and occupational success as well as fulfillment in intimate relationships. About 80 percent of the control group were judged to have made similar favorable adaptation as well. So there was little difference in the two groups on all the measurements. There were more individuals in the study group who reported stress in their lives, but the rate of risk factors was, on the whole, considerably below what they were at 18 and certainly at 10 (reported in Katz, 1997). In these and other studies (see Garnezy [1994] for a review of the literature), the trick is to be able to account for the factors that seem to produce more propitious life circumstances and adjustments in adulthood. Michael Rutter (1985), truly a pioneer in these developmental studies, puts it this way:

Even with the most severe stressors and the most glaring adversities, it is unusual for more than half the children to succumb. . . . Although the risk of depression following disturbing life events is increased, it is usual for most people *not* [author’s emphasis] to become depressed. (p. 609)

The Wolins (1996) describe this phenomenon even more dramatically:

At best or worst, depending on one's perspective, only about a third generally succumb; approximately two thirds do not. The purpose of resilience research is to learn how and why [this two thirds] beat the odds. (p. 246)

The limitations of research methodology and our own cleverness notwithstanding, over the years there has arisen a firmer understanding of what these protective factors are. Anne Masten and Norman Garmezy (1985) suggest three broad categories of protective factors: self-esteem and a positive social orientation; family cohesion; and available social support system beyond the family. Let us examine some likely candidates that come from a wide range of the resilience and developmental psychology literature.

PERSONAL FACTORS

Remember as we review these factors conceptually we are separating out parts of life that are inextricably stuck together. We also may be unaware of other factors that actually have more to do with resilience than these. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to examine these and to wonder, as a social worker, how they might be employed in the lives of people, young and older, with whom you work.

There may be a *biologically given template* of mood, disposition, and physical elasticity that make coping with difficulties and adaptation to stress more probable. Some blooms in the human greenhouse just seem hardier than others:

A predispositional readiness to be flexible is a foundation on which later development rests, and one can easily see how some people make the world meet their needs and answer their calls, whereas other people, no matter how hard they try, never seem comfortably situated and in harmony with their environment. (Neubauer & Neubauer, 1990, p. 103)

Although I am suspicious of the notion that resilience is a biological inevitability or simply a matter of "good genes," it seems obvious that some people do have a predisposition toward a more or less generous and robust set of responses to the whims and demands that life throws at them. Infants who are uncommonly sensitive to environmental stimuli, for example, may have a burden of reactivity and agitation that other children do not. Thus, what to some infants and children seems a manageable set of circumstances may seem to these youngsters to be overwhelming and insistent (Kagan, 1994). Luckily, as they get older some of these children develop a less reactive, more engaging pattern of behavior. Others may find, as they mature, social and occupational niches that are less demanding and more congruent with their temperament (Gallagher, 1997).

Other personal factors come into play as part of the emergence of a resilient child and adult. An abiding sense of *self-esteem* helps soften many blows. The miracle is that given the torments of their little lives, some children manage to sustain and nourish a positive self-regard. A child raped by a parent surely should be swarmed by fear and trembling. But, for some, even though they struggle with those terrible feelings and that appalling reality, a fund of self-esteem and social competence develops. Is it a product of blind faith? The warm regard of another adult? The sense of pride in defending oneself against the intimate violator? We would be hard pressed to say. Vaillant (1993) puts it straightforwardly: "How do we learn to love ourselves when no one else has loved us? How do we learn to expect success when we have often encountered failure?" (p. 302). Perhaps self-esteem is a conglomerate result of all the other factors we discuss here. But think about it. Self-esteem and regard for self in the face of enormous danger. Amazing. Of course, it is always the child's subjective assessment of the situation that is the final determinant of their response. Jerome Kagan (1994), who has studied children for almost four decades, argues that the child's interpretation of any event is the key to understanding the child's response and the ultimate effect of the event on the child. When children respond actively to defend themselves against abuse, disorganization, mentally ill parents, and neglect, perhaps they develop a sense of their own efficacy and a sense of pride in their resistance to these stressful demands (Wolin & Wolin, 1996).

Related to this, many observers have pointed to the importance of *attributional style* and cognitive orientation in the development of resilience. Attribution refers to the ways that people account for and make sense of the good, bad, and ugly in their lives. For example, some children faced with difficult circumstances attribute the adversities to circumstances beyond themselves. Jimmy, at the age of seven, begins to see that his father's irrational and angry outbursts have very little to do with what he does. Dad might explode regardless of Jimmy's behavior. This is an important protective cognitive blanket for Jimmy. If, however, Jimmy comes to believe that it is his behavior that triggers dad's outbursts and he accepts his father's rationalizations for the eruptions ("You worthless little bastard! Don't you ever ask for money again! You're becoming a beggar just like all the men in your mother's family."), then he has a better chance of feeling vulnerable and lacking control. By the same token, if you believe that your good efforts and hard work lead to getting an A in research class, you are likely to experience more pride in the accomplishment than if you believe the work was easy or that you "lucked out." Attributions are not made just by the individual. As we have seen in the social constructionist literature, they are a product of relationships, discourse, and conversation as well. The comments and views of others, close to us or distant voices, provide grist for the attributional mill.

Two more personal factors that researchers and clinicians have discovered are *attractiveness* and *hope and a belief in the future*. It does happen that children who seem resilient attract the interest of one or both parents (even in very troubled families) or other adults. They may have an engaging personality, be outstanding in some endeavor, or just are able to reach out to others in a way that less fortunate children in similar circumstances cannot.

Janet is a pretty 12-year-old who has always been “Daddy’s little girl.” She overshadows her sibling in beauty and excellence in school. Her parents value achievement, hence she is doubly prized in her parents’ eyes. In this very distressed family, her parents nevertheless are interested in their child and intermittently are emotionally available to her. (Radke-Yarrow & Brown, 1993, p. 588)

These children and youth remain alert for opportunities to earn positive attention from family members or other adults (teachers, neighbors, coaches, ministers, for instance). As they mature, they come to value relationships and are able to contribute to them as well. But the possibility of relationship and bonding often begins with a kind of social attractiveness or charm that these children have (Wolin & Wolin, 1993).

Hope and the belief in a better or positive future sustain many children and adults as they confront harsh circumstances. Kim Anderson (1999), in her study of adult women who had been sexually abused as children, found that for some, the idea that the future would be better sustained them throughout the dark periods of childhood. Nan Henderson believes that for many children who don’t have faith or hope, the appearance of an adult in their lives who actually believes in them—without question (she calls this the “resiliency attitude”)—can begin to create a fund of trust and hope that they can draw on at critical points in their lives. Jason Thomas, now 28 years old, who grew up in the inner city, found that kind of adult in his parents.

I think my mom was probably the strongest one because she had to bear the burden of having a child and then losing something so precious [note: his sister died of leukemia when she was 7]. I think my mom is one of the strongest people on earth. She’s really dealt with a lot in her lifetime, and I feed off that. I look at her and think, man, my mother is tough. (Henderson, 1997, p. 33)

Children really can drink from the well of strength of others in their lives or even from the memories of others who have been especially important and steadfast. This phenomenon may be the fountainhead of hope.

SOCIAL FACTORS

Implicit in what I said above is the importance of another *person who cares* about and is unwavering in the support of a child under duress. Surprisingly (or not), it is often teachers who assume this role of caring, regard, and nurture. As a matter of fact, the resilience research has led to many calls for the schools to “focus on what really matters in life . . . schools must become places where teachers and students live together, talk with each other, take delight in each other’s company” (Noddings, 1988, p. 32). This is related to *social supports* in general. These can take almost any shape, but they include an environment (or part of one) that is reasonably rich in social and human capital—people who care, provide guidance, instruction, and aid as well as physical and emotional resources and tools. In a community outreach program in a public housing community in a large Midwestern city, we were initially amazed at the number of people in the community who, when asked, were willing to put their talents, their knowledge, and their capacities to work on behalf of the children of the community. In a sense, the community was a mother lode of sustenance that hadn’t been tapped. How many communities and neighborhoods—the people, groups, and associations within them—have the same vein of support and succor that has not yet been mined? (McKnight, 1995).

Judith Jordan (1992) believes that much of what we define as resilience in individuals has been spawned in the give and take of caring relationships—relationships that are fueled by the dynamic of empathy and trust. Rather than resilience being either a property of the individual or the fact that the individual has received support and succor from others, much of resilience in her view is based on the existence of relationships that are mutual. As a feminist, Jordan (1991) is interested in understanding how the female self evolves in relationships that are mutual, bounded, and empathic as opposed to those that are barren and/or destructive. She defines a relationship based on mutuality as

an interest in, attunement to, and responsiveness to the subjective, inner experience of the other at both a cognitive and affective level. The primary channel for this kind of mutuality is empathic attunement, the capacity to share in and comprehend the momentary psychological state of another person. (p. 82)

It may be, then, that the healing influence of an interested, caring person in a child’s life is based on that person’s capacity to build this kind of intersubjective, dynamic, and reciprocal relationship with the child.

According to Bonnie Benard (1997), who has worked for years with children at risk for drug abuse and delinquency, schools and neighborhoods

can provide three strongly protective factors for children who face demands, challenges, and risks that may overwhelm them. *Caring and connection* are essential for children to develop into successful adults. James Coleman (1987) says that if we, through our schools or in our neighborhoods, could provide “the attention, personal interest, and intensity of involvement, some persistence and continuity over time, and a certain degree of intimacy—children would develop the necessary attitudes, effort, and conception of self that they need to succeed in school and as adults” (p. 33).

Michael Rutter and colleagues (1979), in their groundbreaking study of successful and unsuccessful schools, *Fifteen Thousand Hours*, concluded that schools that nourished *high expectations* (Benard’s second factor) for their students had not only superior achievement levels among the student body but experienced a clear reduction of problem behaviors as well. There is incredible power in a school-wide or neighborhood ethos of high achievement, a belief that students can achieve, surmount barriers, overcome past difficulties, and start down a path of accomplishment, personal satisfaction, and social productivity. Regrettably, the reverse is too often true. We do not expect enough of students. Or, if we do expect significant academic and social attainments, we do not provide the tools, resources, and supports that would ensure such an outcome.

Finally, Benard would have us consider a protective factor that would be easy to overlook—providing children and youth with opportunities for genuine and consequential *participation and involvement* in the civic, moral, and intellectual life of the school and community. At the least, “this requires adults to let go of the role of ‘sage on the stage’ to become the ‘guide on the side,’ to see youth as a valuable resource, to willingly share power with youth,” (1994, p. 16) to create an environment of reciprocity and collaboration rather than one of control and competition. In schools, this might involve, among other things, organization of the curriculum so that there are ties to the everyday life and concerns of students in both learning and application; high expectations for accomplishment; opportunities to respond and reflect; a high level of engagement in classroom activities; participation in setting goals and making decisions about learning experiences; the opportunity to be a teacher as well as a learner; and involvement in cooperative learning endeavors. When children and youth are given the opportunity to engage seriously in all aspects of their education or community life, when children and youth are expected to be mature and responsible, and when children and youth are given many avenues for engagement and decision-making not only are they more likely to resist the stresses and seductions of everyday life but they are more likely to as adults to become citizens with portfolio.

GENERATIVE FACTORS

There has been little research on these factors, nor is there any widespread agreement on what to call them but, in a word, these are contingent circumstances in our lives that we could not predict, are unexpected, but have a salubrious and beneficial effect on us. These are moments of insight, chance meetings, encounters with ideas, lucky breaks, changes in one's situation that provide a basis for clearer understanding of one's situation, that bring needed resources to bear on one's life, or that present moments of epiphany—sudden flashes of recognition or awareness that give us a clearer picture of the future or more immediate risks. Rutter (1990) calls them “turning points.” Alan, an adult survivor of a terribly disorganized family, reports that

In the late fifties, I saw a television program on the lithium breakthrough for manic-depression. Everything that was described fit my mother to a tee. . . . “That’s it,” I said to myself. “My mother is manic-depressive.” I went to a medical school library, read about the illness and talked to the psychologist in my school. Then I knew for sure. The bitter disappointment came when I tried to tell my father and he wouldn’t listen. (Wolin & Wolin, 1993, p. 78)

Nonetheless, this moment—a matter of happenstance and luck—changed Alan’s view of himself, his mother, their relationship, and the difficulties he was facing. An epiphany, it allowed him to see something previously hidden and reconstruct its meaning (see chapter 2).

Think back about your life. Recall those situations, those events, those people, and those books that, when you happened upon them, brought a significant change in the way that you thought about yourself, in the tools for transformation of your situation, or in the resolve you had to overcome your own particular adversities. Reflect on the difference these “generative moments” or relationships made in the direction or tenor of your life. To do so will make it easier to do the same with your clients.

One major generative ingredient in a life of resilience is something that we do not easily appreciate: our own innate wisdom and the inbred capacity for health and regeneration. As I mentioned in chapter 2, Roger Mills (1995), spinning off the principles of the psychology of mind school that George Pransky developed and elaborated, has constructed an approach to community development called health realization. Although sound community development practices are a part of his approach, the basic idea is to create personal and contextual conditions so that people can savor their own inherent wisdom and tap into their basic capacity for health and well-being. A lengthy quote will provide some of the flavor of the program.

We did everything we could to reduce sources of stress when we began our public housing programs in 1987. We helped our clients with emergency rental needs, paid utility bills, and provided supplementary food, clothing, and physical security. We offered job training and day care assistance. We worked hard to make circumstances easier for our clients. . . .

At the same time, we never lost sight of the bottom line. . . . We wanted to see what would happen when people learned some practical ideas about how they could take charge of their own thinking. We hypothesized that they would begin to handle adversity with more hope and self-respect and find ways to improve their circumstances both as a community and on their own. We trusted that our clients' innate intelligence would surface as soon as they could drop their attachment to alienated or insecure patterns of thinking. We suspected and hoped that the buoyancy of the human spirit would deliver the resiliency they needed to frame their prospects and capabilities in a more hopeful light. (Mills, 1995, p. 128)

Lest you assume that Mills and associates were hawking some feckless clinical hokum to people living a hardscrabble life, think of this: in three public housing and/or economically distressed communities, there have been changes that could only be called astonishing—reduction of violent crime, truancy, school failure, drug abuse, family violence and disorganization, gang activity, and the gradual rise of prosocial, collaborative community and family relationships. The initial dynamic of these changes is a profound belief in and respect for the fact that people usually know, at some level, what is right and good for them. Mills observes that “it helps to remember always that what we really are is a facilitator. We are facilitating the other person realizing the resources they already have in them for health, insight, and wisdom (1995, p. 121).

The resilience of the human spirit—in the face of all manner of assaults on its integrity, safety, and even life itself—is not to be underestimated. Likewise, we cannot really know, at least at this point, who will rebound from hardship and who will be at its mercy. We must always respect the power of adversity and torment, especially when dealing with children and with other more vulnerable and less powerful people. But we must always be appreciative of and on the lookout for the forces for health, healing, and wholeness within everyone. But who thrives and who succumbs remains, still, as do many other aspects of the human condition, something of a mystery. Molly Ivins, the political commentator and humorist, wrote an appreciative column following the suicide of her dear friend, former Texas Beauty queen, Sammilu Williamson Evans. “She was a work of art. . . . She

was like the prettiest Christmas package you ever saw, so sparkly and charming. And inside were gifts she never gave herself credit for—warmth and honesty and guts and humor.” But, given her beauty and her smarts, her charm and her zest,

how come she took a dive off a twenty-third-story balcony in the Galleria [Houston] area in November?” . . . She had a fatal illness. When Samm was trying to recover from alcoholism, it took her a long time to figure out that it doesn’t make any difference whether you get drunk on Stoli in a twenty-third-story penthouse or drunk on Thunderbird in the gutter—it’s the same disease. She died with a blood alcohol level of 0.50. (1998, p. 223)

So, we are woven of threads wound together in the most distinctive and complex ways. We cannot always assume about people that the resilient ones are here and the vulnerable ones are there. Each of us has both possibilities within us and around us. And who knows for sure when we’ll climb the mountain or lose our grip and fall?

Power in the People: Strengths and Hope

The resilience literature compels us to regard and respect the qualities, traits, virtues, and resources that people accumulate as they confront the challenges in their lives. The strengths perspective acknowledges that reality, too. In addition, the strengths approach requires that we understand that everyone (no exceptions here) has strengths and resources, external and internal. These assets may be realized and a part of a person’s life or they may be inchoate—unrealized and unused. But the understanding and work of people who employ a strengths perspective is driven by the search for, definition of, and employment of people’s assets and resources in helping them walk, however hesitatingly, toward their hopes and dreams. We are called on here to venerate the remarkable richness of human experience, to acknowledge that every individual, family, and community has an array of capacities and skills, talents and gifts, wiles and wisdom that, in the end, are the bricks and mortar of change.

The work of the strengths approach is the work of empowerment—helping individuals, families, communities see and utilize their capacities; recognize the options open to them; understand the barriers and scarcities they may face; surface their hopes and aspirations and align them with their inner and outer resources to improve the quality of their life (Cowger, 1994; Rapp, 1998; Saleebey, 1997). Empowerment is both a process and a goal. As a goal, empowered people seek to have a firmer sense of purpose, a place to be and belong, an operating fund of esteem, the possibility of choice,

connections to resources and ties to others, and a palpable awareness of their achievements—in the short run and in the far future. The process of empowerment is the collaboration between, say, social worker and a family or individual, working together on a mutually crafted project that, in some sense, will move people closer to their visions and aspirations (Rapp, 1998). The strengths perspective, then is about “uncovering, naming, embellishing, and celebrating abilities, talents, and aspirations in the service of desired change” (Weick & Saleebey, 1995).

The strengths perspective is a way of thinking about and looking at the people we help and the work that we do with them. In a sense, it is a paradigm shift, although social workers for years have insisted that they build on the strengths of clients. But it is only recently that there has been any significant work—whether inquiry and research or clinical practice or community work—that was focused on developing a strengths perspective. In addition, there are concurrent developments in other areas that provide support for this sort of framework for professional thinking and doing. These include, among others, empowerment approaches (many of which have been built on liberation theology and the social activism of 1960s and 1970s); the resilience literature; healing and wellness practice and inquiry; and solution-focused orientations as well as narrative approaches to practice (see Saleebey, 1996). These are all different in many ways but they do include some common understandings.

- People who confront stress almost always develop some ideas, capacities, traits, and defenses that may subsequently stand them in good stead. Heretofore, we have been much too avid in looking at the impediments and injuries, the deficits and desolation rather than people’s compensating and transformative responses to the challenges they confront.

- Even in the most demanding, tough, lean, and mean environments there are natural resources—individuals and families, churches, associations, groups—available to individuals, groups, and families. Although some are clearly more bountiful than others, all environments have assets (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

- Even though people may have labored for years under the blame and disapproving opinions of others or self-criticism, habitual pessimism, or unfortunate life decisions, at some level, they almost always know what is right for them.

- As a species we surely have—or we would not have survived thus far—an innate capacity for health and self-righting.

- Healing, transformation, regeneration, and resilience almost always occur within the confines of a personal, friendly, supportive, and dialogical relationship. Whether a physician, social worker, psychologist, friend, or

relative, the more we actualize the power of a caring relationship with those we would serve, the better for their future and for our balance.

- Everybody has knowledge, talents, capacities, skills, and resources that can be used for movement toward their aspirations, the solution of their problems, the meeting of their needs, and the bolstering of the quality of their lives.

- A positive orientation to the future is far more important, in the long run, for healing and helping than an obsession with a dark and disappointing past.

- Every maladaptive response or pattern of behavior may also contain the seeds of a struggle for health and self-righting.

Significantly, as I indicated at the opening of this chapter, some of the impetus for the development and emergence of a strengths/resilience-based practice comes from society's obsession and fascination with pathology, problems, moral and interpersonal aberrations, violence, and victimization. Add to that the continuing penchant toward "medicalizing" and "pathologizing" almost every pattern, habit, trait, and inclination of human behavior and you have an intoxicating mix of diagnoses, labels, and identities at the ready—all broadcasting our abnormalities, disorders, weaknesses, fallibilities, and deficits. An influential cartel of professions, institutions, businesses, and individuals—from medicine to the pharmaceutical industry, from the insurance business to the media—stand to assure us that we all have a storehouse of vulnerabilities and failings born of toxic and traumatic experiences (usually occurring in childhood) that put us at risk for an astonishing array of pathologies: from caffeine addiction to post-traumatic stress syndrome to dissociative identity disorder (Kaminer, 1993; Peele, 1989; Peele & Brodsky, 1991; Rieff, 1991). Likewise, victimhood has become big business as many adults, prodded by a variety of "therapies," gurus, and ministers search out their wounded inner children and the submerged memories of the poisonous ecology of their family background. This phenomenon blurs the distinction between people(s) who have been seriously traumatized and victimized and those who experience the expectable trials and tribulations of real life (Dineen, 1996). Another interesting phenomenon that contributes something to the prevailing sense of the reign of problems is the "I'm okay, they're not" syndrome. David Whitman (1998) calls it the "optimism gap." Most people, when asked about their personal conditions (finances, education, relationships, safety, the future, etc.), indicate that they are doing well and are not too concerned about their future. When asked about the rest of the country, the same people see cause for alarm or are skeptical about the future of the country, the health of social and political institutions, and the capacity of other groups of people to carry on their lives.

Understand that a strengths perspective does not require us to blithely ignore or mute the real pains and troubles that afflict children, groups, families, and classes of people. Child sexual abuse is real. Violence is real. Cancer is real. Schizophrenia is real. Racism is real.³ The strengths perspective does not require you to discount the grip and thrall of addictions; the humiliating, frightening anguish of child abuse; or the unbidden disorganization and confusion of psychosis. But from the vantage point of a strengths perspective, *it is as wrong to deny the possible as it is to deny the problem*. And the strengths perspective *does* decry the intemperate reign of psychopathology and illness as the central civic, moral, and medical categorical imperative. Adherents of the strengths perspective *do not believe*, with good reason, that most people who are the victims of abuse or their own rampant appetites or that all people who have been traumatized inevitably become damaged goods. Followers of the strengths approach *do believe* that the recovery movement, now so removed from its original boundaries and intent, has

pumped out a host of illnesses and addictions that were by earlier standards, mere habits, some good, some bad. Everywhere in public we find people talking freely, if not excitedly, even proudly about their compulsions—whether it be gambling, sex, exercise, or the horrible desire to please other people. We are awash in a sea of codependency, wounded inner children, and intimacy crises. (Wolin & Wolin, 1993, p. 7)

Old paradigms die hard. Theories about patients, clients, victims, and the disadvantaged have been around for a while.⁴ On the one hand, it is good that the attic door has been opened so that women and children who have been or who are abused can tell their story. On the other hand, when we opened that door we failed to see all that was in there—including a variety of resources and possibilities. Defining these heretofore silent ones as victims seemed initially to be a service to them. But victim, unfortunately, has become for far too many a master status (Becker, 1972), a controlling set of expectations, norms, images, and behaviors that become hardened over time and difficult to penetrate and that supersede every other element of

3. Real only in the sense that people do experience and suffer the wide variety of inner states and outer challenges indicated by these terms. The terms themselves are constructions and emanate from the language and authority of particular groups—like doctors or social workers or judges. The actual designations of such human conditions may vary wildly from time to time and from place to place.

4. We have a variety of designations for those whom we think of as “other” or “different” from the rest of us—either by their own doing or by the malfeasance of others.

identity (one becomes, for example, a *schizophrenic* violinist or a *gay* plumber). Worse yet, many people are invited or persuaded to think of themselves as victims when they have experienced only the bumps and bruises that most all of us can expect at some points in our lives. The same might be said of the recovery movement as well. In spite of the widespread good that it has done, it has now spread so widely and captured so many people in its net that its good is obscured by its overweening dictates (Dineen, 1996; Peele & Brodsky, 1991).

THE IMPACT OF LABELS

What's in a word? Words create imagery, imagery creates expectancies or orientations, orientations become part of behavior, and behavior may become part of one's identity—firmly lodged in the very marrow of one's being. Let me give one example. In the mental health professions there are probably few phrases that strike more terror in the heart of the clinician than "borderline personality disorder." Whether described in terms of traits or symptoms, the label for this presumed conglomeration of behaviors, emotions, and relationships presages nothing but trouble and ultimate failure. The expectations around those with this diagnosis are unremittingly negative, creating an anticipation of extremely difficult work and the imminent possibility of failure. Unchallenged, these expectancies become "theories" that govern what we do and that help produce confirming attributes in the identities of those who bear this label. Many other diagnoses or labels have the same effect: schizophrenic, perpetrator, victim, cancer victim, codependent. In a word, too often our theories obscure the complex reality before us and make us ascribe to the person bearing these designations traits, patterns, motives, and even experiences that are either not there or can be understood more benignly. But most important, these markers turn us away from the real possibilities and capacities that are inherent in everyone we see. The longer many clients are in the mental health or social service systems, the more difficult they seem to help. Often that is an artifact of the symbols, words, images, designations, and confirmatory experiences we expose them to.

So words can elevate and inspire or they can, at the other extreme, deflate, depress, and agitate. Whatever else they do, labels create expectations and help us and our clients form impressions of themselves. Labeling obscures the person behind the diagnosis because it ignores the sociocultural context of suffering and recovery, it slights the strengths and capacities of the individual and the relevant environment, ignores the indigenous resources for transformation and healing within and around the individual, and disregards or even belittles the individual's own understanding of her

or his condition. Finally, it reflects and emboldens a power inequity between expert and client or patient that frustrates the possibility of the restoration and regeneration inherent in the body, mind, and environment of the individual. The power of labels turns on the power of words. As Joseph Conrad (1900, p. 185) wrote, “A word carries far—very far—deals destruction through time as bullets go flying through space.” Labels create anticipations and expectations in the patient or client, the healers, and the larger community. These expectations turn out to be extremely rugged blossoms. They affect others’ responses to that person and contrive role relationships in which it is extremely difficult for the person *not* to act in accordance with these expectations. In the end, labeled individuals may begin to think of themselves as incapable or unwilling to follow through on treatment or even to get better. In some cases, a clinician’s initial expectations may serve as corroborative biases that then are regaled in charts and files, staffings and conferences, and informal contacts between professionals. Despite our best intentions, attributions may continue to contribute to impression formation and undermine our critical thinking and careful reflection. While we are conducting our professional routines and conversations, we may be turning a person with considerable potential into a case with little to recommend it at all. Of course, accurate diagnoses are beneficial, but given without proper assessment and attention to the person before you, they can rapidly deteriorate into labeling. A social worker in a school system, you first learn that James, age 14, has spastic cerebral palsy, frequently is aggressive with peers and siblings, is two years below grade level in reading and arithmetic, and has parents who are rarely present in the home and not very supportive of him. It is tempting to go down the serious intervention route immediately. It certainly appears that a lot of work is in store for you and James. He would seem to qualify for a variety of labels at this point. But to your credit you want to know more about James as a person. You quickly discover (James is appreciative of your interest here) that he has had a paper route for over a year and does an outstanding job, that he likes to write poetry and science fiction, that he has a close relationship with an aunt and uncle who live nearby, and that he is making steady progress in physical therapy (Wright & Fletcher, 1982). The picture changes dramatically. James still has cerebral palsy and is not doing at all well in school, but you can begin to discern through his stories that he has a significant degree of motivation, some self-discipline, supportive relationships, and perseverance, among other things. These will ultimately be important assets in helping James confront and contend with some of the insistent difficulties in his life.

Ian, who as a youngster was given a diagnosis of attentional, learning, and some behavioral difficulties more than twenty years ago, recounted for Gabrielle Weiss and Lily Trokenberg-Hechtman (1993; also see Katz, 1997,

for a fuller discussion of Ian and others with similar stories) some of his experiences, some of which speak to the factors discussed above.

I was never left with a sense of hope, or a feeling of any clinician's real interest in being a partner with me to help me grow and learn. Rather the mystification of what was wrong with me was reinforced with each new test. (p. 320)

Interpreting somewhat, we can surmise that the theory used by clinicians who tested and assessed Ian got in the way of them seeing who he was. In effect, he was his label, the label came from the theory, and the theory did direct the clinician's interest in Ian's motivation, his understanding of the situation, his interests, or his capacities. As a matter of fact, the label began to obscure for Ian more positive reasons for working on his problems: "My dignity and self-esteem rested on my ability to conceal from anyone that there was anything wrong with me" (p. 302). And the clinicians who came Ian's way did more of the same: more and more tests and more and more diagnoses. But let us recall the discussion of protective and generative factors in the resilience section of this chapter. Ian's story tells us something about these, too. In his sister's room one day Ian found

Catcher in the Rye by Salinger; thumbing through it I realize it's about a boy in trouble. I can't pass it up. I keep going back to it, wondering if I might be able to read. I take the book back to my room. Sentence by sentence, page by page, a new world opens up to me. . . . Emotionally, the book compels me to pay attention and not lose track. I go over it again and again. I discover that I can read. (p. 313)

Luck and an epiphany found in a book, became a genuine turning point. And, finally, a warm, supportive and caring adult, outside the family, appears in Ian's life.

Mrs. Wilson was the best teacher I ever had. Although strict, she was encouraging and supportive. She understood what I could and couldn't do. I was never thrown out of class; instead, she kept me after school and I would help her clean up, set things up for the next day. She got to know me and sensed that I wanted to please, that I craved for sincere, positive feedback. (p. 313)

One way to understand the orientation of those who adhere to a strengths-based approach to practice is to ask, *What are the factors in life and in helping that make things go well; the core conditions for propitious outcomes?* When you think of it, even though we know most people in the midst of significant challenges and stresses do better than we might expect and do not eventually succumb to the pressures of their lives, it is odd that we know little about them. We have a prodigious storehouse of knowledge about those who, at least initially, fall or fail under these stresses and ordeals, but

we know little about those people who change naturally and spontaneously every day.

Michael Lambert (1992), in his review of the studies done over many years of the efficacy of psychotherapy says, that there are four factors that account for most of the positive change in individuals and families. These offer further hints about strengths and resilience. The largest percentage of the beneficial experienced by individuals can be attributed to their assets and strengths, personal qualities, and social resources as well as contingent factors (luck) that intercede in their lives. The second most powerful force for change is the character and tenor of the helping relationship. A relationship that is caring, genuine, safe, collaborative, respectful, and stable provides a milieu and context for confronting the difficult and considering the possible. The third and fourth factors, roughly equal in their impact, are the placebo effect/positive expectations and the technical operations and methods of the theory employed by the helper (for example, cognitive or behavior therapy). The methods of theory carry with them assumptions about cause, the nature of the problem, and directives about what to do. But, to a significant extent, they succeed or fail because of the presence (or not) of these other, apparently more salient, factors. (For an *excellent* discussion of these factors, please see Miller, Duncan & Hubble, 1997.)

So, the *matrix of clients' lives* goes a long way toward explaining how they might react: their strengths, resources, and assets; how they see their misery (their theory) and motivation; their social supports; and the luck and contingent factors that move inexplicably in and out of their lives. This means being mindful of things in a person's world—relationships, culture, opportunities, stresses and challenges—those conditions and people that might be positive, supportive, helpful, or even therapeutic. It also means listening and looking for evidence of the resources and aptitudes of clients as they tell their stories. The *quality of the relationship* between helper, physician, and client and patient has always been understood (and in some cases undervalued) as powerful tool for healing. Hans Strupp (1995), who has studied the effectiveness of psychotherapy for decades, said that the relationship is the sine qua non of all forms of therapy. It is the medium of change, a dynamic that should not be ignored. The important elements of that kind of relationship are well-known thanks, in large part, to the pioneering work of Carl Rogers (1951): respect, genuineness, concern, collaboration, and empathy. If healers are seen as nonjudgmental, trustworthy, and caring, they have some influential tools at hand whether they are addressing depths of a serious depression or the disappointments and pains of unemployment.

Of great interest to those who subscribe to a strengths-based orientation is the influence of *expectancy, hope, and the placebo effect*. The expectation that you will get better; that there is a chance that you can beat the odds; that you have within you the power to transform or at least fight the disease

process; my expectation, as your friend, intimate partner, or social worker that you will do as well as possible confronted with whatever difficulties you have—all are extremely important elements in recovery or at least the progress of the illness you have. Robert Hahn (cited in Miller et al., 1997, p. 122) rightfully says “belief sickens, belief kills, belief heals.” There are bone-pointing deaths, mal ojo deaths, and voodoo deaths: people die or become ill because of their implicit belief in a curse or the lethal malediction of someone who is credible and seen as having culturally relevant authority, power, and tools. These point to the power of expectation and belief in healing. At the other end of the spectrum, out of the positive expectation that something organically good will happen (you, by the way, have to believe it) comes hope, the idea that things can get better and that you can recover or do as well as anyone in managing your condition. A focus on possibility, an eye to a better future, and creating justifiable optimism all promote movement toward the desirable. Patch Adams (1993) says that faith and the hope that it engenders is the most significant element of health, a faith free of doubt and full of celebration.

But of all these three—faith and hope, positive expectation, and the placebo effect—the most intriguing and perplexing is the placebo effect. For the most part, we ignore it and it is dutifully reported as a by-product of medical research—double-blind studies intended to demonstrate that a real medication or procedure is more effective than one that is inert or fake. Or, more commonly, we regard the placebo as inconsequential or something that is just in one’s head. But placebos do bring about significant change, at least in the short run. Recently, a newspaper report of a study of a new antidepressant drug (one of the new designer, atypical antidepressants—the generation beyond Prozac) reported in a double-blind study that nearly 75 percent of those who took the drug reported an elevation of mood within a couple of weeks. More remarkably, a little more than one-half of the people who were given the placebo also reported a lifting of the dysphoria. The message that accompanies the giving of a placebo or a real medication or doing a medical procedure is extraordinarily important. Does it mobilize hope and possibility? Or does it mobilize anxiety, doubt, and helplessness? Creating the positive expectation of a healthy, efficacious response is important to the placebo effect. Likewise, creating the expectation of success and achievement is important to the strengths perspective but more consequentially, it is vital to those who struggle against the tide of low expectations, little opportunity, belittled self-esteem, and thwarted justice.

Several years ago students identified by the district as promising young leaders were invited to spend an all-expenses-paid weekend at Notre Dame University, participating in a youth leadership training

program. One year there were two students whose names were very similar—John P. Williams and John T. Williams. John T. was a member of the honor society and had an outstanding curricular and extracurricular record during his first 2 years of high school. John P., on the other hand, was categorically defined as learning disabled. Although he attended school regularly, he did not excel academically and never participated in extracurricular activities.

Through a clerical error, John P. Williams received the written invitation to the leadership program and decided to attend. (The error was not noticed until after the students returned from the program.) Several weeks later, the principal complimented his staff, particularly on the selection of John Williams. He had been advised by Notre Dame that John showed the leadership qualities that those conducting the workshop truly admired. (Golarz & Golarz, 1995, p. 25)

So what happened? Let us guess. It could be that John P. already had those leadership qualities in relative abundance, but that his long-standing label at school as learning disabled and underachieving obscured the faculty's ability to see this. Because he was a participant, the Notre Dame staff saw John in terms of their expectation, unsullied by more negative information, that he was a leader. Finally, it is likely that the experience and expectations in the context of the Notre Dame program created a new reality for John P. Think back to chapter 2 and the importance of relationships and context in the funding of meaning.

Applying Strengths and Resilience: A Schematic

Let us see if we can put together this stewpot of ideas that bespeak hope and possibility and that commemorate of the gifts of *all* people—not just some. We begin with the observation that “the notion that adverse experiences lead to lasting damage to personality ‘structure’ has very little empirical support.” So says Michael Rutter (cited in Vaillant, 1993, p. 285), no Pollyanna, and long a student of the development of personality and psychopathology (he was one of the first to identify the reality that children actually do become depressed). Let us add to that this commentary: “Every family has strengths and competencies; the [social] worker’s job ‘is to help people learn to recognize and appreciate their strengths and to believe in their capacities to develop, help themselves, and to be independent’” (Kaplan & Girard, 1994, p. 48). A schematic to highlight and illustrate the ideas of this chapter may help (table 3.1). Remember, as with all such schemes, the reality they refer to beggars the representation.

TABLE 3.1

<i>Risk Factors</i>		<i>Protective, Generative Factors</i>		<i>Expectations</i>		<i>Decisions</i>		<i>Project</i>	
Challenges Damage Problems Trauma Disorder	} <i>Internal</i> and <i>External</i>	⇒ Resources Strengths Capacities Talents Gifts	} <i>Internal</i> and <i>External</i>	⇒ Hopes Dreams Visions Goals Possibilities	⇒	Choices and options about paths to be taken Opportunities and decisions	⇒	Mutual collaboration and commitment toward	⇒ <i>A Better Future</i>

CONCLUSION

At the very least, the strengths perspective and the resilience literature obligate us to understand that, however downtrodden, beaten up, sick, or disheartened and demoralized, individuals have survived and in some cases even flourished. They have taken steps, summoned up resources, coped, or maybe just raged at the darkness. We need to know what they have done, how they did it, and what resources provided ballast in their struggles. People are always engaged in their situations, working on them, even if they just decide to resign themselves to their fate. Circumstances can overwhelm and debilitate. We do know a lot about that. But dire circumstance can also bring a surge in resolve and resilience. We must know more about that.

But strength alone though of the Muses born
Is like a fallen angel: trees uptorn
Darkness, and worms, and shrouds, and
 sepulchers
Delight it; for it feeds upon the burrs
And thorns of life; for getting the great end
Of poesy, that it should be a friend
To soothe the cares, and lift the thoughts of man.

John Keats, *Sleep and Poetry*

M and M Dialogue

MEREDITH: Unlike some of our earlier discussions, I really can relate to these ideas. As I've told you before, I am raising two kids alone. For the first five years of their life I was married to a man who cared more about cars and his buddies than he did about the kids and me. But I was determined to raise them right—father or not. So I summoned the courage to get a divorce. (I only say this now looking back. At the time I was scared out of my wits.) If you would've told me before I got married that someday I could or would have to raise kids on my own, hold a job, finish college, and go back to school for a master's, I think I would have laughed in your face.

MITCHELL: And to be honest, at that point in my life, I think, had I known you, I might have been very skeptical about your ability to do any of this, steeped as I was in the literature and philosophy of troubles and woes. As a matter of fact, at that time, had our paths crossed, and had I been your social worker, I might have advised you to stay with your marriage and paid little attention to your own desires and motivations.

MEREDITH: Frankly, as we discuss this, I am thinking about my own kids. I see the terrific pressures they get from their peers to engage in behaviors

that are, well, just purely bad for them. I see teachers pouncing on their mistakes and stumbles at school, and I see them at times really shrinking back, doubting themselves. I really try to be a cheerleader at these times, but the negative stuff they get is pretty overwhelming.

MITCHELL: I don't doubt that for a minute. But let me ask you to suppose a couple of things. Isn't what you are looking at in your children the effect of expectations of others who have some influence with them—both peers and teachers? What if the expectations of those two groups were thoroughly positive, hopeful, and salutary? What if the teachers knew as well as you do of the talents and virtues of your kids? How would these things change you and your children's lives?

MEREDITH: For me the answer to that question is obvious. Life would be better for them, they would feel and think more positively about themselves in relation to other kids. They wouldn't balk so much at going to school. Although I must say my 8-year-old seems less affected by all this negativity than my 12-year-old. The 12-year-old, Benjie, is in his first year of junior high school, middle school they call it now. I have always thought that junior high was sort of a Black Hole of Calcutta for a lot of kids. Some kids look and act so young, while others prance around and even look like they are in their late teens or twenties. Benjie looks like he is 12 going on 10. He seems sort of dumbfounded by it all and anything that is negative hits him hard. I guess kids on the brink of adolescence are much more sensitive to what others think—especially if it is not very positive.

MITCHELL: Do you ever think of this as a phase? That all of the positive regard you and others give Benjie will, in the end, stand him in good stead with himself?

MEREDITH: I suppose so. I'd hate to think otherwise. Another thing that bothers me, and makes all this more difficult, is all the negativity in the media—TV shows, the newspapers, movies, even popular music—these constantly hammer at what is wrong or bad. Look at situation comedies on TV. Usually, they are festivals of putdowns between family members. Kids see this everyday. It can't help but skew their perceptions of the world and themselves.

MITCHELL: I wonder if you aren't falling a wee bit into the trap that we talked about earlier: the tendency to notice and dote upon the negative? I'll bet that if I asked you to tick off all of Benjie's talents and virtues, all of the healthy and supportive forces in the environment, you would have difficulty getting started but, in the end, would end up with quite a list.

MEREDITH: I know you're right about that. It took me forever to acknowledge the good stuff about me. I am really going to think about this. It

is really important to me to get this right. A lot is at stake for the kids—and me.

You brought this up before, but I just wonder how much this mindset affects those who are supposed to help others. Not just social workers, but psychologists, psychiatrists, physicians, and nurses. What if, as a culture, we have these blinders and simply cannot see the virtuous? Now that would be an existential joke, wouldn't it? Here in the land of opportunity where we have come to expect technological miracles and growth, we can only see the rust, the closed doors, the danger? Wow!

MITCHELL: Maybe that is a sign of our cultural existential crisis. Are you game for more talk?

MEREDITH: Yes, but later. I have some serious thinking to do.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Biopsychosocial Understanding

Our bodies are our gardens, to which our wills are gardeners.

—SHAKESPEARE; *OTHELLO*

The nature of the relationship between the body, mind, soul, and the environment is, at worst, a confusion, and, at best, a thrilling intricacy. I have no illusions here that I will somehow be able to unravel and stitch together again these marvelous connections. But as a social worker, your profession proudly announces its ability to understand people and their environments in this holistic and transactional way. You will be called upon to deliver assessments of people that reflect the complexities of these elements of the human condition—body, mind, soul, environment. So in this chapter, I will discuss some different ways of thinking about these connections with the hope that they might suggest some useful ways of grappling with our wondrous and often mysterious complexity. If we bring these concerns down to a more personal level, you might well ask of this chapter: What is human nature and how is it different from human experiences and conditions? How do genes influence who I am? How do my biology and experience go together? How much depends on what happens to me? To what extent have my parents shaped me? How does my past haunt the present and augur the future? Does the life I lead suit who I am? To what degree has my identity been formed by culture? Are my problems or vulnerabilities due to my genes? Can I change the way I am? (after Winifred Gallagher, 1996, pp. xv–xviii).

HUMAN NATURE AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

Genes, Evolution, and Human Nature

We are members of a species. We have a long evolutionary past. We are rooted, in ways not fully understood, in that past. We are, in this sense, members of the animal world. It has been said, though the proof remains to be fully seen, that we share some 98 to 99 percent of our DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid, the molecular building blocks of our being) with our closest

primate relative, chimpanzees. (See *Journal of Molecular Evolution*, volume 30, numbers 3 and 5, 1990, for a series of papers about measuring the similarity of DNA between families of apes and humans.) Scientists from various fields argue the merits and details of evolutionary theory and population genetics and the roles of natural selection and sexual selection in producing various traits that characterize various species and subspecies. Others argue for different explanations of human origins and development, such as creationists and neo-Lamarckians. Lamarck was a French naturalist in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who was among the first to classify the animal world using the vertebrate and invertebrate distinction. He also wondered whether traits acquired during the life of a being could be transmitted genetically to the next generation. Neo-Lamarckians wonder whether genetic change could be two-way, not only from DNA to expression in the organism but from the adaptations made by the organism to DNA (Milner, 1990). In this chapter, however, evolution will be our guide.

HUMAN NATURE

Human nature refers to those characteristics that we share with each other because of our species membership and our collective evolutionary past. Some of what we share is in common with all of the members of our species, and some is shared only by some. For example, all humans have a large brain “pan” allowing the development of a brain that is not as much so big (relatively speaking) as it is complex and convoluted. If our cerebral cortex (the outer covering of the brain—our gray matter) were smoother and not so full of folds, ridges, and convolutions, our skulls would have to be enormous to accommodate such a brain (and your mother’s hips would have to be extraordinarily wide to accommodate your entrance into the world). Bipedalism (walking upright on two legs) is significant in the evolution of human beings. Compared to chimpanzees (our evolutionary cousins), the human pelvis is broad and box-like, whereas the chimp’s is lengthened; humans have shorter and non-curved digits and longer hind limbs. “The adoption of bipedalism was so loaded with evolutionary potential—allowing the upper limbs to be free to become manipulative implements one [distant] day—that its importance should be recognized in our nomenclature” (Leakey, 1994, p. 13). An extremely fortuitous development was the evolution of the anatomical basis for speech. The structure of our larynx, tongue, and the associated muscles provide a high degree of control over the production of sounds. Chimpanzees and other apes do not have this structure. Although they are capable of some symbolic communication with signs and even with computer keys and maybe sounds, they do not have the anatomical capacity to produce, for example, certain common vowel

sounds (Diamond, 1992). So, the capacity to produce speech would bring a tremendous change in the evolving options open to humans over the coming millennia. Although some millions of years were required for these and other characteristics to eventuate in the way we are today, in geologic time they are but a recent development. If “deep time” is a cosmic mile, for example, human nature only shows up the last inch or two (Gould, 1996).

It should be understood here that a belief in evolution does not mean that humans sit atop some imagined pyramid of increasingly progressive and ultimate elaboration of various capacities and abilities. As Stephen Jay Gould has often pointed out, evolution is not so much like a ladder as it is like a bush, with branches and limbs going every which way. We happen to be a limb on one branch—interesting and arresting no doubt (at least to ourselves)—rather than the pinnacle of some inexorable evolutionary march from simplicity to complexity, from ignorance to intelligence, from inferiority to superiority among all the living world.

Within our species but still a part of our nature there are obvious differences between us—skin color, eye color, and certain anatomical differences, among others. Jared Diamond (1992) says it succinctly:

Other localized human traits that surely evolved through natural selection include the big chests of Andean Indians (good for extracting oxygen from thin air at high altitudes), the compact shapes of Eskimos (good for conserving heat), the slender shapes of southern Sudanese (good for losing heat) and the [narrow] eyes of north Asians (good for protecting eyes against cold and against sun glare off the snow). (p. 114)

These are due, as Diamond points out, to natural selection. At its simplest, natural selection refers to the ability of a species or members of a species to successfully produce offspring. Survival of the fittest in this sense means those elements of behavior and organic structure that fit well enough with the demands of a given environment to allow organisms and populations of organisms to triumphantly reproduce and maintain life. And what is “fittest” in one environment may be an absolute disaster in another environment. Survival of the fittest does not mean that the smartest or meanest dog will always stand at the top of the heap. It means that the dog that over time develops adaptive traits to meet specific environmental challenges and changes will be, for a few generations anyway, the last dog barking. The iconoclastic anthropologist Marvin Harris says this about natural selection:

Natural selection acts upon changes in the hereditary program contained within the molecules of DNA located inside the nucleus of the body’s cells. If the changes in the program and the physical and behavioral traits that they control result in a higher net rate of

reproduction for the individuals in whom they appear, then the changes will be favored in succeeding generations and will become part of the population's genetic programs. (1989, p. 126)

Let us take note of some things in the preceding discussion. First, the changes wrought by natural selection, in the end, affect the shape of a given population of organisms rather than just specific individuals if they ensure reproductive success. By inference, second, all natural selection is "about adaptation to changing *local* environments." (Gould, 1996, p. 139). Also note that we are *not* talking about cultural change or cultural "selection" here. Culture, and the variations in cultures, are powerful instruments of change and adaptation, as we will see later. Finally, there does seem to be an important phenomenon at work along with natural selection called sexual selection, which relates to attractiveness to the opposite sex, vigor, and fitness (reproductive success, primarily). At its simplest, sexual selection refers to the process of the development and prevalence of features that seem to have no obvious survival value, but they do seem to play an essential role in securing mates or sexual favors either through the attraction of a potential mating partner or the intimidation of a rival. This is more complicated than it sounds, because if one gender develops some trait, then for it to be potent and durable, the other gender somehow must develop a liking for that trait.

Genetic variability refers to the variation in heritable traits of a species and, in a sense, is an insurance policy. That is, should something catastrophic happen to a population that shares some common genes, there is a better chance of survival for much of the population if there is variability within it. We have tampered, during the past few decades, for example, with the variation of a number of plants and animals to produce "super" strains of foodstuffs. Virtually all corn, wheat, and rice are now grown from single super strains. The obvious advantages of better tasting, more durable foodstuffs notwithstanding, the danger is that blights and diseases of certain kinds could wipe out entire strains if they are too genetically uniform. Plant geneticist Erna Bennett says, with respect to variability in seeds and plants, that the world's genetic inheritance is wasting away (cited in Milner, 1990, p. 190). Genetic variability, too, is a product of natural selection, operating over eons of time to produce adaptation or extinction of populations and species.

Mutation, recombination, and allopatric speciation are among the major mechanisms of genetic change and shift within a population (Gould, 1987). Mutations are a genetic goof, a fluff that may have an effect, entirely by chance, on the adaptability of a species or subspecies. Most mutations are small changes and not very dramatic (like a change in fur color that, over

the long haul, becomes advantageous in meeting certain changes in the environment). Most mutations probably do not afford much of an edge in survival; some may even be lethal. Recombination simply refers to the scrambling and rescrambling of chromosomes every time eggs and sperm are produced and united to form a new being. You are a product of recombination, and your distinctive attributes as a human being can be accounted for in large measure by that fact. Allopatric speciation simply means that because of natural forces—earthquakes, the rerouting of a river, for example—the same breeding groups become separated and become isolated from each other. Over time, they begin to diverge and may eventually become different species. Genetic drift is a related chance phenomenon. If a population becomes isolated reproductively, its gene pool may no longer represent the range of diversity in the original species or population. Thus, theoretically, the group may be less prepared for the demands of changing environments. Having less variability to call upon, they may develop a high rate of heritable disease, for instance. On the island of Tristan da Cunha, whose isolated population is descended from a single Scots family and some shipwrecked sailors, a high rate of a heritable and rare eye disease prevails (Milner, 1990).

We have been briefly reviewing our hereditary past as a species—how we got here and what we bring. In summary, evolution is based on some simple ideas. Organisms change through time. We have plenty of evidence for this root fact. Evolution proceeds not linearly but through a kind of branching. No offspring are exact replicas of their parents. Thus, in any population, there is a degree of variability so that there is the possibility of adaptation to an ever-changing environment. Most change is slow and steady (although some theorists contend that change is sporadic and dramatic followed by periods of relatively little change). The mechanism of change and adaptation (or not) is natural selection. Populations, unchecked, would increase rapidly and geometrically, eventually overwhelming the resources of an environment. But, for some reason, populations tend to stabilize at a certain level. Therefore, some struggle for existence must take place, with the successful assuring survival of their genes into the immediate future (reproductive success, again). Because there is variation in the gene pool, those individuals with specific variations better adapted to the environment leave behind more offspring to carry on their “tradition.” And to repeat: none of this is about progress, marching upward toward some higher level of being. It is about successful adaptation to local conditions (Shermer, 1997).

Let us move a step closer to discussing the *human condition*. We will do this by considering the idea of genotype and phenotype. The genotype, let us say *your* genotype, is your total genetic makeup: the coded plan for the development and eventual expression of all your characteristics dependent

on genes. Your phenotype is the actual expression of these characteristics—what we observe about you today—your intelligence, body type, size, eye color, creativity, athletic ability, etc. Your phenotype is the result of the interaction of your genetic potentials with the environment and learning. It is probably true that most complex human attributes are the result of the interaction of several different genes and that they prescribe a “reaction range” of expression depending on the environment. Pretend that you have a genetically endowed intelligence that, using a standard intelligence test,¹ ranges from 85 to 130. Further suppose that you have been raised in an environment that encourages learning and has ample resources for learning and that you have been taught that doing well academically can translate into a rewarding career. Imagine another individual with the same reaction range for the expression of intelligence, 85 to 130, who lives in an environment that does not support, encourage, or have many resources for learning and where survival—economically, physically, and socially—is the order of the day. School is merely a thing one might do occasionally if there is time and energy. Both of you are given IQ tests at the age of 15. You score 120, the latter individual scores 90. Genetically, you are the same with respect to intelligence, but because of vastly different environments, opportunities, and adaptive challenges, you two—phenotypically—seem quite different, and your futures may be very unlike. This homily is meant to highlight the phenotype as the interaction among environment, learning, and genetic inheritance. Here you can see the importance of the role of environment. Small changes in the environment can have enormous effects on intelligence. The classic experiment on the effect of environment was done by H. M. Skeels in the 1930s. He took thirteen children being raised in an orphanage (during that period they were not known for an especially nourishing environment) and placed them in the care of foster mothers who were notable for their ability to nurture and encourage children. He compared them with twelve other children who remained in the orphanage. After four years, the foster children had gained an average 30 IQ points; the children who stayed in the orphanage lost an average of 20 points. The ethics of the research notwithstanding, this is, as many other subsequent studies have shown, a testament to the power of the environment (cited in Plomin, 1994). But we should also remember that intelligence (again, this is with the suspect assumption that we can accurately define and measure something called intelligence) has a significant heritable component, too. Studies of identical

1. IQ tests probably do not measure any single general attribute such as intelligence but rather the effects of different kinds of learning, but since we are pretending here, pretend they do measure intelligence. Also, it is extremely unlikely that a reaction range of this sort actually exists.

twins (they have the same genetic blueprint) raised together and raised apart show a heritability factor, depending on the study, of 45 percent to 75 percent (three-quarters of the similarity in intelligence attributed to genes).

THE HUMAN CONDITION

The great leap forward in human evolution was reaching that point when natural selection brought the body, brain, and behavior of our ancestors to the point of “cultural takeoff” (Harris, 1989). Whereas evolution and natural selection are a slow and local train, cultural change is a dynamic, dramatic, and rapid high-speed train. Stephen Jay Gould (1996) observes:

The obvious main difference between Darwinian evolution and cultural change clearly lies in the enormous capacity that culture holds—and nature lacks—for explosive rapidity and cumulative directionality. In an unmeasurable blink of a geologic eyelash, human cultural change has transformed the surface of our planet as no event of natural evolution could ever accomplish. (p. 220)

Although some cultural change is directional, usually intentional, and, in our best moral and technical moments maybe even progressive, much of it is antic and unpredictable, unlike evolution. In a weird way, it is Lamarckian (see above)—through cultural devices (socialization, education, demonstration, scholarship, myth and ritual, technology), we can pass on to future generations characteristics and traits that we have acquired in our cultural and social lives, both intimate and public. There have been many hypotheses about when the great leap forward took place. (Was it in Africa among the toolmakers or in Spain and France among the cave painters? Was it 60,000 or 30,000 years ago?) The importance for us is that it did happen, and from that evolutionary moment (probably thousands of years in the unfolding), the human condition became forever problematic, paradoxical, and wonderful all at the same time.

Doesn't it strike you as something approaching amazing that given our relative size, our frail sensory acuity compared to many other species, the wild forces of nature, and our own perfidy and cruelty that we have managed to survive? Nobody knows the complete story, but let us suppose some happenings and circumstances. The two things that probably have made us distinctive and led us to the human condition are the relative lessening of instinct as a guide and governor of behavior and response compared to other species and the relatively rapid growth in the size and intricacy of our cerebral cortex and frontal lobes (the putative site of abstract thinking, reasoning, logic, anticipation and planning, and other complex cognitive functions). Very important is that this development has given humans an enormous

capacity for self-awareness and self-reflection, a joy and a burden that other animals may not know at all. But because we cannot rely on instinct for much direction, in a sense, we have been left “rootless” in paradise. Theodosius Dobzhansky (1962) says it dramatically:

Self-awareness and foresight brought, however, the awesome gifts of freedom and responsibility. . . . Man [sic] knows that he is accountable for his acts: he has acquired the knowledge of good and evil. This is a dreadfully heavy load to carry. No other animal has to withstand anything like it. There is a tragic discord in the soul of man. Among the flaws of human nature, this one is far more serious than the pain of childbirth. (p. 338)

The reference to childbirth aside (this is reference to having developed an erect posture, which has made the experience of childbirth painful—another difficult tradeoff in evolutionary terms), the idea is that humans have to build themselves into the world symbolically and that how to be is always and ever a problem as well as a potentiality. We are also subject to an awareness of the split in our being. We know we have fabulous powers of thinking, imagination, creating, representation, analyzing, reflecting, and transcending, but we are also made aware—often—that we are stuck in a puny, limited, and eventually inert body: something like having Shakespeare’s inventiveness and eloquence but rooting about in a simian shell. How to be human is always a challenge; there are no real guarantees. Because of our situation we have any number existential needs we must meet, including

- The need for a system of meaning to which we can devote ourselves and about which we can have conviction and some degree of certainty.
- The need for a sense of place and belonging; a place to be and a place to be from—existential, familial, and geographical roots.
- The need for a sense of individual coherence and wholeness of self that extends through time and place.
- The need for a sense of effectance; of being able to act and to act with authority, relevance, and effectiveness in one’s world. (These ideas and hypotheses about the human condition come from Erich Fromm [1973], but Ernest Becker, in his brief but brilliant career, wrote about them in a most compelling way [1964, 1973, 1975].)

As I said in two earlier chapters, we humans can meet these insistent existential needs in several ways: by immersing ourselves in cultural stories, norms, lore, and prescriptions; by tranquilizing ourselves with routine, trivial distractions, bread and circuses, or drugs; by surrendering our own authority and responsibility to someone else thought to be more powerful; by taking

responsibility, in league with others, of making meaning and trying to make sense out of our condition and situation; of seeking and finding a higher source of revelation and guidance; or any combination of these.

How we manage to meet these needs, the emotions involved in doing so, the learning that supports and directs us, the relationships and social institutions that form the context in which we strive to become whole, and our genetic predilections all go toward forming our character. Character is that relatively enduring pattern of traits and attributes that dictate how we relate to, see, and understand the world around us. My argument is that animals, though they have different kinds of intelligence, emotions, endearing (or frightening) qualities, do not have character. And, in a sense, character is the benchmark, the signpost of the human condition—its promise and its peril. So our character is rooted in the very circumstances of being human.

GENES AND EXPERIENCE: THE CASE OF TEMPERAMENT

For centuries, there has been attraction to the idea that people are born with certain innate capacities and orientations, traits and virtues, personality and character. From the ancient Greeks to the Chinese, to the more modern conceptions of psychologists, anthropologists, and geneticists, the notion of certain inborn templates of emotion and cognition has held thrall. It is only more recently, as Kagan (1994) has observed, that the idea of intrinsic structures of personality or “types” has become much less popular, if not anathema, to our current sociopolitical scene. The impetus of democracy, egalitarianism, behaviorism (all behaviors are a result of environmental contingencies), and the idea that parental influence is the single most important force in a child’s life all contrive to diminish or debase the idea of temperament as, in part, a genetic given. However, the notion of a temperament rooted in biology and shaped to an uncertain degree by experience has made a recent comeback (although it has always had supporters). The idea of temperament is related to but different than the concepts of character and personality. Ornstein (1993) defines it as “more general, more basic than is the whole complex of personality; it concerns whether one does everything slowly or quickly, whether one seeks excitement or sits alone, whether one is highly expressive or inhibited, joyous or sullen” (p. 47). And the thinking now among many is that temperament is inborn. This does not mean that you are stuck with being shy and cautious or with being a thrill-seeker and chance-taker. There is a built-in flexibility here, and events in the environment may have a strong effect on temperament. But Barney Fife will never become James Bond; Homer Simpson will never become Einstein. But with, say, some different experiences or friendships, the birth of a child, or even

the effects of a life-threatening illness (it could be many things), Barney might become more outgoing and Homer more reflective and subdued. Maybe. *Personality* refers to those elements of a person's behavior, emotion, relationships, talents, and reactions that distinguish that person but are not inborn or broadly articulated (see the discussion of McAdams's view in chapter 2). I love baseball and classical music. I have some athletic ability. I generally become quiet when I am disturbed or angry. I am usually generous with those in need. I am liberal and progressive in my political inclinations, and conservatives drive me nuts. But my temperament is that I am not much of a risk-taker; I am more reactive or sensitive to intense stimuli than not, and although people see me as outgoing, I have always had a level of shyness and interpersonal anxiety that has diminished over the years probably because of the nature of my work, chance factors, and relationships that I have had. *Character* refers to how all of these attributes and needs are woven into a relatively (or apparently) seamless whole so that you could think of me generally as having a life-affirming character with much of what I believe and do, the values that I hold, and the passions that move me, funded by a belief in the sanctity of life, the necessity of justice, and the possibility of becoming more fully human. These are not without contradiction or struggle, of course, but generally over time, with a lot of slips, that seems to be my character—the way that I have come to meet my existential needs, and how my temperament and personality have evolved and coincided to make me who I am—today. Tomorrow, well. . . .

More theorists and researchers are crossing disciplinary boundaries to develop a more compelling and complete picture of temperament and behavior. There has been bold research, for example, on developing genetic strains of certain behavioral or “personality” types in animals. Stephen Suomi (1991) bred fearful and shy as well as bold and aggressive rhesus monkeys. This, by the way, could not have been done, had there not been these types already extant in the real monkey world. What Suomi and other researchers have done is to breed for these traits and then see how these two types differ in terms of neurobiology and neurochemistry as well as how they differ behaviorally and developmentally (e.g., can environmental conditions modify these traits?). For example, one difference is that the fearful monkeys have very high levels of the neurotransmitter norepinephrine—adrenaline in the brain—that produces a state something like having had too many cups of coffee (see later in the chapter for a discussion of neurotransmitters and other aspects of the brain and behavior). The bolder monkeys have less of this neurotransmitter. But Suomi and other researchers do not regard boldness as merely the absence of anxiety or tremulousness and realize there are probably many other differences to be mined at this point. J. D. Higley calls these two temperament types north and south (cited in Gallagher, 1996).

Jerome Kagan, mentioned earlier, has been part of an ongoing study of

inhibited and uninhibited infants and children that began in 1957 at the Fels Institute in Ohio. Any summary of his work is something of an injustice, but is important for us to attempt. By the time they are 2 years old, a certain percentage of the children studied during these four decades show clearly one of the two extremes—north and south—shy, inhibited, and anxious or bold, assertive, and relaxed. The inhibited children are different physically as well as in terms of cognitive functioning and behavior patterns. Of course, you can't examine and experiment with children the way that Suomi and others have done with monkeys, but you can measure heart rate, metabolite (of neurotransmitters) output, and many other variables. Physically, more of the inhibited children (not all have all of these characteristics) have chronically higher levels and lability of autonomic nervous system reactivity: higher heart rates caused by stress or upon standing and greater discrepancies between low and high rates, blood pressure lability and higher diastolic rates upon standing, higher skin conductance, and evidence of aroused stressed response—higher plasma cortisol output and higher levels of norepinephrine metabolites in the urine (we will discuss these later in the chapter). Curiously, these children also are more likely to have atopic allergies, especially asthma and eczema (it may be that high levels of cortisol—stress—compromise the immune system). About 60 percent of them have blue eyes (60 percent of the uninhibited have dark eyes). They are more likely to be girls and to have an ectomorphic, thin, narrow body and face. The inhibited children have large pupillary dilation in response to stress. There is also the interesting finding that there is more activation in the right frontal area of the cerebral cortex (the gray matter) than among the bolder and more assertive children. Behaviorally, the shy children were much less likely to adapt quickly to new situations or new people and to engage in spontaneous talk or play with others, and they took a long time to relax in novel situations. Early in life, they developed a number of fears and phobias. They also had a harder time shaking off the effects of a stressful situation like a nightmare (Kagan, 1994, especially ch. 5).

These findings raise questions that certainly a lot of parents would ask. Are these traits that my child is born with just the way it's going to be? Is it some sort of genetic fate? Can they change? Can my shy little poet become a pull-out guard for the Green Bay Packers? Is my very inhibited child ripe for later psychopathology? Is my very aggressive and extroverted son headed for trouble in relationships or with the law? There are many ways to answer these questions, and not all our answers can be certain. For example, in the Fels study, more than one third of the highly reactive, inhibited infants were not either exceptionally shy or fearful by the second year; a few were actually fearless. Genes "necessarily share power with experience" (Kagan, 1994, p. 262). The primary effect of these temperaments seems to be on the relative

prominence of certain moods and feelings, the intensity and quality of relationships, and the choice of careers. But all of this is affected by early experience, too. Parents too protective of a shy, inhibited, and reactive infant or toddler may inadvertently increase the social fears and fears of novelty or surprise of the child. On the other hand, parents who have a sense of their own confidence and accept the child's behavior as it is but also gently prod the child toward developmental milestone experiences may promote a greater sense of well-being and ease in the child. But we still have much to learn about how much influence, in any individual family, these relationships and interactions between parents and children have (Gallagher, 1996). We do know that people with temperaments toward the extreme (inhibition/introversion or fearless/extroversion) tend to find niches and relationships that suit their temperaments more often than not. Inhibited children become adults who might be more likely to be accountants, artists, computer programmers and in other careers that limit the need for interpersonal influence and frequency of contact as well as the control of novelty. The next time you see a test pilot, professional wrestler, car salesman, or trial lawyer, he or she is less likely to have been a shy, inhibited youth. In the first cohort of subjects in the Fels study, as adults the four most fearful 3-year-old boys had chosen careers

that permitted them to avoid interaction with large groups and to control unpredictability in their daily lives: one had become a music teacher, two had become science professors, and one was a psychiatrist. By contrast, the four least fearful boys had chosen competitive or entrepreneurial professions: one was a high school athletic coach, one was a salesman, and two were self-employed engineers. (Kagan, 1994, p. 114)

Although there may be some stronger relationship to certain kinds of psychopathology in temperaments at the extreme, most inhibited children do not become adults who suffer panic attacks or phobias, and the fearless risk-taker is much less likely to become a bully or law-breaker than a leader or manager. The difference in outcomes here is due to environmental influences, the availability of appropriate social niches and possibilities, and the modulating effects of propitious and beneficent relationships.

In the end, the relationship between nature and nurture and between temperament and environment is complex, dynamic, and in some ways yet to be revealed. But we must understand that our general biology and our specific individual inheritance do make a difference in how we approach and manage what life sets before us. Things do change, however, and we should review some of the factors that produce change. As many have pointed out, aging and maturity—growing older—may bring with it changes in

emotional coloration, behavior, beliefs, and relationships. It is a timeworn but apparently reasonably accurate observation about people with so-called borderline personality disorder that most of them grow out of it—“keep ’em alive ’til 35,” the saying goes (Kroll, 1993). Middle age also brings with it a change in perspective for many people. Looking at how much time is left in your life as opposed to how much has passed brings with it some reflection and circumspection. An extrovert may really become more reflective; an introvert less preoccupied with certain fears and restraints (Gallagher, 1996; Vaillant, 1993). This does not even take into account, say, hormonal changes we might experience as we age and their effect on our personality.

I spoke earlier (see chapter 3) about the role of luck and contingency in human affairs. Such an observation applies here as well. The experiences we have may work to bring shifts and changes, subtle and occasionally dramatic, in how we orient ourselves to our world—our temperament. A person born with a seemingly inhibited temperament ends up in a job that she later discovers requires her to do public speaking. At first a wreck over the prospect of such a public display, she receives coaching and support from an experienced coworker. Her first effort goes extremely well and she receives accolades from members of the audience. Her intelligence and native wit shine through her somewhat diffident style. Later successes and the challenges that they bring help her develop some degree of confidence in herself that translates into a more outgoing personality. She’ll never do the salsa in front of fellow party-goers, but she would not be recognized by some of her classmates from junior high school, either. Whether it is a good marriage or relationship, a stressful situation handled well, or the accumulation of mastery in a demanding job, each may work, for some individuals, to modify and shape the basic lode of temperament.

Jim Taylor (1997) speaks of the importance of social niches. He separates them into two kinds, each with dramatically different consequences of their inhabitants, enabling and entrapping. Entrapping niches, for example, are highly stigmatized, people within them are defined totally by their social category (for example, underclass member), there are few gradations of reward or status, and economic resources are sparse. It is difficult to escape the boundaries of such a niche. Enabling niches are quite the opposite. Full of economic and social resources and status and reward possibilities, there are many opportunities to learn skills and hone abilities that allow one a high degree of social movement within and outside the niche, and there is no stigmatization of niche members (pp. 220–23). For our purposes here, it is important to understand that new environments and new roles may provide better or even transformative social and occupational “niches” for some people. Stable, relative permanent and unchanging environments may make for stability of temperament and character. Changing and dynamic

environments (more often the case today) may bring with them opportunities or pressures and new roles and relationships that end in favorable changes in how one relates to the world. We do not know whether these new environments also or primarily tap unexpressed genetic capacities in the individual. Just because something is hereditary does not mean it never alters or changes. As a matter of fact, Robert Plomin (1994) suggests that although there are structural genes that really do not respond to the environment but continue to be blueprints doggedly followed by the organism, there are regulator genes that are in continual dialogue with the environment. As a matter of fact, Plomin and others suggest that active organisms, especially as they mature, interact energetically with environments (if they are allowed to) and that activity is in part genetic (Plomin, 1994). Whatever the case, it seems to be that “new roles and settings have the potential to shake up our personalities because they push us to new learning that by adulthood most of us mightily resist” (Gallagher, 1996, p. 200). I would add that some of us may actively seek those new roles and settings as a part of our genetic inheritance. So, the dialogue between genes and environment is a two-way conversation.

In the discussion so far, we continue to sense the shifting and complex dynamic between natural forces, genetic and biological determinism, and individual freedom and liberty. Depending on the issue, we might say that someone’s behavior is pretty much the result of uncontrollable environmental (natural) forces. Another time, concerning our own educational success, for example, we might invoke personal will and choice. Yet another time, we might look at someone’s sexual orientation, say, and point to the importance of genetic endowment. In most cases, these components act in concert. But given the focus of the chapter so far, we should not forget the power of the will. That is, we do have, to an unknown extent perhaps and in different arenas of life, some degree of personal control, the ability to decide to act, and the ability to change (or not), an enactment of the responsibility of electing among the options open to us. This assumes motivation as well. If you are an aggressive or assertive kind of person and you want to control your angry outbursts in your intimate relationships, you have to not only sustain the motivation to control your temper but commit yourself to the choice you have made to change, and, very importantly, you must find strategies to help you understand and control these flare-ups. We cannot know, in this instance, how one’s willpower and biologically based temperament and other qualities interact. But it is certain that people do decide to change and then do change, occasionally in fairly dramatic ways. But we also know how difficult it is to change certain habits, addictions, and annoying personal traits. Nonetheless, we should not underestimate resolve, determination, and the enigma of will. Malachy McCourt (1998) in his ribald

memoir recalls his resolve, as a child, to be rid of the burdens of poverty and the contempt of the more fortunate:

I didn't like being made fun of and sneered at by the upper classes, who had tea and buns in the afternoon and electric light in every room. . . . I was a smiley little fella with a raging heart and murderous instincts. One day I would show THEM—yes, you rotten fucking asshole counter-jumping stuck-up jumped up whore's melts nose-holding tuppence-ha'penny-looking-down-on tuppence snobs. I'll go back to America where I was born and I'll fart in yer faces.

And I did. (p. 2)

THE BRAIN AND BEHAVIOR: THE BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL VIEW

Ninety percent of all the scientists who have ever studied the brain are still alive (Restak, 1995). That means that our knowledge of the brain and its involvement in basic human processes, such as perception, emotion, thinking, and self-consciousness, and to the range of behaviors that we engage in every day is developing rapidly and dramatically. This enormous corpus of research and thinking means that we cannot talk about behaviors and behavior disorders without talking about the brain. In this section, we will take a tour of the brain and discuss some of its structures and functions and, briefly, how they relate to certain behaviors. In the next chapter, when I try to put together the conceptual frameworks and themes we've discussed so far, I will write in some detail about the relationship of brain dysfunction to behavior disorder—mental illnesses, in particular. Some of the discussion below may be difficult. But, remember, if I can learn it so can you and in your career you will be glad you did. Some pictures along the way are meant to help you visualize the brain and its workings.

A Tour of the Geography of the Brain

Debates about the brain, how it functions, how it is related to the mind and consciousness, and whether or not it is crucial to human behavior have raged for centuries. Many ancient sages and cultures have preferred to think of the heart as the seat of sentience (self-awareness) and the mind; others have been convinced that the brain is a collection of sites each related specifically to all human behavior and perception—for example, there might be a site whose exclusive function is to help you distinguish between various

primates or to recognize whole numbers. But when people began to examine brains through surgery or with advanced brain-imaging techniques and to see the effect of damage to or stimulation of certain parts of the brain to specific kinds of motor or cognitive functioning, theories became more sophisticated. At this point, it is safe to say the following.

1. The brain is both hard-wired and plastic. That is, there are parts of the brain that are clearly related to specific functions like speech (Broca's area), and there are large areas of cells that do not clearly have a precise duty but whose connections to each other become enriched as we learn new things (association cells).

2. The brain is specialized but always operates as a whole. As you speak (thanks to Broca's area), you are also visually representing that about which you speak, responding to stimuli in the environment, moving your hands, feeling emotions, and wondering what the effect of your words are on the listener.

3. Any sensation, thought, or behavior usually involves the coordination of many parts of the brain. Muscle movement and coordination, for example, involves several parts of the brain—from top to bottom, so to speak.

4. The brain exists to allow us to represent the world and reality. All of our previous talk about “constructing reality” and “making meaning” (chapter 2) would be pointless without understanding the particular structures and functions of the brain that allow us to do this. As humans, we construct reality differently than all other species (my guess is your Siamese cat sees the world a lot differently than you do). And we humans differ, thanks to learning and culture and to subtle differences in brain structure and function, in the variety of ways that we represent the world around us.

5. No one as yet knows whether there is some executive control center that integrates all of the sensations and information processing activity that occurs separately and in different parts of the brain. But the incredible reality, barring injury or illness, is that these activities are integrated and we experience them as a whole.

THE AMAZING BRAIN

To actually see a brain is not impressive.² Without the support of the skull and the outer dura mater (hard mother),³ the inner pia mater (tender

2. Several sources have been used as guides for the tour of the brain. They include Richard Restak (1994), Robert Hedaya (1996), Scott Veggeberg (1996), Richard Thompson (1985), Harriette Johnson (1998), Michael Gitlin (1996), Nancy Andreasen (1984), William Calvin (1996), and Michael Gazzaniga (1992).

3. I will try to indicate what the Latin terms mean in English. Nancy Andreasen's book *The Broken Brain* was helpful in this regard.

mother) of the brain would look like a gelatinous mass of pinkish, yellowish fat or a bad soufflé. Between the pia mater and the dura mater, cerebrospinal fluid flows. This fluid provides a degree of cushioning for the brain. Cerebrospinal fluid comes from deep within the brain and is found in four chambers called ventricles at certain locations in the brain.

The brain is covered with furrows and fissures (sulci) and ridges (gyri). It vaguely resembles, in that respect, a much softer version of a walnut. Much of the outer covering (cerebral cortex—the bark) is grayish (“She’s really got the old gray matter—she’s a brain, for sure.”) The rest of the brain is cream colored with occasional islands of grayish matter. The gray, roughly, reflects the existence of neurons (brain cells), and the creamy white represents their axons (the tails of brain cells, through which they communicate with dendrites of other cells). The brain is divided in half with a deep furrow (hemispheric fissure) running down the middle that separates the left and right hemispheres of the brain. To the naked eye, the right and left sides of the brain look exactly alike. Functionally, however, they are quite different, as we will see later.

The brain weighs only about three pounds on average, a little less for women (but, as we know, the size difference makes no difference in intelligence). Even though small, the brain is a powerhouse and consumes 25 percent of the oxygen that the body requires and one and one-half pints of blood flow through it per minute. It generates enough electrical power to light a twenty-five-watt light bulb. Parts of it are constantly at work, even in sleep.

But most extraordinary is the brain’s capacity for storing and processing information. Someone once suggested that if you took all the phone lines in the world, connected them simultaneously, and multiplied those connections by a million, the number you got roughly would equal the potential amount of information the brain could manage. Or put another way, if all of the information in your brain were put on audiotape (even the info that, right now, you can’t remember to save your soul), by the time you were fifty years old, the length of that tape would run from the earth to the moon and back again several times (at times, I know, it feels like the tape wouldn’t make it around the block).

The outer part of the brain, the cerebral cortex, or gray matter, is only about three millimeters thick (about one-tenth of an inch) but is composed of six layers as it folds in upon itself. If you took the cortex and ironed it to remove all the folds (do not do this at home), you would have an interesting tablecloth for a small card table. The brain has billions of its basic functional unit—the neuron or brain cell. Estimates vary, but conservative to more liberal guesses about the number of neurons range from 10 billion to 100 billion. Neurons are the means of communication within the brain and nervous system. Each neuron may communicate with 1,000 to 20,000 other

neurons. So think of the potential here: billions of cells capable of communicating with thousands of other cells—that's a lot of data. Neurons are grouped together in bundles and connect with each other along pathways, so if you actually could see them in great detail, they would look like so many modules or perhaps a complex system of highways. Although we know that certain groups of neurons have specific responsibilities and are related to specific functions, many cells are association cells, and many pathways are association pathways. That is, we do not know that they have a precise preordained function. We do know, however, as people learn and are exposed to new experiences, some of these association pathways become richer and more dense, suggesting that learning has to do with creating more ties and connections between adjacent groups of cells. Even in those parts of the brain that are supposedly hard-wired, we are talking about a vast expanse (in brain geography terms) of space and millions of associated neural connections. Richard Restak (1994) recounts:

At the turn of the century neuroscientists competed with one another in their efforts to fashion the most complete and accurate map of the brain. . . . these cartographers of the terra incognita of the brain operated on the assumption that it is possible to plant a flag at, say, the visual area and proclaim, "Here is the area that enables the brain to see. By searching here, we will learn to solve the mysteries of vision."

But subsequent brain researchers have discovered that such lines of demarcation dissolve when one turns from the map and encounters the land at first hand. Even something as seemingly straightforward as vision—to say nothing of such elusive processes as thinking—depends on the activation of millions of brain cells spread along a path from the retina to the cerebral cortex. (p. 92)

Billions of glial (glue) cells surround neurons and provide some protection for them. They do not process information, but they do take up substances in the brain that are present in excess or not needed. When neurons die, for example, glial cells move in and clear out the debris of the defunct neuron. Glial cells also surround the tail of the cell (axon) so that electrical transmission down the axon toward another cell is facilitated. In multiple sclerosis, this sheath degrades and the passage of electrically generated impulses is gradually disrupted. Finally, glial cells help form the blood-brain barrier. Because the brain receives such a significant percent of the blood supply, it is important that substances toxic to the brain be kept out and nutrients be allowed in. Because these glial cells contain fatty material, any substances in the blood that are not fat soluble are kept out. That impedes a lot but not all of the potential toxins.

It is commonly thought that we do not grow any more neurons after

we are born (although there is some beginning evidence that we may⁴). The reason that your brain gets bigger after birth is because neurons already in place get larger and because the number of connections between neurons increases dramatically. Neurons die naturally every day and as a result of exposure to toxins that end up in the body. The brain of a 90-year-old probably weighs about two-thirds of that of an 18-year-old principally because of cell death and the resulting decrease in brain mass. There is some evidence that in certain kinds of schizophrenia, more than the normal number of brain cells die in a part of the brain (this happens in dementia, too). In that case, the mass of that part of the brain diminishes to such a degree it can be seen with brain imaging techniques. Barring catastrophic changes like dementia or massive strokes or the infusion of catastrophic environmental toxins, the presence of association cells and pathways and the capacity of neurons to develop and restore relationships with other neurons allows us to continue to learn well into old age. After we are born, some brain cells are not where they will eventually end up. They migrate, often well into adolescence. This migration is a part of the maturing and plasticity of the brain. Research done by Arvin Oke and associates (1995) shows, for example, that in some cases of people with schizophrenia, certain brain cells migrate to and colonize the wrong area of the brain. If they ended up where they should be, the effect would be salubrious and benign. But settling where they do, they wreak a degree of havoc with the brain's ability to control the flow of input to the cerebral cortex. This chaotic flow of stimuli to the upper reaches of the brain is one of the hallmarks of certain kinds of schizophrenia (see chapter 5).

The brain is bilobed. That is, its two hemispheres mirror each other—at least in structure if not in function. That is, every structure or nucleus on the right side (hemisphere) is replicated on the left. So, you have an amygdala (discussed later) both on your right and left sides. However, in terms of process and function, hemispheres are different enough that we may speak of “two brains.” For example, the left hemisphere is verbal, the site of producing and understanding written and spoken language, but the right hemisphere is silent. The right hemisphere seems to be the site of the recognition of wholes and has spatial visual virtuosity, for instance, whereas the left hemisphere is implicated in analysis, the ability to break wholes down

4. The rise of stem cell research has led to the observation that, under certain not yet well-defined conditions, stem cells (largely undifferentiated cells that can turn into any variety of mature cells) may migrate to places in the brain that have experienced cell damage or the death of cells. Also, there is evidence that some neurons, under not well understood, and not common conditions, grow in adulthood.

into their component parts. But the most incredible fact is that the two hemispheres act together and are in constant communication. They connect to each other across a structure deep in the middle of the brain called the corpus callosum (hard body). Interesting, too, is that the two hemispheres each control the opposite side of the body. What I see with my right eye is received and processed in the left side of my brain and vice versa. In most people, including southpaws (that's baseball lingo for left-handers), the left hemisphere is dominant. One difference in the hemispheres that has been demonstrated over the years is the difference in the level of activity in certain parts of the brain during the experience and expression of certain emotions. A person experiencing positive emotions—happiness or pleasure, say—has a more active left hemisphere. When the person experiences negative emotions like distress or anger, the right hemisphere is more active. This is true of infants and adults. There are also some intriguing differences between men and women, the most commonly found being that women have more connections between the hemispheres (a thicker corpus callosum and associated connection points like the anterior commissure [seam]). Some think that this renders women more capable of whole-brain thinking or a sharper intuitive sense of certain situations. More on this later.

The cerebral cortex is divided into four regions called lobes (see figure 1). This again is a division concocted by us based on the observation of how ridges and fissures in the cortex itself are situated. In terms of function, the lobes line up as follows: the *occipital* area (in the back of the brain) processes, along with the optic nerves, vision. The *temporal* lobes, on the sides of the brain (near your ears), are important for hearing, some aspects of memory, and a person's sense of self in time. The *parietal* lobes on the top and slightly to the rear of your brain house the sensory cortex at its very front where it abuts the frontal lobe. The sensory cortex is the terminal for all incoming sensations (touch, smell, etc.), the place where they are processed. The parietal lobe also includes the secondary cortex, where the elaboration of discrete stimuli into meaningful wholes takes place, particularly on the right side of the brain. The parietal lobe also has very extensive association areas. The *frontal* lobes are the most forward (right about where your forehead is) part of the brain. They account for about one-third the total mass of the cerebrum. The frontal lobes house the motor cortex (right across the central sulcus from the sensory cortex), where motor movements are executed or willed (as opposed to reflex reactions). But the significance of the frontal lobes, especially the most forward part of the lobes, the prefrontal cortex, is that it is the probable site for all that seems to make us human—abstract thinking, planning and anticipation, the foreseeing of consequences, taking the perspective of another, theorizing, philosophizing, reasoning, imagining the unimaginable, and most important,

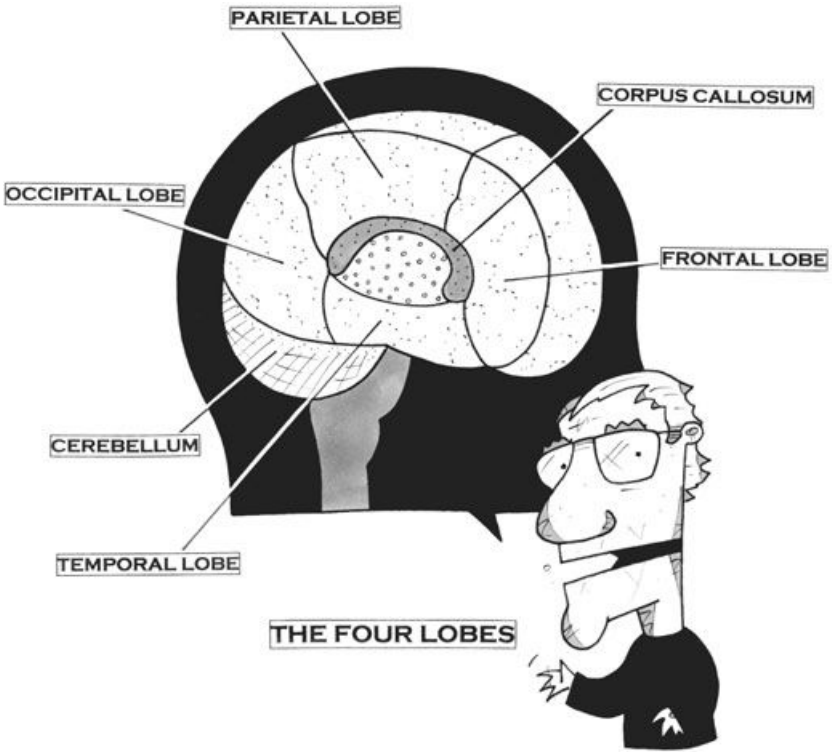


FIGURE 4.1 The four lobes

the capacity to tell stories, and revise our understanding of experience (social construction is rooted in the brain).

The Triune Brain

Remember that all attempts to propose divisions and sections in the brain are artificial, born of our need to classify and structure so that we might not shrink in the face of the extraordinary complexity that we face. Although there are many different schemes of classification similar enough to give us a fairly reliable guide, I have chosen the scheme called the triune brain (see figure 2).

Many years ago the neuroscientist Paul MacLean (1990) proposed that humans have, in essence, three brains, each a more recent evolutionary development than the previous. The oldest brain is the *reptilian brain* or the *brain stem*. We share this brain with alligators and garter snakes. The brain

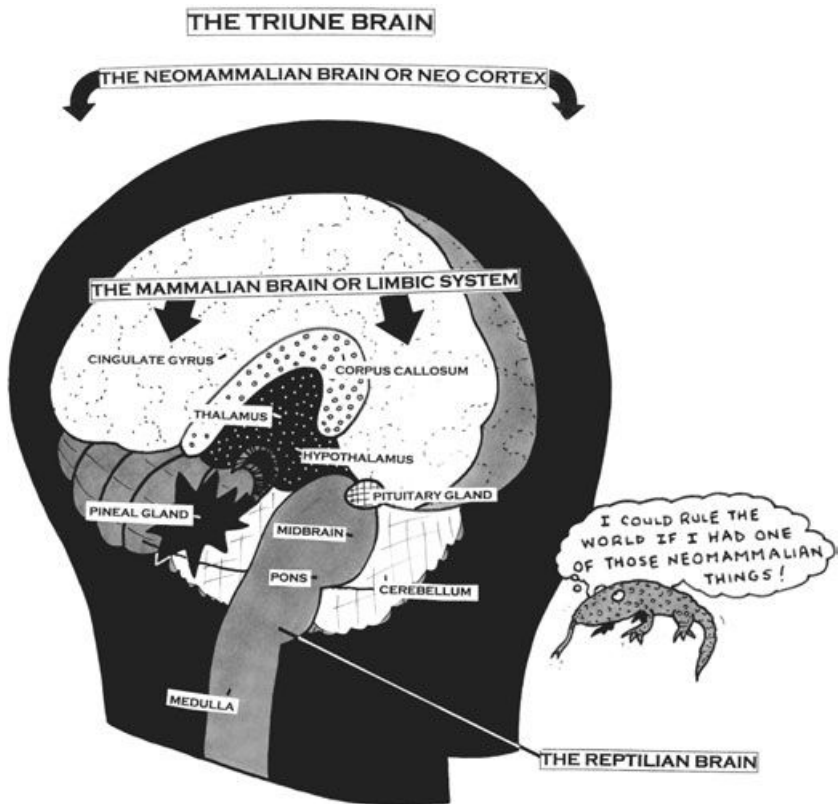


FIGURE 4.2 The triune brain

stem controls blood pressure, heart rate, body temperature, and respiration. The medulla (marrow) is one of the neural centers of the brain implicated in the functions mentioned above. Lying above the medulla, the pons (bridge) provides a bridge of communication between the motor centers of the brain and the cerebellum (a large body at the posterior and base of our brain that has to do with, among other things, maintaining motor coordination, smooth movement, and balance). The reticular (netlike) formation runs along the brain stem and appears to play an important role in regulating the level of arousal—both generally and in response to particular stimuli. That is, as you go through the day, you need to have a certain level of alertness and readiness to respond to stimuli in order to function, generally. But you also have to be ready to respond to specific stimuli, some of which may be quite dramatic and ask a lot of you and your brain (like an onrushing sports utility vehicle). Some people think that abnormalities in the reticular formation may be implicated in attentional disorders.

Above the reptilian brain lies a series of bodies that have complex relationships with one another as well as systems above (the cerebral cortex) and below (the brain stem), called the *limbic (bordering) system*. This is a brain that we share with all mammals. Although there is some conflict over what to include in the limbic structure, it is clear that it is important in understanding some mental disorders as well as the experiences of pleasure and pain. In general, the limbic system is the seat of the five Fs: feeding, fighting, fleeing, feeling, and making love. It seems to be the physiochemical source of emotionality and emotional tone and provides the major connection between the rest of the nervous system⁵ and the cerebral cortex. Some of the neural bodies in the limbic system and other parts of the brain are nuclei. Nuclei are aggregates of nerve cells that are the hub (like the Dallas–Fort Worth Airport is American Airlines’s hub) of specialized functions. Cortices (plural of cortex) are collections and relationships of cells that are layered, as in the cerebral cortex. A bundle of axons from a known site that goes to a target of cells is called a projection; a sequence of projections across several targets is called a pathway. Some of the nuclei, cortices, and pathways in the limbic system are discussed in the next paragraphs.

The *thalamus* (the marriage bed) is a major site in the brain. It is responsible for neuronal gating. That is, almost all incoming stimuli must pass through the thalamic structures in order to reach the appropriate destination in the cerebral cortex. As a major terminal, it joins many brain centers to each other and modulates the flow of sensations of all kinds. There is some thought that in some forms of schizophrenia there is an abnormality in the gating function that creates a chaotic flow of information and stimuli to an ultimately overwhelmed cerebral cortex. And, in a relationship not too well understood, when we do have a surfeit of stimuli during the day, dreaming at night seems to have the effect of restoring some order and balance to our brain (and mind) (Allan Hobson reported in Dolnick, 1990). The fact that some people with schizophrenia have paltry levels of dreaming (which occurs during rapid eye movement [REM] sleep) suggests that the chaos and disorder of the previous day does not resolve itself fully and the next day begins with something of a deficit of order.

The *hypothalamus* (under the marriage bed—interesting idea) is a group

5. The human nervous system can be roughly divided into two systems: the peripheral nervous system connects with a variety of voluntary skeletal muscles and a variety of sensory receptors in various areas of the body, and the central nervous system includes the brain and the spinal cord, which receive stimuli from outlying regions (limbs, skin, internal organs) and process it and also send instructions to those same areas.

of neuroendocrine nuclei (they produce hormones) and is in frequent contact with endocrine (hormone producing) glands—the pituitary, thyroid, growth, sexual and reproductive, and adrenal. The hypothalamus is responsible for the regulation of appetite, thirst, temperature, growth and development, metabolism, and sexual and reproductive functions. This is a process called homeostasis—keeping the body functions that are critical to life (for example, body temperature) within narrowly defined ranges. The hypothalamus also controls the autonomic nervous system, that part of the central and peripheral nervous systems that governs aspects of responding to events and situations that commonly trigger emotions. The autonomic system is composed of the sympathetic and parasympathetic branches that operate in opposition to each other. The sympathetic branch prepares us for stress or danger and fight or flight in emotion-arousing circumstances (here comes that SUV again—look out!). The parasympathetic branch—bless it—when stimulated brings on the relaxation response, the reduction of blood pressure, heart rate, and respiration we associate with feeling at ease. Drugs can heighten the effects of either of these branches. But human activity can as well. Progressive relaxation techniques and meditation, for example, can elevate the parasympathetic response. Calls to action (cheering at football games, exhortations prior to combat) can elevate the sympathetic response. Along with the pituitary, the hypothalamus is also involved in maintaining our circadian (daily) rhythm of rest and arousal, appetite and satiation, sleep and waking, and temperature control. This biological clock is controlled by an inner regulatory system as well as external factors (flying to a foreign country can produce jet lag, which is an upset of the rhythm caused by flight). The suprachiasmatic nucleus is one of the many nuclei of the hypothalamus and sits above the nerves that emanate from the retina. It is thought to be principally responsible for the sleep/wake cycle and seasonal variations in sleeping, waking, and response to light. The hypothalamo-pituitary-adreno-cortical axis (a feedback loop that involves the hypothalamus, pituitary gland, and the top [cortex] of the adrenal glands) seems to be responsible for the daily fluctuations and adjustments of levels of alertness and readiness (possibly along with the reticular formation). Both of these systems seem to be out of whack in some cases of depression. People who are depressed, as you know, experience a variety of vegetative (organ) disruptions: sleep disturbances, eating difficulties, sexual dysfunctions, body temperature irregularities, and psychomotor alertness. It is as if this part of the limbic system is continually preparing them for dealing with stress, when their bodies should be resting and recovering.

The *amygdala* (almond) is a tiny group of nuclei lying near your ears. It seems implicated in the experience of rage, anxiety, and dominance and submission responses. It may also be a factor in the modulation of emotions.

Seizures sometimes develop here, and they can produce violent or rage reactions. Some people are investigating the possibility that some examples of explosive rage that are unexpected—a guy who by all accounts is a model citizen, one day walks into a McDonald's and unloads a clip of shells on innocent bystanders—are due to amygdalar seizures. Destruction of some of the tissue of the amygdala can bring docility, inappropriate sexual behavior, inability to recognize danger or to recognize familiar faces, and clinging (the Kluver–Bucy syndrome).

The *hippocampus* (sea horse) is not a nucleus but a system of neurons and their connections and is probably the remnant of an old (evolutionarily speaking) cortex. Indeed, some refer to it as the paleo (old) cortex. The hippocampus is implicated in learning but most importantly in memory, and the consolidation of new memories into long-term memories takes place here.

There are other bodies and tracts of neurons that are important but are not necessarily (there is disagreement here) a part of the limbic system. These include the following.

The *basal ganglia* (lower nerve knots) include several nuclei with such intriguing names as the globus pallidus (pale globe), putamen (stone), caudate (tail-like) nucleus, and substantia nigra (dark substance). These are considered to be important but not the only sites of the initiation and cessation of voluntary muscle movement (20 seconds ago I decided to type on the keyboard and now I decide to stop). The ganglia are also more clearly involved in the modulation (making smooth) of muscle movement and may have something to do with sensory integration (since they are connected to several nuclei of the marriage bed [the thalamus]). Actually, we have two motor systems in our nervous system. One, called the pyramidal (because the neurons in it are shaped like pyramids), sends a chain of command from the motor cortex through the thalamus to the brain stem to the spinal cord and on out to the muscles of the body, often in response to incoming sensory data (such as touching a hot stove or dirty diaper). The basal ganglia lie outside that system and are, thus, called the extrapyramidal system. In Parkinson's disease, abnormalities in the substantia nigra lead to difficulty in starting and sustaining voluntary movements and in maintaining smooth muscle movement and often produce tremors. Parkinson's disease is a result of the naturally but abnormally occurring reduction of the neurotransmitter dopamine (see below for a discussion of neurotransmission) in the substantia nigra. In treating schizophrenia, some antipsychotic drugs diminish the supply of dopamine (see below) and, thus, may produce side effects that look like parkinsonism.

The *cingulate (girdling) gyrus* wraps around much of the limbic structure. It may be one of the major pathways between the limbic system and the

frontal lobes and, thus, one of the pathways leading to the integration of emotion and thinking.

The *mesolimbic cortical pathway* is a system of neuronal relationships and has many connections in the limbic system and also parts of the cerebral cortex. It appears to be the primary source of the experience of pleasure and reward. This intricate pathway includes the *ventral tegmental area*, the *nucleus accumbens*, and the *median forebrain bundle*. Many addictions are based on the initial activation and stimulation of these areas. Virtually all drugs, for example, lead to increased levels of dopamine in the nucleus accumbens. One of the most powerful addicting drugs, cocaine, goes almost directly to the nucleus accumbens (it virtually bypasses the ventral tegmental area) to activate it. But let us be clear here. Knowing about this neurobiological infrastructure does not necessarily offer any explanation of why some people become addicted and why others do not.

The *cerebral cortex* or *neomammalian cortex* is the latest evolutionary brain, the frontal lobes being the most recent. We have already briefly discussed the functions of the four lobes. In this section, I will focus on the frontal and prefrontal cortex (neocortex) because of their importance to the human condition and human nature. The neocortex is critically involved in making plans, considering other options, reviewing and anticipating consequences and future events, making choices, and intending and carrying out the actions required. This can be a methodical, intellectual process or it can be fraught with emotion and less calculated—as in the anticipatory anxiety that may arise when a final examination is coming up or when you are about to see your first client. The neocortex is also implicated in problem-solving and the integration of emotion and reason in thinking purposefully. Abstract thought and higher cognitive functions for which human brains are always crediting and lauding themselves involve the ability to assume a mental set or perspective and to assume the perspective of others; to think conceptually, theoretically, and propositionally (if a then b); to think about the imaginary or fantastic and to create never-before-seen or thought-of phenomena; to hold in mind several aspects of any given circumstance or thing; and to break things into their component parts and to restore them as they were or reconfigure them in newly fashioned relationships. It is unlikely that you would be a sentient or self-conscious and self-reflective being without this large neocortex. That is, you would have neither the burden of being human and self-aware nor the immeasurable possibilities inherent in such a state. The motor cortex, as we observed earlier, is also here. And there is an area here—the ventromedial region, the midline underbelly of the frontal lobes—that seems critical to the integration of reason and emotion. We will discuss this later.

These three brains (Paul MacLean said that when you lie on the couch

in the psychiatrist's office, you lie down with an alligator and a horse) all communicate with each other, imperfectly, to be sure, in that we do have a great deal of trouble sometimes as a species overriding the emotional, sexual, aggressive, and pleasure-bent intents of the limbic system. Maybe we should be more amazed at the times we are able to nullify those urges with the brake of more "civilized" thought. It should also be said that it is rare for any one part of the brain to carry out functions on its own. Our motor movements, as you have seen, rely on a variety of nerve pathways and nuclei. The coming together of reason and emotion as we form a relationship with someone to whom we are attracted relies on any number of parts of the brain, higher and lower. Finally, our brain, mind, and body exist in such deep and complex interaction that it is probably more of an intellectual convenience to distinguish so bluntly between them than it is the reality of our condition. Let us turn now to the process that makes us go.

Neurotransmission

The functional unit of the brain is the neuron.⁶ This kind of cell is different from all others in that it is made for processing information. There are basically four parts to the cell: the *cell body*, including the nucleus, manufactures all the proteins and other chemical substances that the neuron needs to sustain itself and to function properly. The nucleus of the cell, like all other cells, contains the individual's total bequest of DNA. There are manifold hair-like dendrites that extend from the upper part of the cell body. These are the primary receptors of neuronal impulses (information) from other cells. The axon extends from the lower end of the cell body and is the means of transport of the impulse from the cell body to the synapse. Axons vary enormously in length. Those neurons that activate the muscles in our limbs may have axons as long as a meter. Most, however, are measured in millimeters. The axons also have many projections at the end called end feet or terminal buttons. This allows a single axon to have relationships with the dendrites of many neurons. The synapse (or synaptic cleft) is actually a small space between neurons, between the axon of one neuron and the dendrite of the downstream neuron. The synapse (there may be 10 trillion of them in our brain) is where the communication between cells occurs. Some dendrites and axons (the end feet) are heavily branched or endowed so that they have contact with many other cells. Others are more sparse.

6. References for this section include Richard Restak (1995), Richard Thompson (1985), Robert Hedaya (1996), and Michael Gitlin (1996).

Each neuron is bathed by a cell membrane, an aqueous solution of chemicals and fatty acids. This makes communication at the synapse *between* cells and the transmission of information *within* each cell possible. The passage of impulses within the cell is the result of chemical ions (electrically charged molecules) lying within the cell and outside the cell membrane. Each cell has ion channels so that the chemical ions (principally sodium and potassium during impulse propagation and calcium at the end and chloride at the beginning of the process) pass in and out of the cell. Cells have a resting potential or voltage difference across their membrane of almost a tenth of a volt. The propagation of the impulse begins when the resting potential is changed. This begins when sodium ions pass through a gate into the cell and some potassium molecules migrate from inside the cell out to the membrane. This action as it continues down the axon is the product of a chemical sodium–potassium pump, namely, adenosine triphosphate (ATP). The voltage change begins at the top of the axon and continues at a constant speed down the axon to the end feet of the axon, traveling anywhere from a few miles per hour to 200 mph. When the impulse reaches the axon terminal, calcium ions rush into the cell, and this initiates migration to the membranes on the end feet of little packets of chemical molecules called vesicles. Once there, they open and release the molecules into the synapse. These chemicals are called neurotransmitters. The molecule (there are thousands of them released every millisecond) “sets sail” across the synaptic channel and binds to a receptor site that fits it perfectly. The chemical then initiates an electrical response in the receptor cell. Depending on the type of ion channel or gate that it has opened, the action potential will either be inhibitory (the cell basically doesn’t fire) or excitatory (the impulse is propagated in the receptor cell). Remarkably, the receptor cell is able to summate the effects of thousands of molecules at a time so that the summary affect will either be inhibitory or excitatory. Some cells have more inhibitions that have to be overcome to fire, and others have less. So, the transmission of impulses within a cell is electrical. Between cells, transmission is chemical (see figure 3).

The first action at the receptor site is called the first messenger system. When you step on a rock and react immediately, that is the first messenger system at work. It is a result of the initial action of the neurotransmitter on the post-synaptic cell’s membrane. But there are a second and third messenger system as well. They are involved not so much in neurotransmission (first messenger is transitory and either activates or inhibits the cell’s response) as in neuromodulation. Sometimes, and it is not certain why, a neurotransmitter will activate substances inside the receptor cell called G proteins. G proteins are the great modulators of stimuli or information passed from one cell to another. They can manage the cell’s response to

NEUROTRANSMISSION

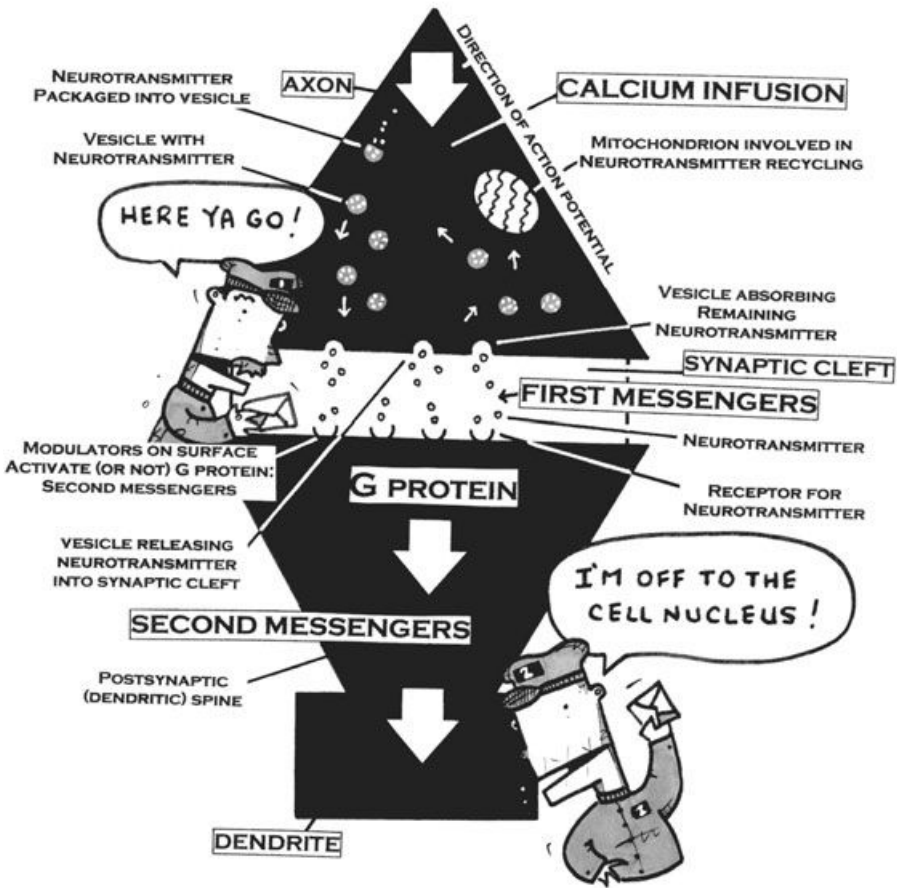


FIGURE 4.3 Neurotransmission

multiple receptors, orchestrating, as it were, the cell's reaction. But most importantly, these proteins direct the flow of stimuli from the outer cell membrane to the inner reaches of the neuron, instituting a cascade reaction. The G protein may act upon a substance within the cell called an effector, usually an enzyme (chemicals that speed up or slow down the coming apart or knitting together of molecules to make new substances) that activates a molecule that goes to the nucleus of a cell and may affect its very structure and function, in both the short and the long run. It can alter the type of neurotransmitter a cell uses, the number and kinds of receptor sites in the cell membrane, the amount and types of enzymes within the cell to make

or metabolize transmitter chemicals, and the number and location of new branches and connections to other cells. Strike a child in anger and there will be an immediate cellular and behavioral response (first messenger) in the child. But physically abuse the child over time and you just may see the process of neuromodulation change cell structures and processes along certain pathways (second and third messenger) and, thus, enable a dramatic and tragic change in behavior of the child.

There are several kinds of neurotransmitters. *Amino acids* are involved in fast and direct communication between neurons. These are natural substances and are widely available throughout the brain. They are also commonly found in our foods. Glycine, glutamate, and aspartate are three of the more important ones. Glutamate is a primary excitatory transmitter. An enzyme⁷ in the brain turns glutamate into *GABA* (*gamma aminobutyric acid*), the primary inhibitory messenger. Other classes of neurotransmitters are far less abundant than amino acids. They include *monoamines* of two kinds, the *catecholamines* and the *indoleamines*. Among the former are norepinephrine and dopamine. They share a similar chemical structure and are derived from the enzyme tyrosine. Dopamine is widely available in two major pathways: the mesocorticolimbic pathway, which connects part of the limbic system to the frontal lobes and is related to a number of functions that regulate and integrate thinking and moods, and the nigrostriatal pathway (remember the basal ganglia?), in which it helps in the regulation and modulation of muscle movement. In addition to the two major pathways, a smaller dopamine pathway connects the hypothalamus to the pituitary and assists in regulating hormonal output. Norepinephrine (think of adrenaline for the brain) pathways are found throughout the brain. Among other things, norepinephrine may be involved in the regulation of sleep-wake cycles, attention and focus, and biological responses to new stimuli and stresses. The indoleamines include serotonin (also called 5-hydroxytryptamine [5-HT]) and melatonin. Serotonin is synthesized from another amino acid, tryptophan (bananas are loaded with tryptophan). Serotonin in the pineal gland is converted into melatonin, which is actually a pigment. You have probably read a lot about these two substances. Serotonin is widely implicated in limbic system functioning—pleasure and pain, sexuality and sleep, the regulation of circadian rhythms. Peter Kramer (1997) calls serotonin the brain's police force, helping to keep things on an even keel, no matter what is happening in the environment. Melatonin is involved in sleep and seasonal variations in response to light. *Acetylcholine* is the major neurotransmitter where muscles and

7. Enzymes are workhorses in the brain. They split or combine molecules to make a variety of substances in the brain. They are not altered by this process but, once finished with their work, are ready to roll again.

nerves meet. There are two kinds of acetylcholine receptors: one helps maintain heart function and the autonomic nervous system, and the other helps maintain neuromuscular system operation and integrity. *Neuropeptides* (composed of short chains of amino acids; proteins, for example, are much larger, more complex chains of amino acids) are another group of neurotransmitters. Among the most interesting are endorphins, which produce relief from pain and a kind of high (endorphin means endogenous morphine, a morphine-like substance in your brain), and substance P, which modulates pain impulses in the brain.

Neurotransmitters are important because they are the molecular precursors of behavior and response. When there are disruptions and irregularities in the process of transmission or in the makeup of the cells themselves, the outward manifestation may, for example, be the complex of behaviors, emotions, and cognitions that we associate with some mental illnesses. Richard Restak (1995), with his usual clarity, says this about the relationship between the disordered molecules and disordered behavior:

It may seem simplistic to equate a disordered thought with a disordered molecule, but there are situations in which they seem literally to be equitable. When communication is disrupted at one level—say, when a crucial chemical in the brain undergoes an alteration—the end result of that event may be invisible to our eyes but will only be too “visible” many orders away. An infant born without the ability to metabolize an essential chemical in her food may, as a result of ensuing brain damage, spend her days staring into space, incapable of responding to those around her. (p. 31)

What happens to neurotransmitters once they sail across the synapse and bind to the receptors? Some neurotransmitters, having done their work (remember these sequences occur many times in just milliseconds), return to the home neuron, a process called reuptake. Others, when done, are broken down by enzymes and excreted (they are out of commission). This metabolization can take place in the home cell or in the synaptic cleft. Some of the metabolized neurotransmitter molecules return to the cell, where they are stitched together again and sent to the vesicles for further neurotransmission duty. Neurons do have time to recover and, thus, control the amount of stimuli to be dealt with. There is a brief resting period after each passage of stimuli. The balance of inhibitory neurons with excitatory also provides some order. Finally, there is competition for the same neurons by various stimuli, and the neuron can select only one set.

It is known that psychoactive drugs (drugs that produce psychological and behavioral effects) act upon certain neurotransmitters at particular sites

and produce certain changes in neurotransmission and, thus, behavior. They do this in several ways. Some drugs bind to the receptor site. Once there, they either enhance the effect of the neurotransmitter or cause there to be no response. Morphine, for example, enhances the effect of endorphins, whereas certain antipsychotic drugs block the effect of dopamine. Other drugs block the neurotransmitters from reuptake back to the presynaptic neuron, thus allowing the chemical more time and more influence at the receptor site. Cyclic antidepressants (e.g., Elavil) and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs, e.g., Prozac) are of this sort. Some medications, mostly the antidepressants, can cause changes in the number of receptors at a site (more or less) and the sensitivity of receptors. Some, such as lithium (used in the treatment of the manic phases of bipolar disorder), affect the second messenger system. Some psychoactive drugs work by diminishing the amount of breakdown (metabolization) of neurotransmitters; MAOIs (monoamine oxidase inhibitors) used for the treatment of depression do this. And, finally, the amount of a neurotransmitter available could be affected by providing less or more of a precursor chemical like L-tryptophan, which is metabolized into serotonin.

In the next chapter, we examine some more practical applications of the concepts and facts we have discussed here, including a brief discussion of the biopsychosocial approach to understanding serious mental illness. Before we move on, however, let us discuss two more practical applications of esoteric neuroscience: the relationship between reason and emotion and some of the differences between the right and left hemispheres of our brain.

Reason, Emotion, and the Environment

This brief excursion into a complex topic benefits greatly from Antonio and Hanna Damasio's research and hypothesizing about the nature of reason, emotion, and moral choice presented with great eloquence in Antonio Damasio's, *Descartes' Error* (1994). Starting with the amazing case of Phinneas Gage in 1848 and ending with some of the latest research on brain function and moral choice, Damasio suggests several things. Human reason and rational and moral choice depend on emotion as well as logic and language. Because of that, higher and lower brain centers (the frontal lobes, the limbic system, and the brain stem) are all involved to some degree in making reasonable decisions. Rather than asserting as we do in the Western world that passion must be eliminated from reasonable choices and that logic, cost-benefit analyses, rational processing, and linear thinking must prevail, Damasio maintains that unless we are aware of physical changes and attend to

emotional sensations that arise from our representations of the current environment (or past experience), we are doomed to make faulty, perhaps immoral or unwise choices. Damasio says, in trying to determine what is good and what is bad in terms of choices and their consequences by reason alone,

Imagine that *before* you apply any cost-benefit analyses to the premises, and before you reason toward the solution of a problem, something quite important happens: When the bad outcome connected with a given response option comes to mind, however fleetingly, you experience an unpleasant gut feeling [because it is experienced in the body and because it “marks” an image, he calls it a somatic marker]. . . . What does [this] achieve? It forces attention on the negative outcome to which a given action may lead and functions as an automated alarm signal which says: Beware of the danger ahead. (p. 173)

Learning to attend to this may protect you from making a bad decision, may direct you toward a good decision, may reduce the number of consequences and choices you have to consider, and may allow you, then, to use reason, to select among more desirable options. In 1848, Phinneas Gage had an iron railroad spike blown by dynamite through his left cheek, piercing the base of the skull, traversing to the front of the brain, and exiting through the top of the skull. The spike weighed thirteen and one-half pounds, was three and one-half feet long, and was pointed (about one-half inch in diameter at the top). Miraculously, Gage remained conscious and coherent and could even walk. In two months he was “cured.” His doctor and subsequent biographer followed Phinneas’ life for years and concluded that for the remainder of his years there was “no equilibrium between his intellectual faculty and his animal propensities” (cited in Damasio, 1994, p. 8). He meant by this that Gage had lost something human; his choices seemed ill-fated, lacking perspective or sense, and even immoral, even though there was clearly no diminishing of his intelligence. Subsequent research into the lives of people who have had damage (due to lesions, tumors, or surgery) in the areas that Gage did, primarily the ventromedial prefrontal cortices (those areas underneath and in the middle of the frontal lobes), has revealed a similar fecklessness.

The prefrontal ventromedial cortices have extensive relationships with many other brain centers, including the limbic system, thalamus, and basal ganglia, and together these hold both innate and acquired knowledge about the body proper, the outside world, and the brain itself as it interacts with both. These markers are both biological and cultural. Many markers we have are the machinery of primary emotions, those states that seem disposed to

pair certain somatic responses (flight, anxiety, approach) with social situations (threats, pleasure, etc.). But most somatic markers involved in rational decision-making “probably were created in our brains during the process of education and socialization, by connecting specific classes of stimuli with specific classes of somatic state [secondary emotions]” (Damasio, 1994, p. 177). So conceivably a person could have this same faulty decision-making process because of upbringing or because, like Gage, a serious insult to that part of the brain where so many pathways come together occurred. With regard to the first, we might think of people we know or have heard of who seem not to have any sense of moral obligation or proportion; who steal, rape, and kill with cool and passionless poise. Has there been a deficit of some sort in their lives that permits the decision to act selfishly and against societal norms without the leavening effects of soul or compassion or worry or guilt? Or is there some biochemical disruption that we are unaware of here? Or both? In an environment in which violence is tolerated and often celebrated in the media, in which decisions to harm or fleece others are made without emotion in many of our cultural tales, one can’t help but wonder whether children and adults experience some loosening effect in the ligament between somatic markers and social experience. What do you think?

RIGHT BRAIN, LEFT BRAIN

There has been much made of the differences in the kind of consciousness and in the functioning of the right and left hemispheres of the brain. The left hemisphere has been lauded (or excoriated, depending on your point of view) as the seat of high-mindedness—logic, analysis, verbal facility, linear thinking, rational musing, etc., whereas the right hemisphere has been celebrated as the intuitive, holistic thinker: the left is our philosopher/scientist, the right our shaman/soothsayer. The reality is probably more diffuse and complex than that. Although centuries of human speculation have contributed to this debate, the idea that there are functional differences in the two hemispheres emerged from the “split-brain” research of Joseph Bogen, Roger Sperry, Michael Vogel, and Michael Gazzaniga (Gazzaniga, 1988; Gazzaniga, Bogen & Sperry, 1962). In order to control severe epileptic seizures that seemed to migrate from the dominant to the opposite hemisphere through the corpus callosum (remember that the callosum is the vehicle through which the right and left hemispheres communicate with each other), these doctors decided to sever the corpus callosum, the idea being that the severing of the callosum would prevent these life-threatening seizures. And it did. Remember that the left side of the body informs the right side of the brain and vice versa (there are a few exceptions to this),

and the right half of each eye sends its messages to the left hemisphere; the left half to the right. It soon became apparent in subsequent research on these individuals who had had this surgery (a commissurotomy) that there were some interesting differences between the two halves of the brain. If you simply observed these individuals after surgery, there wouldn't be much apparent change in them. But if you examined them more closely, you would discover some intriguing things. In a classic demonstration of the two sides of the brain, the word *heart* was flashed before the patients. The "he" was to the left of the eyes' fixation point (and, thus, sent to the silent right hemisphere; the "art" to the right (to the gabby left hemisphere). When asked to point to the word they saw, using the left hand they pointed to *he*. The right hand pointed to *art*.

As we said earlier, the two hemispheres seem to have different emotional lives; the right side is activated when we are scared out of our wits; the left side when we are tickled pink. The right side is also significantly involved in managing large muscle movement, so there may be some evolutionary sense here: if you are being threatened by a wild boar, you ought to be afraid and you ought to be able to transfer that sympathetic nervous system activity into running like mad (Gazzaniga, 1988; Ornstein, 1997).

The left hemisphere is dominant for speech in about 90 percent of right-handers and 60 percent of lefties. Left-handers usually have language functions spread throughout both hemispheres. Some people show great distinctions between left and right hemispheric functioning, and others are more integrated. As a general rule, women seem to be more hemispherically egalitarian than men, more integrated (damage to right and left usually produces fewer problems with the functions usually associated with right and left—speech and spatial orientation, for example). The truth is, too, that most brain/body/mind functions require extensive cooperation among various centers in the brain, right and left, high and low.

But, as Ornstein (1997) recently has suggested after an extensive review of the literature of right-hand/left-hand differences, the right is essential for understanding the nuances, context, ironies, and nonverbal elements of language and discourse. The left side checks out and monitors the syntax, the grammar, the literal meaning of words and the correct choice of words. But the right side of the brain works to understand and interpret the meaning of what is being said, not just literal but figurative, to understand nonverbal behaviors, changes in tone of voice, and the larger context in which something is said. People with, perhaps, a stroke in the right hemisphere may not be able to get a joke or to make judgments about another's intentions, beliefs, and motives. They may have an impaired ability to read people's faces and to understand the social/interpersonal context of a particular claim or statement. Ornstein puts it thus:

Accordingly, the way we understand the world, far from being a matter of the rational side alone, involves putting the different events of life together, be they a discussion about where one lives, or whether a comment is to be taken at face value or understanding “Can’t anybody ever remember to serve salt around here?”

Far from being Hyde and Jekyll. . . . the right hemisphere contributes . . . not only in vision, but in every sentence we speak and hear as well as everything we feel.

It gives us an overall view of the world. (p. 115)

Having the ability to assess situations clearly and completely, to figure out what is going on, to read the complexities and subtleties of a situation, and then to focus on the most important elements of the situation before acting or deciding goes a long way toward helping humans survive in a large, often threatening natural and physical world. The right hemisphere brings us balance and possibility in our understanding of our situation. But it does not do this by itself. The left hemisphere supplements the opaque, holistic comprehension of the right to fruition with detail, focus, and analysis. What a remarkable division of labor!

CONCLUSION

The underlying message of this chapter has been that to understand our heritage as an animal and a species is to understand the distinctive attributes that make us humans rather than ring-tailed lemurs. To understand this is not to debase the fabulous powers of mind we have, but to augment our understanding. To begin to understand the elegance and mystery of the brain and the relationship of brain to mind and consciousness is to respect and be humbled before the robust wisdom and powers of nature. As social workers, we must be as attentive to the body and its sagacity, capacities, and resources as well as fallibilities as we are to those of individuals, families, and groups.

In the next chapter, we examine some ways of putting this all together. We look at mental illness and the role of parents, environment, and biology in the development of children.

M and M Dialogue

MEREDITH: Yikes! I never thought that becoming a social worker meant that I would have to know things about genes and behavior, about neurons and temperaments. I must say, I find this material intriguing but confusing and I am not sure of what practical use it is going to be to me

when I am seeing a poor teen-age mom struggling to take care of her 3-month-old son.

MITCHELL: I understand that. It does seem remote at one level. But think about it. We all have a brain and our brain has certain characteristics, some influenced by the environment, and others that it comes with. No one is free from this basic reality. Likewise, we all have a genetic inheritance because we are the same species and because we have a family lineage. Better to know your family tree than not, right?

MEREDITH: Yes, but what I worry about is that somehow this knowledge makes it seem that everything is due to your genes or based on your biology; that learning, or willpower, or even getting good breaks doesn't make much of a difference. When I was a little girl, my mom who was one of the original feminists, used to say that anatomy isn't destiny. At the time, of course, I was a little girl and I didn't know what she was talking about. But now, looking back, I think she meant that we had to be wary of coming to believe that people were the way they were, that women were limited in some way, because of their physical inheritance and nature. Didn't you say one time that when we oppress people one of the things we do is tell lies about how they are trapped in a less than human body or have a limited biological destiny? Like being African-American somehow dooms one to certain kinds of behaviors and diminishes the likelihood of others?

MITCHELL: I did say that, not quite in that way, but we must give our specieshood its due. Thinking about African-Americans, let me suggest a couple of things. First, race is pretty much a social designation with little biologically to recommend it. I remember years ago, the African-American man of letters and journalist, Albert Murray, said that race in this country is basically a stupid idea because most of us are technically mulattos. He was challenging the idea that there is a firm biological reality to the idea of race as opposed to it being a politically useful or harmful idea (depending on where you stand). A second thing. Skin color is obviously a reality of some sort. People come in all shades and colors. But there is very little evidence that skin color is somehow a result of natural selection, that over thousands of years people who lived in sunny, tropical climates developed darker skin to protect them. But the relationship between sunny climate and dark skin is horribly imperfect. There are people who live in climates where cloud cover makes for very little sunlight, even in equatorial lands, who range from the palest to the darkest. Jared Diamond says that the people we know most about and who stayed in one place for thousands of years before they were annihilated were the Tasmanians. They lived for at least 10,000 years on a small island at the south end of Australia. The climate there

is roughly equivalent to Chicago or Vladivostock. Yet the Tasmanians had very dark skin. Maybe skin color has something to do with sexual selection. But even that is only to say that we often seem to be attracted to people who resemble us in terms of skin color, eye color, stature, etc. Thus, we may just be talking about culture.

MEREDITH: I see your point, but that doesn't really confront the continuing racist or sexist notions that somehow natural selection gives certain people superior qualities and traits. And I fear that this kind of knowledge will somehow reinforce that—even if the knowledge is misused.

MITCHELL: I agree. I wish I had some comforting words about that but I don't. I guess in the end, I think it is better to know the truth as best we can and hope that others don't distort or abuse it. We are obliged, I think, to speak the truth when we hear the lie.

MEREDITH: I have another concern. I am interested in working in the mental health field, especially with people who do not have access to private, expensive services and programs. All this stuff about the brain and behavior seems to be setting up the system—especially with managed care and pressure from insurance companies—to treat really awful, personal pains and dilemmas and interpersonal conflicts as if they were just the result of something wrong with, what did you call it, neurotransmission. Then just give the person a drug or even surgery and be done with it. Quick and slick, as my oldest son says. In the meantime, the person's real problems remain untouched, although they might feel a little better. My mom, after her feminist activist days, went into a profound depression. I was only a teenager but I had the sense that she was despondent about her inability to make a difference and about the fact that things for women didn't really seem to get better. Also, my Dad left and the divorce was a bitter one. So what happened? The family doctor, a good guy really, put her on some kind of antidepressant. Hardly ever talked with her about all she was going through. She took the pills, and others, for years. When she finally decided to stop medication, she went into another swoon. Thank God, she's a strong person. She literally willed herself out of it. But all those horrible years. . . .

MITCHELL: I really understand what you are saying. Just two things. First, if there is in some cases of mental illness or disturbing behavior a biological substrate and you do not attend to it through medication, diet, exercise, or something but get the person involved in years of pointless and expensive psychotherapy, isn't that just as tragic? But the second thing I want to say is this. You have pointed out, and you are right to do so, the abundant abuses and ignorance in the system. But the only corrective to that is the thorough and up-to-date knowledge of people like you who come as professionals into the system. Armed with better

knowledge, if you had been your mother's social worker, I'll bet you would have found the right balance of biological and psychosocial treatments, right?

MEREDITH: I'd like to think so.

MITCHELL: Let's talk again. I enjoy this.

MEREDITH: Me, too.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Nature and Nurture, Neurons and Narratives: Putting It All Together

In nature's infinite book of secrecy

A little I can read

—SHAKESPEARE; *ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA*

In this chapter, I will attempt to weave together some of themes from the previous discussion of the three conceptual frameworks as well as the philosophical motifs of the book. To do this, let us discuss two areas: the interplay between the influence of the physical and social environment and the influence of genes and constitutional factors on human behavior and aspects of child development, and the biological basis of major mental disorders, especially depression and schizophrenia.

NATURE AND NURTURE: HOW NECESSARY ARE PARENTS?

This is a droll heading, but it is meant to evoke an issue that recently has been raised dramatically, forcefully, and controversially by Judith Rich Harris in her book, *The Nurture Assumption* (1998). Generally, in most corners of this culture we relegate enormous power and influence to parents in determining the direction and outcome of the development of their children. For many parents, this requisite and assumption is often fraught with ambivalence. On the one hand, it is an endorsement of the power and necessity of the parental role and brings with it not only responsibility but the possibility of contributing to the well-being of family, community, and society. On the other hand, the obligation for shaping the malleable stuff of childhood into a virtuous, competent adult figure is, at the least, a daunting prospect. And should one's child begin to show signs of faltering, rebelliousness, failure, or any number of other human frailties, parents are apt (and their neigh-

bors, too) to blame themselves. Think of the Swede and his Merry here (chapter 2).

Many other societies and cultures seem more sanguine about the importance of the community, tribe, extended family, and peers and the reality that children will find their way into the nooks and crannies of the larger world without Herculean efforts by Mom and Dad. To take a historical view, the idea that parents have or ought to have an enormous influence on the developmental path traveled by their children is relatively recent (Shor, 1992). Traditionally, much of the research and literature on child development, both academic and popular (say, from the work of socialization theorists and researchers such as Diana Baumrind to everyone's pediatrician, Dr. Spock), has reaffirmed the central role of parents (Baumrind, 1971).

In recent years, there has been a revival of the debate on the relative influence of environmental factors and innate or genetic factors on the development of children—their personalities and temperaments, their intelligence, their behavior, their maladies and disabilities, and so forth. Although it is clear to all that nature and nurture both play a role, most of what we read touts the importance of nurture (usually narrowly meaning the parents' effect on their children). We are less certain about the role of each, how genetic factors vary within different environments, and how different environments vary in their impact on children's personalities and adult fates. The socialization researchers and theorists are much more likely to attend to the supposed correlation between parental behaviors and traits and childhood and, later, the adult personalities and pathologies, strengths, and failings of their children. Behavioral geneticists, on the other hand, are more wary about the role of the parents but absorbed by the role of heredity and how it interacts with and even influences the available interpersonal environment (Plomin, 1990). Does a child born with what turns out to look like a "shy temperament" increase the likelihood that parents will be more active and insistent that the child participates in social events? Or would they be more likely to be protective and doting? Or is there no way to predict what might happen because of the multiple interacting influences, including siblings, peers, culture, social institutions, and the child's own response to parental behaviors? Or does it make little difference—the shy child becomes the retiring adult no matter what? Obviously, there is much perplexity on everybody's part, including my own, about how nature and nurture interact. So my effort here will be to sort out, as best I can, some of the thinking about and research findings regarding the relative influence of nature and nurture. But the most difficult task will be defining the "and"—what the interplay between nature *and* nurture looks like. Let us begin by discussing each separately.

Nature

In this chapter, nature does not refer to our nature as a species but the nature of individuals and the differences between them—what an individual inherits in terms of genetic or DNA characteristics from previous generations and how these influence behavior. Whether we are talking about the genetic basis of physical attributes or behavioral characteristics, the question is to what extent these are encoded in a person's makeup. DNA is the “blueprint of being” (Steen, 1996, p. 5); a huge molecule that has the code for all the information necessary to build the infrastructure of your mind and body. Each of your cells contains all the information needed to replicate your entire being.¹ Here's the amazing part of this: most human beings share pretty much the same DNA coding. Maybe there is a 0.1 percent difference between each of us. But that is enough to keep me singing in the shower and to put Sinatra into the Valhalla of crooners. And, as we said earlier, the difference between our DNA and that of chimpanzees is maybe 1 percent or 2 percent (Hamer & Copeland, 1998). Yet the creature on the weather side of this seemingly minuscule difference may write a novel, surf the Internet, or invent baseball. The chimpanzee, for all its wiles, can't. (A friend of mine with a philosophical bent once said, “Maybe chimps just don't want to invent baseball. They figure it's a pretty stupid game.”)

Single trait inheritance, wherein one gene controls the expression of one trait or behavior, such as eye color, exists, but most human traits and attributes of interest to us are controlled by more than one gene. But even if there were a single gene for something like, say, characteristic mood, the three billion different ways that the nucleotide bases (and there are only four different nucleotides) that make up DNA can locate and express themselves would make significant differences from individual to individual (Hamer & Copeland, 1998; Steen, 1996). So the usual thinking is that those human traits showing a tremendous range of variation are controlled by a number of genes, and this gives humankind its astonishing variety (Steen). (We should not forget in this discussion that the variation is also a result of the environment. We will discuss that shortly.)

Take a certain personality trait—say, agreeableness or sociability—and

1. This is not the place and I am not the person to discuss the complexity of DNA and the nature of genes. But it should be noted that the products of many genes act to regulate the “transcription and translation of other genes in response to the internal and external environment. . . . Much more genetic information is used to regulate, design, and organize than to build” than was formerly thought (Plomin, 1994, p. 14).

let's assume we can measure it.² The similarity between parents and children in affability is probably due to a unknown balance between genes and environment. But behavioral geneticists have found, on the average, that no matter what traits they examine, about 50 percent of the variability between parents and their children or between siblings on the same attribute is due to heredity (25 percent to 30 percent, say, for alcoholism, 40 percent for some cognitive abilities and some personality traits, and 50 percent for IQ³) (Plomin, 1990). That means that the environment plays a substantial role. Genetics, in the case of most human capacities and traits, is not a fate but a factor (Kimble, 1993).

It should be noted that siblings also have “non-shared” or different environments. Although we have typically tried to understand what siblings in a family share in terms of environment (social class, parenting styles and child-rearing practices, parents' education and religion, for instance), experiences and influences that siblings share are probably less significant to their developmental outcomes than those that are distinctive to them individually. It is common for parents to respond to their children differently for a variety of reasons (gender, temperament, age); it makes some difference if siblings are younger or older; of course, each may have different peer friends; and so on. Also, the environmental impact of behavior with a genetic component (Harris [1998] calls it the effect of the effect of genes) produces responses as well. An agreeable, likeable kid will probably experience people responding to her in somewhat characteristic ways—a chuck under the chin, a smile, an invitation to play or participate—and these in turn will have an effect on the child (Harris, 1998, pp. 28–30). Her more irritable, overreactive brother is probably going to have a somewhat different set of responses come his way. But, let us not make too much of the nature of the reactions they incur. Over time, each child will see a variety of behaviors, emotions, and attitudes in the people they encounter. And over time that quality or trait will be molded, to an unknown degree, by contingencies (chance happenings); roles and social niches that the child finds or falls into; close relationships that develop; significant marker events that compel (winning the lottery or surviving a killer tornado); and, most important, the individual's interpretation and construction of life events and relationships (making meaning). As a matter of fact, with respect to the latter, studies of how siblings perceive (interpret) their individual experiences with their parents (how they think their parents treat them) show that while there is substantial similarity, there

2. This is a very big assumption.

3. This research is based on the shaky assumption that IQ tests measure a general quality we call intelligence.

are differences between siblings' perceptions of how parents treat them and between parents' perceptions (compared to their children) of their treatment of their children. It may be that small differences in the relationships between parents and children and between siblings account for plentiful differences in development (Plomin, 1990, 1994).

Remember, too, it is the nature of nature to put some limits on just how far one can develop. We are not smart enough yet to be clear about the range of those limits. To illustrate, say I am a good-natured, outgoing child. I am fortunate to have parents who are reasonably competent, consistent, and organized adults who create a hospitable environment for me and my siblings. As my life unfolds, I encounter some tough luck, some harsh circumstances, some serious disappointments, and the death of a person with whom I have an intimate relationship. I am not sure what to make of all this. Together, these events batter my confidence and sense of security. As a young adult, I find myself getting discouraged, maybe even experiencing some symptoms of depression. But I do find something to hang on to, a buoy in a tumultuous sea—a relationship with a caring, supportive and interesting person. In part, this stroke of luck is due to my sociability. Partly submerged under my setbacks, this sociability is still a part of me, and I continue to think of myself as basically an outgoing “people person.”

As complex as human behavior is, it is difficult to define a specific behavior (how do you define love or, as above, affability, for example?) or set of behaviors, let alone identify or even imagine the genes that might be responsible for its initial expression. Take sexual orientation. Homosexual behavior raises any number of social and cultural responses, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings. We are not even of one mind about what constitutes homosexual behavior or identity. Our society is rife with extremely contentious, even venal, homophobic ideology and conduct. Only recently, for example, there have been two separate incidents involving the brutalization, torture, and death of gay young men. In Topeka, Kansas, the Reverend Fred Phelps has made a recent career of and a reputation for harassing gays and their friends and families. He and his small band of homophobes have gone so far as to appear at the funerals of people who have died from acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and foul the tragic atmosphere with anti-gay placards and chants (such as *God Hates Fags*). This has brought him the interest of national media. The point here is not the Reverend Fred, but that the subject of sexual orientation is freighted with political, ideological, spiritual, and emotional baggage and is difficult to discuss reasonably.

The debate seems to have boiled down to this: some people believe that a homosexual identity and behavior is a matter of choice and preference. In most cases, it is pathological or certainly immoral. Finally, with good faith

or good therapy the homosexual can change to heterosexuality. Other people, including most people who have a homosexual orientation, believe that it is, like heterosexuality, an ineffable, complex esthetic and erotic mix of biology, consciousness, experience, and culture. It is not chosen. It is not pathological. It is deeply rooted in the nature of the organism, and it is not particularly malleable. The former view, once held by professionals in mental health as well as researchers and the public, has now been all but abandoned by psychiatry, psychology, and other helping professions. The latter view is consonant with the experience of gays and lesbians and is now the most prevalent view of mental health, counseling, and developmental professionals as well as a growing segment of the public (Burr, 1993). This view has also led to an eruption of research into the biological and genetic bases of sexual orientation. But let it not be forgotten that social stigma, ignorance, verbal and physical violence, sometimes even within their own families, and their own struggles for identity, not to mention the developmental challenges that all adolescents face, result in daunting and sometimes devastating challenges that gay and lesbian youth must face. Too many gay and lesbian youth are at risk for, among other things, depression and suicide. Suicide rates among this group of adolescents are unconscionably high (Morrow, 1993). Any discussion of the "nature" of sexual orientation should be conducted with this in mind.

Here is a story. Bettina Aptheker (1989), a remarkable sociologist and social activist, recalls as an adult coming out (revealing one's sexual orientation publicly) as a lesbian to her mother:

I am in my mother's house. It is early in the morning. I have spent the night. It has been a good visit. I am helping my mother make the bed. We are tucking the bedspread in under the pillows. I know that a week before she has had a conversation with my son in which he has inadvertently told her the nature of my relationship with Kate.

My mother says, "I understand that you are gay."

My heart pounds furiously. "Yes," I say, as calmly as I can.

She sighs and sits down on a chair in the bedroom. I sit on the bench with the antique needlepoint. . . .

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" she asks.

"Well, you know Mama, some people get very upset about these things."

"Ach!" She says. "I've lived such a long time. Nothing upsets me anymore. Besides, I've known since you were sixteen."

"Mama," I fairly shriek, "why didn't you tell me?"

"Oh," she says, "I hoped for the best." (p. 77)

Here in this simple and beguiling narrative fragment lurk many of the contradictions, fears, and misunderstandings that surround the development of a gay or lesbian identity. Bettina's mother surely loves her and accepts her, but she can't imagine her living with a woman as a life partner; later in the narrative, after revealing how much she likes Bettina's partner Kate, she says, "But if you should ever fall in love and get married it would make me very happy" (Aptheker, 1989, p. 77).

For most individuals, sexual orientation begins to manifest itself, in muted form, well before adolescence. Recent studies searching for biological, genetic, and/or constitutional differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals have been both controversial and intriguing. In one study, homosexuals were found to have a smaller part of the hypothalamus (remember the "under the marriage bed" from the last chapter?) that is associated with sexual interest—the third nuclei. A larger nuclei seems related to interest in women. In the postmortem examination of brains from heterosexual men and women and homosexual men who apparently died from AIDS, the homosexual men had a third nuclei that was on average about half the size of heterosexual men, much like the size of heterosexual women's nuclei (LeVay, 1991). As publicized as this study was, some researchers thought that it was fraught with problems, including how the subjects were selected (for example, some of the heterosexual subjects also had died of AIDS). These and other methodological limitations elicited a screeching howl of skepticism, especially among some behavioral geneticists. These results are not transferable to women, either.

A more methodologically trustworthy study strongly suggests a different genetic basis for homosexuality (Hamer, Hu, Magnuson, Hu & Pattatucci, 1993). The study began by interviewing self-professed and active homosexual men (and their family members whenever possible). The researchers discovered that the brothers of male homosexuals were more likely to be homosexual than the general population (this had previously been found in another study conducted by a psychiatrist, Richard Pillard; it is important to remember that even though the likelihood is much higher than in general, most of the brothers were heterosexual) (Burr, 1993). Furthermore, it gradually came to light that the men also had more gay cousins and uncles. Finally, it became apparent that most of the gay male family members were on the mother's side of the family. "To a geneticist, all these gay men on maternal branches of family trees meant one thing: a gene on the X chromosome" (Hamer & Copeland, 1998, p. 190). Men always receive their X chromosome from their mothers. The continuing research by Hamer et al. did find a marker on a region called Xq28 on the end of the chromosome. The researchers, in the examination of forty sets of gay brothers, found this marker on thirty-three pairs, way more than you would expect by chance

(Hamer & Copeland). Further study of eleven sets of gay men and their straight brothers found a much lower incidence of the marker in the straight brothers (22 percent compared to an 83 percent incidence in gay brothers in the first study). Many gay men have suspected for a long time what this study indicates—that their sexual orientation developed early and that it was not a matter of choice, accident, or seduction. As Jim, a college student who is gay, says, “I didn’t choose to be queer anymore than you chose to be hetero. Why would anyone choose a sexual orientation that would bring them nothing but grief from most of the people they come into contact with?”

The development of one’s sexual orientation is not an all-or-nothing process but rather a series of phases that unfold and, if the individual is lucky and plucky and has support, ends in a full-fledged, integrated sense of oneself as a gay man or lesbian woman (D’Augelli, 1994; Lewis, 1984).

The possible biological foundations discussed above refer to homosexual men. It appears, tentatively, that the sexuality and development of sexual orientation of women is somewhat different than in men. Angela Pattatucci suggests that among the supposed differences are a greater dynamism and fluctuation between women’s fantasies, actual behavior, their sexual orientation, and sexual interests over time. In the long run, it seems, men tend to be more rigidly bound to certain sexual attributes, whatever they may be; women are more fluid in their sexual behavior and patterns (Pattatucci & Hamer, 1995). Nonetheless, lesbian women also face the relentless social, cultural, and political barriers and prejudices that gay men do.

No matter how dramatic the studies of the heritability of sexual orientation turn out to be, there still are exceptions and puzzles. Even in the startling results of the Hamer study above, seven of forty sets of gay brothers *did not* have the genetic marker on the chromosome, and three of eleven straight brothers *shared* the “gay gene” with their homosexual brothers. Further, environmental factors certainly play a significant role in how one’s sexual orientation will be played out over the life span. Will you be a Lothario, with many partners, or a steadfast and loyal lifetime companion? Will you learn to have and enjoy unbridled sexual relations or be restrained, tentative, and limited in sexual play? Will you be allowed to accept your sexual orientation, or will you be forced to mute it and struggle to act as a heterosexual? Will you end up in a city where there is a lively and supportive gay network and social institutions? Will you encounter older mentors who have come to terms with their sexual orientation and identity? Again, the genotype (in this case the hypothesized strongly heritable genetic marker) is molded *to some degree*, like most inherited traits, by environments as well as having an effect on those environments (such as when Bettina Aptheker tells her mother of her lesbian orientation).

Our sexual orientation is also forged by our own subjective and conscious interpretations of who we are and who we are becoming (e.g., one can choose not to act on one's sexual impulses and urges—homosexual or heterosexual; one person may regard it as a curse, another as an opportunity for the full expression of sexuality; another may craft his sexual orientation as a significant and central element in the ongoing plot of his life). The tragic fact that so many gay adolescents commit suicide has nothing to do with genes but everything to do with social, cultural, and political factors; parental, family, and peer attitudes and behaviors; and one's own understanding and interpretation of what this orientation means.

So in the end, it is the individual's assessment of his or her future, the hope or hopelessness of it, the possibilities divined for it, or the drear outlines contemplated of it that will dictate the fate that began with a genetic marker on a chromosome. The narrative possibilities of this genetic imprint are boundless. In gay and lesbian literature we see the impressive variety of stories woven and lived around sexual orientation and identity (D'Augelli, 1994).

Important, too, are the moral and ethical questions that confront a society conflicted over the nature and reality of sexual orientation; these questions will never be answered through behavioral genetic research. They must be answered in our collective hearts and minds, in the development of a collective narrative. Chandler Burr (1993) makes the point:

The challenge posed by homosexuality is one of inclusion. . . . Five decades of psychiatric evidence indicates that homosexuality is immutable, and nonpathological, and a growing body of evidence implicates biology in the development of sexual orientation. . . . Yet it would be wise to acknowledge that science can be a rickety platform on which to erect an edifice of rights. . . . we cannot rely on science to supply full answers to fundamental questions involving human rights, human freedom, and human tolerance. (p. 65)

TWIN STUDIES

Much of our understanding of the heritability of human traits comes from the study of twins.⁴ Identical twins develop from a single fertilized egg and are exactly alike genetically. Fraternal twins develop from separate eggs and are no more alike than any siblings in a family. Francis Galton, in the

4. The discussion here relies on the following resources: Robert Plomin (1994), Dean Hamer and Peter Copeland (1998), R. Grant Steen (1996), Judith Rich Harris (1998), Robert Plomin and Gerald McClearn (1993), R. C. Lewontin, Steven Rose and Leon J. Kamin (1984).

late nineteenth and twentieth century, studied the heritability of genius by comparing twins who were alike and twins who were unlike (a rough measure of identical/fraternal). His ultimate purpose was scurrilous, however, in that he was hoping to create an improved human race by advancing the breeding of what he considered the excellent and controlling the breeding of the unattractive and undesirable. But it has only been in the past three decades or so that twin studies have been used for purely “scientific” purposes—to discover the genetic basis of various human traits from intelligence to extroversion and introversion. The study of twins, however, is difficult because if they grow up in the same environment, it is much harder to say what traits result from similar environments and what from shared DNA. So one avenue taken has been to compare identical twins reared together with fraternal twins reared together, and if the identical twins have a higher correlation of occurrence of a trait than the fraternal twins, then heritability is a strong possibility.

But, for many behavioral geneticists, the best possible scenario is to find twins separated at birth or early on, raised apart, and to examine how they are similar. To the extent they are similar and have experienced different environments, relationships, social roles, contingent factors, the similarities are likely to result from genetic factors. It is by no means easy to find older identical twins who were separated at birth. The most famous ongoing study of twins reared apart is the Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart (Bouchard, Lykken, McGue, Segal & Tellegen, 1990). Here, the researchers found people who did not even know they were twins. Some of the similarities between these individuals, who have been reared in different environments, are fascinating if not amazing. One of the celebrated pairs (they appeared on a videotape on *Nature and Nurture* hosted by Phil Donahue), although they were no more remarkable than other pairs, was Jim Lewis and Jim Springer. They first met when they were thirty-nine. Both smoked Salem cigarettes and drank Miller Lite beer. Both weighed 180 pounds and were 6 feet tall and looked so much alike it was hard for the researchers to tell them apart. But other similarities were strange, if not eerie. Both had been married twice, first to women named Linda, and then to women named Betty. One had a son named James Alan; the other a son named James Allen. As children, they both named their dogs Toy. This is not to suggest that there is a dog-naming or son-naming or cigarette preference gene (though wouldn't advertisers love that?). This is to suggest, as behavioral geneticists do, that genes can have a powerful effect on how we experience life, how we think and feel, and the kinds of relationships we form or are drawn to. Another finding from these studies that gives pause: identical twins reared together are, on the whole, no more alike than those reared apart. But in both cases, on average, as I said earlier, heritability can account for about one-half the

variance in traits; the rest is due to environment and the effect of the genetically endowed trait on the environment. So Jim and Jim are by no means exactly alike; neither are identical twins reared together. It also must be said here that the environment can affect genes. Recall from chapter 4, for example, that second and third messenger systems in the brain may, over time, affect the DNA in neurons, which, in turn, may manifest itself in overt behavior. A person exposed to uncompromising and unrelenting deprivation and stress may, over time, undergo not just personality changes but some personality changes based on chemical alterations in the nuclei of brain cells.

There are troubles with and limitations of twin studies. First, the definitions of what constitutes an environment are often woefully narrow and usually only consider the immediate family. But similarities in seemingly different environments can occur in a variety of ways for, in our case here, twins reared apart. The media have a powerful influence that extends throughout the culture to many families. Singular events such as war, depression, and social upheavals influence many families and provide, in a sense, a similar backdrop for raising children and experiencing family life. Another difficulty is that those traits we are interested in, such as intelligence, susceptibility to violence, or cognitive complexity, are difficult to measure in a way that ensures (1) that our measure of the trait actually measures the trait and (2) that our measure of the trait among individuals really means the same thing for each of them. Also, because of the rapid proliferation of various measures of human qualities and attributes, how we gauged certain traits a generation ago is vastly different from how these traits may be assessed today. Thus, intergeneration comparisons are tricky, to say the least, but essential if we are serious about “proving” the heritability of traits. Other problems arise, but a very intense one is the assumption that if in one split twin study (the study of identical twins separated at birth and reared apart) heritability of a trait is strongly suggested, then you can generalize to other groups who differ from the study group. That is, you say this trait is highly heritable whenever and in whomever it is seen. But is a trait found to be heritable in a study of middle class, white, identical twins reared apart easily generalized to be heritable to poor, rural, migrant Hispanic laborers (Steen, 1996)? Hard to say, but such a transposing of results is all too common. Given this, let us now turn to nurture.

Nurture

The moment we make our appearance in the world, we are of it. Our parents have plans for us. The people around us at the beginning are abuzz

with feelings, anticipations, words, and noises. How we look, what our gender is, and even our eye color generate responses from those big, boisterous humans on every side. And, in the very way we are received, culture begins to work its design in us, and the limbs of our family tree brush across our tiny being. Our genes bind us to our parents, to be sure. But we are unique, too. A being never seen before on the planet, in some ways a stranger to those who have anxiously or nervously awaited our arrival. Our parents and family members have had fantasies about who we might be, and out of these came expectations for who we might become. Some of us nestle comfortably into the lap of the family. Others of us do not.

In a case of identical twins reared apart one family battled against the studied, watchful passivity of their adopted son while the other family accepted this relaxed, unaggressive quality with relative ease. Although the temperaments of both boys remained steady through maturity and both ultimately chose professions that matched their natural inclinations (one accounting, the other academic medicine), the first boy's relationship with his unaccepting parents became embittered and he has carried their disapproval with him for many years. (Neubauer & Neubauer, 1990, p. 28)

In its narrowest sense, nurture refers to the impact of parental behavior, values, knowledge, and so on, in shaping the development of their children. In this brief section, we will examine some of the environmental influences on children, including relationships with parents, siblings, and family members as well as peer relationships, cultural influences, the impact of social and natural events (unemployment of a parent, patterns of discrimination, or a tornado), the media, involvement in and the effect of social institutions—schools, church, local governments, neighborhood associations, businesses—and, not least by any means, the physical environment.

Some biases that inform this argument should be laid out here first. The central importance we ascribe to parents' behavior in molding the present and future behavior of their children may not be fully justified. Eleanor Maccoby, among the most illustrious and productive of child development and socialization researchers during the past four decades, after reviewing her own work and that of most other researchers in the field came to the following difficult conclusion (along with her colleague John Martin):

These findings imply strongly that there is very little impact of the physical environment that parents provide for children and very little impact of parental characteristics that must essentially be the same for all children in a family: for example, education, or the quality of the relationship between the spouses. Indeed the implications are either that parental behaviors have no effect, or that the

only affective aspects of parenting must vary greatly from one child to another within the same family. (Maccoby & Martin, 1983, p. 82)

A remarkable confession indeed! But in 1992, Maccoby seemed of a slightly different frame of mind:

The most central assumption of all the socialization viewpoints I have examined is that events that occur in the context of parent-child interaction affect children's behavior in other settings and at later times. . . . that influence is a bi-directional matter from infancy onward [and] there can be no doubt that the differential between parents and children in power and competency is enormous. (Maccoby, 1992, p. 1016)

So Maccoby's confusion or confession (whichever appeals to you), reflects the state of the art and science of development and nurture. There are genuine conflicts here. Most social workers, throughout history as well as in the current thinking of the profession, are clearly on the side of socialization theorists—that parents are the single most important influence on their children. That influence is presumed to have important residual effects in adulthood. But we cannot ignore this fact: identical twins (who share the same DNA) in terms of a specific personality trait or physical attribute, for example, obesity, whether they are reared together or apart, are more alike than fraternal twins. Adopted children raised in the same home from infancy are no more likely to be like their obese adoptive parents with respect to this trait than the two kids down the street (Harris, 1998).

Besides the influence of heritable factors, some environmental dispositions should be noted. Clearly, from both commonsense and expert study, parents do react differently to their children, and each child has a slightly or greatly different intimate environment from the next (the non-shared environment discussed above). My first daughter was the first grandchild on either side of the family. Because of that she was showered with a degree of attention, especially from grandparents, that my other three children did not receive (oh, they received attention all right but nothing like the lead-off hitter). In addition, Jennifer had two inexperienced parents to contend with. Anxiety ran high, Spock (Dr., not Capt. Kirk's stoic sidekick) was consulted on a regular basis, and my own social work background in human behavior came to haunt me (ohmigosh, she's in the oral dependence phase; we've got to be careful not to over- or under-stimulate her oral needs; I think she's sucking her binky too much!). Less than a year later, brother David shows up. He has slightly more distracted and busy parents, enthusiastic but not doting grandparents, and a big sister to contend with. Then, a little over another year brings John, who for three years is the youngest, and he has a very different set of relationships. His arrival also changes

Jennifer and David's immediate environment. And so it goes. When, three years later, Meghan makes an appearance, she's in a virtual zoo. She is assured of being the target of many sibling gibes because she is now the little one with older, more experienced siblings who are jockeying for emotional and relational slots in the family and neighborhood.

Children also socialize each other. Siblings and peers are important guides to the world outside the home. The impact of peers probably reaches its zenith in adolescence, but peer influence—norm setting, fad instruction, language and dress curricula—is a constant for children and youth. Babies and toddlers are fascinated with each other and generally prefer their own company to that of older peers (Bailey, McWilliam, Ware & Burchinal, 1993). Peers also are guides to the learning of culture, whether managed through imitation, play, or norm instruction. Certainly, children pick up fragments of culture from their parents, other adults, and the media, but these are often tested and acted out in the company of peers. Think of a Chinese-American child, born of parents who immigrated to this country only recently. The parents do not speak English and retain many of the customs of their native culture. If the child happens to get involved with other children, not of their ethnic background but representative of the prevailing culture, the native culture rapidly loses sway, including, often, the native language. The cultural rituals and rules that continue to be followed usually pertain only to the interior of the family. These, however, are the last to dissipate (Tseng & Hsu, 1991). Peers are more powerful as carriers of culture if they are actual groups, that is, if they have developed a sense of themselves as “we,” a shared communal identity, norms and rituals, a lexicon or argot, and, in some cases, an economy. Think of some gangs in this regard. Though we might be, as outsiders, preoccupied and a little disturbed or threatened by their criminal activity or menace, the fact is that gangs can be powerful agents of socialization and acculturation.

On April 20, 1999, in Littleton, Colorado, two members of a fringe group called the Trenchcoat Mafia entered Columbine High School while heavily armed and carried out an apparently premeditated plan, killing twelve students, one teacher, and then themselves. The group they belonged to was based, in part, on the group members' sense of themselves as being left out of the world of and scorned by the jocks and popular kids. Gradually, they evolved group norms, an identity (“Goth”), rituals, and a language. They turned to violent ideologies, including, apparently, Nazism, and developed a mission that, tragically, two of their members carried out. None of us really understands how this happened. As we struggle to make sense of this, people have suggested the reality and presence of evil; the failure of parents to guide and instruct; the fracture in the coherence of community; the violence of American culture; the availability of weapons; and even a biological

basis for this sort of explosive violence. One thing is clear, however. The group that formed had a powerful impact on the minds and hearts, and eventually behavior, of some of its members. Whether or not this is a cause is irrelevant here. What matters is the context in which the heinous act was conceived and from which it was carried out.

Luckily, most peer groups provide opportunities for the development of relational skills and attachments to activities and institutions outside the family. Many youth groups are positive forces in their schools and neighborhoods, reaching out, for example, to other teens who are in trouble, providing mentoring to younger children, or serving elders in their communities (see Henderson, Benard & Sharp-Light [1999] for many examples of this). Though parents may despair of the dress or demeanor of the peer group, its members find something of importance and value within it.

In chapter 2, I discussed the importance of context for the sense and “presentation of self” (to use Erving Goffman’s [1959]) felicitous term). The ideas are applicable here as well. What is required, what you learn, and what is expected of you in one context or environment may have little relevance or applicability in another. So to understand how children are and what they are like, we need to understand what social setting we are talking about. The Eddie Haskell phenomenon (I just made that up) is common. With the Beav and Wally, Eddie is the scheming, know-it-all, don’t-let adults-cow-you wag. When in the company of the Cleaver parents, butter couldn’t melt in his mouth, he is so courtly and polite. So who is the real Eddie? Does he have an underlying personality that can be seen in every context? Growing up, I’ll bet there was a little Eddie Haskell (or Eloise) in you. At home, you might have been hell-on-wheels, demanding and full of energy, schemes, and yourself. In a school classroom, you were demure and reticent, but seen as smart (you did all of your assignments and did them well and almost always amazed your parents—they could hardly get you to study). With your closest friends, you were funny, and irreverent, but, like them, a little wary about risky behavior (smoking, drugs, sex). As a teenager, it was important for you not to let your separate worlds collide. You knew that the way you were at home was not very acceptable or even attractive to your peers. You also knew there were some elements of your life or lifestyle that could be transferred from one environment to another (you were a tennis player of some skill).

Another critical influence in the lives of children and families is the media. The media represent everything from *The Jerry Springer Show* to public television’s *Nature* series, from the *National Enquirer* to the *Nation*, from *The Secret Garden* to *Friday the 13th*, and there is little doubt that television, videos, movies, magazines, newspapers, novels, music, and the marketplace play a major role in transmitting and interpreting culture and in setting norms and

expectations, fads and fashions. For personalities still forming, the messages about gender, sex, violence, physical attributes, body image, money, relationships, and morality sent out by the media can be critical to how a child or youth thinks of herself or himself and what values come to steer and shape behavior. Mary Pipher, in her wonderful account of the struggle of young women to become whole adults in this culture, *Reviving Ophelia* (1994), tells of Cassie's experience with the media:

Cassie's been surrounded by media since birth. Her family owns a VCR, a stereo system, two color televisions and six radios. Cassie wakes to a radio, plays the car stereo on the way to school, sees videos at school and returns home to a choice of stereo, radio, television or videocassettes. She can choose between forty channels twenty-four hours a day. She plays music while she studies and communicates via computer modem with hackers all over the country in her spare time. . . .

Cassie's been exposed to years of sophisticated advertising in which she's heard that happiness comes from consuming the right products. She can catch the small lies and knows that adults tell lies to make money. We do not consider that a sin—we call it marketing. But I'm not sure she catches the big lie, which is that consumer goods are essential to happiness. (p. 243)

Cassie and her peers have probably seen, in various media, more sex and violent acts (as well as the confusion between the two) than many adults have. Body functions and sexual behaviors that were taboo in my youth, probably beyond the reach of my fantasies as well, have become staples of everyday, ordinary advertising, for example. But much of what Cassie experiences occurs in a moral vacuum. Pipher says,

In some ways Cassie is more informed about sex than I was. She's read books on puberty and sexuality and watched films at school. She's seen explicit movies and listened to hours of explicit music. *But Cassie still hasn't heard answers to questions she's mostly interested in. She hasn't had much help in sorting out when to have sex, how to say no or what a good sexual experience would entail.* [emphasis added] (p. 245)

Adults do wring their hands over the influence of the media, but we probably do not know the extent of its sway in the culture at large, in the minds of children and teens, on the development of their identities, and in the articulation of their values. But it would be hard, I would think, to overestimate its dominance.

KINDS OF ENVIRONMENTS

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1989) has studied children and child-rearing practices in a number of cultures and subcultures. He proposes looking at the social environment in terms of levels of proximity to any given child. He suggests there are four levels.

The first, the microsystem, includes those situations and contexts where children have face-to-face relationships with others—family, school, neighborhood, church, peers, local stores, associations. The value of the microsystem to the health and development of children can be seen in the answers to some basic questions: Is the child regarded positively and accepted? Is the child exposed to diverse relationships and groups of people? Is the child expected to be competent and given the resources to become so? Is the child given an active role in the community or neighborhood? How these questions are answered in a given neighborhood or community reflects the soundness of the developmental infrastructure as it relates to the well-being of children (see James Garbarino [1992] for a further discussion of these kinds of questions at all levels of the environment as they affect the welfare of children). For too many children, the answer to these questions is “No!”

The mesosystem refers to the relationship between microsystems—family–school, church–family, school–neighborhood, business–family, family–family, for example. Do these settings respect each other? Do they foster similar values? Do they collaborate in behalf of children? Do they have similar views of children? Do they make their resources available broadly in the community? Francis Ianni (1989), a psychiatrist, did a noteworthy study of adolescence in several different kinds of communities—rural, suburban, and urban; poor and rich; ethnically diverse and ethnically alike: stable and in transition. He found that in those communities in which there seemed to be agreement between schools, churches, and families about the core values and beliefs about the nature and needs of children and adolescents, teens fared much better, socially and academically.

The exosystem refers to those settings and institutions where children and adolescents do not usually participate⁵ but in which decisions that directly affect the well-being of children and their families are made. The school board, city commission, parental peer groups, associations, and organizations of all kinds may have a hand in making decisions that are fateful for children. Do these organizations have the best interests of children in mind? Do they solicit the ideas and opinions of children and their families?

5. Some of the resilience literature suggests that for children and youth to develop optimally, they must be encouraged to participate actively and genuinely in such social structures and settings (Henderson et al., 1999).

Do they have adequate knowledge to discharge their responsibilities? Do they share values that are humane and child-oriented? Is the developmental infrastructure of the community attended to (parks, recreational facilities, clubs, libraries, etc.) “As American families become more isolated, they focus more exclusively on protecting their own interests and lose sight of the need to advocate as a community for the needs of all children” (Webster-Stratton, 1997, p. 157). A vibrant and humane society, one that is dedicated to the health and fulfillment of families and children, is built on fashioning collaborative links between families and community agencies, organizations, institutions, and resources (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

The macrosystem is that level of society where the blueprints for maintaining the ideological and institutional life of society are drawn up. These include social policies at all governmental levels, prevailing values and ideologies that permeate all of society, the marketplace, the media, legal mandates, and worldviews that all affect the well-being and life-chances of families and children. Questions to be asked here include, Are some groups more valued and favored at the expense of others (think of welfare recipients)? Are there norms and values and resulting policies that support family and community life or are they oriented to the individual? Do corporate and individual values and preferences reign over public and collective ones? In terms of institutional life and resources, is there public scarcity and private wealth? Think, for a moment, of the Welfare Reform Act of 1996. It was legislation devised primarily by white, well-to-do men, with little or no contact with or understanding of the lives of people on welfare (basically poor women and their children) and little understanding of the realities of the existing welfare system. It was essentially propelled by a cluster of values and beliefs that, in the end, are inimical to poor families and supportive of the corporate, commercial, and industrial interests of this country (the less government the better, poverty is the result of a moral defect, welfare dependence is increasing and is a waste of tax dollars, a working mother is a better role model than one who stays at home and receives welfare). The fact is that “workfare” (the reformed system) does not necessarily get people a job nor does it usually provide useful skills so that one can be competitive in the job market. Mimi Abramovitz (1997), a social work professor at Hunter College in New York and long a student of the relationship between women who are poor and welfare and work, says this:

Workfare which requires recipients to work off benefits rarely leads to paid employment or higher earnings. N[ew] Y[ork] C[ity]’s Commissioner of Human Resources reported anecdotally that 75,000 workfare participants would move through 25,000 slots but that agencies would be likely to hire only 250. According to *Newsday*,

4,180 out of a pool of 80,000 or 5 percent found regular jobs from 7/95 to 4/96. (p. 1)

Nature and nurture work hand in hand, unceasingly, until our last breath is taken, to make us the distinctive beings we are continually becoming. The academic debates about their relative influence notwithstanding, we all do understand, I think, that nature and nurture, pattern and possibility, and the inherent and the interpreted work their magic continually in our lives. The Irish journalist Nuala O'Faolain in her "accidental memoir" writes:

But there are no typical people. And places don't stay the same. The world changed around Ireland, and even Ireland changed, and I was to be both an agent of change and a beneficiary of it. I didn't see that, until I wrote out my story. I was immured in the experience of my own life. Most of the time I just went blindly from day to day, and though what I was doing must have looked ordinary enough . . . to myself I was usually barely hanging on. I never stood back and looked at myself and what I was doing. I didn't value myself enough—take myself seriously enough—to reflect even privately on whether my existence had any pattern, any meaning. I took it for granted that like most of the billions of people who are born and die on this planet I was just an accident. There was no reason for me.

Yet my life burned inside me. Even such as it was, it was the only record of me, and it was my only creation, and something in me would not accept that it was insignificant. Something in me must have been waiting to stand up and be counted. (1996, pp. 3–4)

Here is the tension between being a mere organism and being a being. This is a struggle that we all share.

NEURONS AND NARRATIVES: A BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL UNDERSTANDING OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Let us now take a brief excursion through an area of interest that, for some of you, will be a part of your career: mental health and illness and the interplay of biological, social, and psychological factors in "causing," perpetuating, and alleviating serious mental disorders. Before we begin, a couple of cautionary notes are in order. The fact that there may be biological substrates (configurations of anatomy and/or neurochemistry) to some major

mental disorders in no way annuls the importance of interpersonal, developmental, emotional, cognitive, environmental, or spiritual factors as elements of mental disorder. Likewise, we must be careful not to engage in what is becoming a dangerous trend, I believe, in the field of mental health: the assumption that biology is always the cause of mental disorder and the ultimate focus of treatment (e.g., medication). We do stand in some danger of “biologizing” (assuming that biology is the first or primary cause) elements of human behavior. This is appealing because it seems to render complex human behaviors simpler and because it promises control of those behaviors. Recently, I read in the paper about the results of a research project that claims to show that the intense emotions that adolescents feel have their roots in brain chemistry. The frontal lobes of adults are able to override the intensity of emotions originating in the amygdala and other parts of the limbic system (see chapter 4). The same is not true with adolescents. Now you can just imagine what one response to such a finding (valid or not) will be: a pill to control this intensity, a pill, in a sense, to stand in for the feeble adolescent frontal lobe (Carpenter, 1999).

Let us also not make the mistake of assuming that the root of mental illness and psychopathology always reaches back to dislocations and disorganization in the family of origin. We have spent enough capital on blaming parents, especially mothers, for the mental infirmities of their children (Bateson, Jackson, Haley & Weakland, 1956; Bettelheim, 1967). I recall a time while teaching a mental health class when a group of twenty people were invited to my class, ten young adults who had been diagnosed with schizophrenia and ten parents. Two astonishing revelations popped up. First, not one person, parent or child, had ever been educated fully (or even skimpily) about what this disease and its treatment were all about by the professionals with whom they had had contact. Second, parents were treated implicitly by professionals mostly as culpable and culprits. Although they were not overtly blamed, the parents came to reproach themselves for imagined and implied failings as parents, until they began to join with other parents and allies in the mental health professions to find out what really was going on in the brains and minds of their children. Steven Hirsch (1979), who has done considerable research in London on the families of people with schizophrenia, concluded twenty years ago that “there is yet no evidence to support the view that parents bring about, in the formative years, the tendency for their children to become schizophrenic [sic] in later life” (p. 49). Twenty years later, Hirsch’s statement is even more strongly supported (Torrey, Bowler, Taylor & Gottesman, 1994).

Something like mental illness has been acknowledged and explained by almost every culture over millennia. From capture by evil spirits to the wages of sin, from the loss of soul to breaches of sacred taboos, to conflicts and

tensions in our internal, psychological dynamics to dysfunctional families and parents, all human groups seem intent to define the behaviors we call mental illness as either special—perhaps even signs of divinity—or as requiring treatment and punishment or demanding sequestering and isolation (Ellenberger, 1970). Our ideas about mental illness have undergone dramatic changes in the past century or so. Three (among many) perspectives have held sway and have been extraordinary influential, at least for periods during this time: Freudian and neo-psychoanalytic ideas, family system/interaction theories, and cognitive/behavioral theories (elements of these theoretical systems will be discussed in chapters 6 and 7). Also, in the early and middle part of this century, something of an agreement existed in which there was a clear distinction between organic disorders that have profound effects on cognition and emotion, such as senile dementia, mental retardation, and the effects of prolonged drug and alcohol intoxication, and functional disorders caused solely by intrapsychic or interpersonal factors (virtually all other disorders) (Johnson, 1999). In the case of the latter, we looked to families for explanations of the development of functional disorders and because we expected to find dysfunction, we did—at least in the clinic. Researchers, however, were much less successful in pinning the rap on the family.

With the advent of a variety of sophisticated brain imaging techniques and the seeming power of medication to control some of the symptoms of serious mental illness, another biological revolution in understanding and treating mental illness has taken off. I say another because for many years, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and earlier), many “experts” assumed that there *was* something the matter with the brains of people with severe mental disorders, especially psychosis. At the end of the nineteenth century, the postmortem discovery of lesions (pathological changes in tissue) in the brains of people who were, by the standards of the day, psychotic seemed to confirm this belief. But it turned out that most of these individuals had syphilitic lesions and were in the tertiary stage of syphilitic decline (Szasz, 1976). As Szasz claims,

The discovery of the syphilitic origin of paresis [partial paralysis with some behavioral changes noted] was a brilliant scientific confirmation of this organic-psychiatric hypothesis—namely that persons whose brains are abnormal are likely to exhibit behavior commonly judged abnormal. (p. 6)

Let it be said here that Szasz believes this discovery of the idea of mental “diseases” was a terrible mistake and not at all warranted by the evidence. What we call mental diseases he says are basically problems of conduct, living, and the untoward consequences of moral/ethical choices. Nonetheless, the excitement of finding what seemed to be a correlation between

organic malfunction and behavioral “abnormalities” overwhelmed more skeptical voices.

Another path to the current “biological” revolution extends back to the work of Emil Kraepelin and his associates in Munich around the turn of the century (see Andreasen, 1984; Ellenberger, 1970). Kraepelin, in his attempt to bring a more rational, scientific understanding of mental illness, brought together in the department of psychiatry in Munich an illustrious array of neuroscientists (Alzheimer, who studied illnesses that led to varieties of dementia; Nissl, who developed the staining technique that allows brain cells to be seen more clearly under a microscope; and Brodmann, who used Nissl’s technique to map areas of the brain that seemed to be structurally and functionally different or specialized). Over the years, in several editions of his basic textbook on psychiatry (each more expansive than the last), Kraepelin reported on his continuing research and observation of patients with mental illness. His work was primarily descriptive rather than “causal,” although he and other neuroscientists of the day suspected that brain abnormalities would be found to underlie serious disorders. His careful observations and descriptions led him to make the first distinction between dementia praecox (early occurring dementia, later called schizophrenia) and manic-depressive disorder (now bipolar disorder). The former he regarded as progressive, serious, and usually having a lamentable outcome. People with the latter, although afflicted with dramatic symptoms, usually came to a more satisfying end. Thanks to the influence of the many neuroscientists on his staff, Kraepelin came to believe that there must be lesions or anatomical abnormalities in the brains of people who suffered these terrible disturbances of thought, emotion, and behavior. In his 1919 treatise on schizophrenia, Kraepelin offered the ideas that head trauma and infectious illness might be among the causes of schizophrenia. He also suspected that there may be other biological roots of the illness that go back to childhood. *But it must be said that he discovered no histopathological (disordered cells) lesions to confirm his suspicions* (Kraepelin, 1919/1971). To his credit, Kraepelin was able to begin to distinguish between and categorize discrete disorders that previously had seemed a confusion—a real bedlam.⁶ And, the core elements of many of his descriptions and distinctions stand today.

While Kraepelin may have been the father of psychiatry in Europe, in

6. Bedlam was the name for Bethlehem (Bedlam is Middle English for Bethlehem) Asylum in London. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, people thought to be mad were sent there to be chained and otherwise abused in small cells. They were also the objects of curiosity for interested observers as if they were animals in a zoo. Bedlam now refers to confusion, uproar, and cacophony, which is how Bedlam would have appeared to the observer.

America Sigmund Freud was the Big Kahuna. Subject to more admiration here than at home in Europe, where he was regarded with some suspicion and skepticism, Freud's views were spread by a variety of mental health professionals, including social workers. His tour in America in 1910 could only be considered, if he were a rock group, as boffo! By the 1940s in this country, the psychoanalytic empire reigned supreme in the field of mental health. There were pretenders of all sorts—even some of Freud's original group of disciples who had abandoned him and started their own schools of thought and therapy—Alfred Adler, Carl Jung, Karen Horney, and Otto Rank,⁷ for example. But what ruled the day was the Freudian idea that mental health could only be a partial victory won—and mental illness a defeat suffered—on the battlefields of the relationships between parents (the purveyors of the civil and shapers of conscience) and children (carriers of impudent and not fully tamed unconscious, primitive strivings) in the intense psychosocial interior of the family. The idea that the internal tensions in one's mind, in a sense, were representations of the tensions of early intimate relationships and social demands became very popular and had many offshoots and progeny. For years, the seeds of mental illness were thought to be found in the fertile field of childhood family relationships. Schizophrenia, autism, and depression were all assumed to be manifestations of toxic early experiences in a person's life. There have always been dissenters from this model of psychopathology, and they have promoted many different kinds of theories about and treatment for mental disorders. But the psychodynamic view created by Freud and modified by his later followers held dominion over the kingdom.

In the 1950s at Washington University in St. Louis, a series of inquiries into the dynamics and the genetic and familial origins of depression and other mental disorders was launched. In order to conduct their research, these investigators sought out clearer and more definitive descriptions of mental illness. They returned to the Germanic tradition begun by Kraepelin (and his actual work) that stressed the importance of careful, painstaking, and descriptively thorough diagnosis. They also wanted to investigate more carefully the possibility of biological bases for serious mental disorders. Their initial triumph was the categorical, explicit differentiation of the symptoms of different groups of mental disorders. The individuals who did much of this research would later become part of the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) effort to make a breathtaking change in its handbook of diag-

7. Otto Rank's core ideas about will became the basis for the functional school of thought in social work. That school reached its pinnacle of influence at the University of Pennsylvania, where it still—in more modern guise—has some influence, along with other perspectives.

nosis—the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)*—predicated on developing a standardized set of definitions for common mental illnesses. The definitions of mental illnesses that the Washington University group—neo-Kraepelinians—crafted were rooted in the supposition that each illness was a distinct and separate entity characterized by specific symptoms that could be clearly and precisely described. To make a given diagnosis particular and explicit, exact criteria had to be met. This was a strategy designed to ally psychiatry with the rest of medicine in terms of rigor and reliability of diagnoses. Unlike physical medicine, however, it could not be said with any certainty that these symptoms indicated underlying pathology. The Washington University group initially developed detailed criteria (primarily symptoms and symptom clusters) for thirteen mental illnesses. These were published in the *Archives of General Psychiatry* in 1972 (Feighner, Robins, Guze, Woodruff, Winokur & Munoz, 1972). To the handful of psychiatrists and other clinicians who happened to see them, these descriptions apparently had great impact. In 1974, the APA decided it wanted to review and perhaps revamp the *DSM-II*. The *DSM-I* and *DSM-II* had been largely psychodynamically oriented, written in a much looser, bookish style, and were much smaller (*DSM-I* had 86 actual pages of text devoted to description and discussion of disorders; *DSM-IV* has 673 pages of actual descriptions of disorders). The APA was anxious to make the *DSM* more scientifically and medically acceptable and appointed a task force to begin the work of revision (and, it turns out, revolution). It so happened that the chairman of the task force was a neo-Kraepelinian, Robert Spitzer, also associated with the Washington University group. At the outset, he made the plea that psychiatry too long had been embarrassed by its lax diagnostic standards and criteria and asked the other task force members what they thought. Surprisingly, even though they represented many different theoretical schools and perspectives, they agreed that the diagnostic manual should introduce specified guidelines for the diagnosis of each illness. Eventually, their ideas were field tested; the clinical perspectives of hundreds of physicians, psychologists, and an occasional social worker, were gathered; research was examined; and, in 1980, the revolution experienced its first and significant success—*DSM-III*. It was a far cry from the languid and sometimes rambling prose of *DSM-II*. It also signaled that the era of big theory was over and that the sovereignty of psychodynamic theory was coming to an end. Politics aside, this shift to descriptive, symptom-based, criteria was one of the singular forces for change in the way that we think about mental illnesses—for good or ill (Andreasen, 1984; Kirk & Kutchins, 1994).

Although the Kraepelinian approach argues for the biological foundation of much of this kind of human misery, it, as we observed, did not offer much data about just what those foundations were. So how have we come to

know so much more about the brain and behavior and mental disorders? First, new technologies have allowed us to see minute structures and processes in the brain, and, most remarkably, even a single neuron. Computed tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) allow us to see structures. Positron emission tomography (PET), single-photon emission computed tomography (SPECT), and fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) reflect processes and can show areas of greater or lesser activity in the brain (Johnson, 1999; Restak, 1994).

Second, it has been known for some time that certain drugs can mediate and control the symptoms of various mental disorders. It has also been known for some time that these drugs act on the chemical process of neurotransmission (remember how individual neurons communicate with each other). More recently, the development of designer drugs, based on a technology that allows drugs to be developed in the laboratory for specific actions on specific cells and molecules, has speeded up the production of new drugs for action on targeted emotional states (e.g., dysphoria or craving for food) and mental phenomena (e.g., delusions or inability to concentrate). Computer modeling of the interaction between a drug and specific neurons will open the way for even more finely targeted and accurate applications of drugs. Older psychoactive (meaning they affect psychological functioning) drugs were like crude bombs; once in the system, they exploded and spread chemical shrapnel all over the brain, causing a variety of side effects, among other things. Newer drugs will be more like “missiles” homing in on a specific destination.

Third, the continuing longitudinal studies of twins (separated at birth or living together, identical and fraternal) and their parents or foster or adoptive parents provides a rich lode of information about the differences and similarities—biological, emotional, cognitive, behavioral—between siblings, twins, and parents who share a mental disorder (concordance) and those who do not share a disorder (discordance—one twin, say, has bipolar disorder, the other not). A quick example. The six-year study of schizophrenias and bipolar disorder in sixty-six pairs of identical twins funded by the National Institute of Mental Health has provided an encyclopedia of suggestive findings about the nature of schizophrenia and its manifestations and possible origins. For example, the evidence of neurological impairment was significant in those twins who shared schizophrenia (twenty-nine of fifty-three pairs had obvious neurological abnormalities). But in discordant pairs, the twin who did not have schizophrenia also showed more neurological impairment than normal controls. This suggested to the researchers that underlying the schizophrenic process may be something like a broader genetic or traumatic deficiency or irregularity in the neurodevelopmental process. Such an abnormality, with sufficient environmental push, may manifest

itself as schizophrenia. Or, lacking particular (and unknown) external pressures, it may show in more subtle and less debilitating ways (Torrey et al., 1994).

So, at least two forces have brought us to the current and continuing biological revolution in understanding mental illness: the Kraepelin factor (sounds like a Robert Ludlum novel) and the increasing sophistication of neuroscientific research and technologies (imaging, surgery, and pharmacology, for example). Let us now see what may be going on in the brain, mind, and environment in the case of someone with a serious mental disorder.

SCHIZOPHRENIA

I saw myself in different bodies. . . . The night nurse came in and sat under the shaded lamp in the quiet ward. I recognized her as me, and I watched for some time quite fascinated; I had never had an outside view of myself before. In the morning several of the patients having breakfast were me. I recognized them by the way they held their knives and forks. (quoted in Torrey, 1988, p. 53)

This report comes from a woman describing the dramatically altered sense of self she experienced during a schizophrenic episode. Other disruptions occur in one's emotions and thinking: "My thoughts are all jumbled up, I start thinking or talking about something but I never get there. Instead I wander off in the wrong direction" (quoted in Torrey, 1988, p. 32).

Schizophrenia is a serious, complex, and devastating disease or set of diseases. For many people it involves a massive disturbance and disorganization of senses, emotions, thinking, behavior, and neuromuscular integrity. As a consequence of these upheavals, relationships and social roles suffer. Hallucinations and delusions are the hallmark symptoms of schizophrenia. Delusions are beliefs and belief systems that are patently bizarre and peculiar and are not shared by other members of the person's culture or social group. Likewise, they do not change in response to argument and reason. The most dramatic delusions are grandiose—for example, believing that one is, in fact, a deity. Hallucinations are sensory experiences (sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste) that have no apparent external stimulus and that others do not perceive, but are felt to be real by the person experiencing them. A young man with incipient schizophrenia (he had been having acute bouts of anxiety for a while and occasional sense that things were not quite real) was shaving, and as he looked into the mirror he saw his face begin to shatter like fractured porcelain, revealing, as the pieces of his face fell to the floor, his skull. Imagine experiencing such an abrupt demolition of the integrity of thought, sensation, and emotion: "Schizophrenia is to psychiatry what cancer is to

medicine: a sentence as well as a diagnosis” (Hall, Andrews & Goldstein, 1985, p. 3).

Given the above brief description of the havoc that schizophrenia can bring to individuals and their loved ones, more amazing yet is the number of people who have this most serious disorder and still manage to get through the day, to develop insight and understanding about their condition, to demonstrate their humanity, and in more cases than we think, to recover their former energies, motivation, and skills as well as capitalizing on the learning that has come from years of suffering. Psychiatrist Patricia Deegan, who has had schizophrenia for years, says this about the idea of recovery:

The concept of recovery is rooted in the simple yet profound realization that people who have been diagnosed with mental illness are human beings. Like a pebble tossed into the center of a still pool, this simple fact radiates in ever larger ripples until every corner of academic and applied mental health science and clinical practice are affected. (1996, p. 92)

Deegan means to alert us to the fact that as serious as this illness is, even more injurious is the treatment often afforded people with schizophrenia (and their families). This would include many professionals as well as lay people. People with schizophrenia are often relegated to the margins of life, sequestered in hospitals or group living situations, and often have had the ligaments to everyday life (jobs, education, intimate relationships) severed. Furthermore, they are told that they are not likely to fully recover, and if they do become “normal” it will be nothing short of a miracle. I will have more to say about recovery and healing later since it provides us with the opportunity to make the leap from disordered molecule to life-affirming narratives. First, more about this illness.

Causes and Kinds of Schizophrenia. Let us be bold here. Schizophrenia is a brain disease. It tends to run in families and probably has a genetic basis. It may even, in some forms, be due to an early, possibly intrauterine, viral infection—perhaps even a cytomegalovirus (it may take a long time to show its effect on the body) like HIV/AIDS (Gitlin, 1996; Hedaya, 1996; Johnson, 1999; Torrey et al., 1994). For years, various neurological and neuropsychological abnormalities have been found in many people with schizophrenia, from abnormal eye movements, to unusual neuromuscular postures and movements, to slower reaction times. In addition, PET scans and other imaging techniques have shown that some people with schizophrenia have brain irregularities, including a dwindling mass of left frontal lobe tissue near the temporal lobe; an expanded left lateral ventricle (suggesting brain cell loss in the surrounding areas); malformations in the limbic system, including

a thinner corpus callosum; and shrinking (or less development) of the amygdala, hippocampus, thalamus, and cingulate gyrus in both hemispheres (not all individuals have all of these; some have none of these). One theory (these theories are not necessarily mutually exclusive nor are they necessarily the last word) is that schizophrenia is a neurodevelopmental disease—maybe genetic, or maybe caused by a virus in utero. Whatever the case, it is, like some other illnesses, a disease that seems to appear during a window of developmental time—usually and predominantly from 15 to 30 years (although in the past few years a type of schizophrenia has been discovered that manifests itself in later years [50s and 60s], affects mostly women, and is characterized by paranoid symptoms). The turmoil of psychosocial and biological development during this period (roughly adolescence and early adulthood) may provide the external and internal stress that heightens or aggravates the looming neurobiological abnormality. Not everyone who has this latent predisposition would necessarily become symptomatic—it is the quality and force of the environment/body transaction that tells. Thus, there are people with this susceptibility who do not manifest the disorder.

A view that has been somewhat popular and controversial and speaks to both cause and kinds is the type I and type II theory of Timothy Crow (1980) of Northwick Park Clinical Research Center in London. Type I schizophrenia reflects normal brain anatomy and structure but suggests abnormal dopamine activity. The symptoms are positive—delusions, hallucinations, and some disorganized thinking and speech (positive because they are clearly observable and unmistakable). There has been evidence of good psychosocial functioning before the eruption of symptoms, and these usually acute episodes respond well to antipsychotic medications. The prognosis for people with this kind of schizophrenia is usually quite good. Type II, on the other hand, is characterized over time by a decrease in brain mass (the loss of brain cells in the left frontal area described above), a reduction of dopamine, and the appearance of negative symptoms (hard to determine at first because they are subtle and nonspecific at the outset). These symptoms include, eventually, a meagerness of emotions, diminished intellectual functioning, decreasing relationships, increasing difficulty managing life's responsibilities (education, job, intimate relationships, etc.), and decreasing motivation and interest. Individuals here do not respond well to antipsychotic medication, and the prognosis is not as favorable as for those with type I symptoms. But understand: many of these individuals are not seen in clinics, do not receive treatment, or are diagnosed as something else. An unknown number live on the streets or are transient. We really do not know much about them or how they might respond to treatment. So it is important to be careful in making judgments about their resistance to treatment or their poor prognosis—part of that is due to our ignorance and lack of experience.

There is another cluster of symptoms that some have talked about; I'll call them deficit symptoms. After an episode of acute schizophrenia (type I) with the beginning of drug treatment, hospitalization perhaps, and then, later, discharge to the community (one hopes with appropriate psychosocial supports and education), a person for a time may appear to be suffering negative symptoms—a lack of motivation, affect, and the like. But these symptoms are more likely a response of the person's brain and mind to this sudden and massive assault—a period of neurobiological recovery (Hogarty, 1993). Thus, this is a transient phase.

Why Do Drugs Work? Recall from the last chapter in our discussion of neurochemistry that dopamine is one of the neurotransmitters implicated in mood, cognition, memory, and muscle movement. In people with type I schizophrenia, there is evidence—not without question—that there is a dysregulation of the dopamine transmission along several pathways. Basically, the person is too sensitive to dopamine or dopamine appears in neural tracts where it does not belong. The net effect of either of these two sorts of abnormalities, occurring primarily in the limbic system, and the left frontal cortex is to create a disruption of the usually smooth process of neuronal gating. In this case, the individual becomes unable to control incoming stimuli in a measured, categorical way. It is as though the individual is being battered by sensory storms from without and from within.

At first it was as if parts of my brain “awoke” which had been dormant, and I became interested in a wide assortment of people, events, places, and ideas which normally would make no impression on me. Not knowing that I was ill, I made no attempt to understand what was happening, but felt that there was some overwhelming significance in this, produced either by God or Satan and I felt I was duty-bound to ponder on each of these new interests, and the more I pondered the worse it became. . . . Now, many years later I can appreciate what had happened. . . . the mind must have a filter which functions without our conscious thought [part of that filter is the thalamus], sorting stimuli and allowing only those which are relevant to the situation in hand to disturb consciousness. . . . What had happened to me in Toronto was a breakdown in the filter. (Norma MacDonald, cited in Torrey, 1988, p. 27)

Let us suppose that part of this sensory overload and chaos is due to excessive sensitivity to the effects of the neurotransmitter dopamine along the pathways in the brain that involve muscle control and movement and that link the limbic system with the cerebral cortex (frontal lobes) and possibly have to do with “neuronal gating.” It is well established that

antipsychotic drugs work to block dopamine at some receptor sites. Since dopamine has several kinds of receptor sites (named D₁, D₂, etc.), it seems that the more effective antipsychotic drugs (such as clozapine and risperidone) block D₁ and D₄, whereas the older antipsychotics, somewhat less effective and with more side effects, block D₂ principally. Another proof of dopamine's central role involves Parkinson's disease. It is known that parkinsonism (tremors, muscular weakness) stems from a degradation of dopamine along the nigrostriatal (which has to do with muscle movement and control) pathway. So when people are given antipsychotic drugs, they, in effect, are being exposed to the conditions that lead to parkinsonism—the degradation (blockade) of dopamine. Lo and behold, many people who take antipsychotic drugs do, in fact, experience Parkinson-like symptoms, and these require some treatment (Gitlin, 1996; Hedaya, 1996).

RECOVERY AND HEALING

The fact that schizophrenia is a brain disease does not mean the environment plays no role, that individuals who have the disease do not construct and construe its nature, or that recovery as well as the experience of the illness is a biopsychosocial, narrative, and spiritual process. Kay Redfield Jamison (1995), in the remarkable memoir of her struggle with bipolar disorder (she prefers the older designation—manic depression—because it really captures the essence of the experience), a disorder that has the same disruptive possibilities as schizophrenia, beautifully illustrates the distinctive narrative construction of one's torments in this lengthy passage:

People go mad in idiosyncratic ways. Perhaps it was not surprising that, as a meteorologist's daughter, I found myself, in that glorious illusion of high summer days, gliding, flying, now and again lurching through cloud banks and ethers, and across fields of ice crystals [she is describing her manic condition here]. Even now, I can see in my mind's rather peculiar eye an extraordinary shattering and shifting of light; inconstant but ravishing colors laid out across miles of circling rings; and the almost imperceptible, somehow surprisingly pallid, moons of this Catherine wheel of a planet. . . .

Was it real? Well, of course not, not in any meaningful sense of the word "real." But did it stay with me? Absolutely. Long after my psychosis cleared, and the medications took hold, it became part of whatever remembers forever, surrounded by an almost Proustian melancholy. . . . The intensity, glory, and absolute assuredness of my mind's flight made it very difficult to believe, once I was better, that the illness was one I should willingly give up. . . .

Some of my reluctance, no doubt, stemmed from a fundamental

denial that what I had was a real disease. . . . Moods are such an essential part of the substance of life, of one's notion of oneself, that even psychotic extremes in mood and behavior somehow can be seen as temporary, even understandable, reactions to what life has dealt. In my case, I had a horrible sense of loss for who I had been and where I had been. It was difficult to give up the high flights of mind and mood, even though the depressions that inevitably followed nearly cost me my life. (pp. 90–91)

This is a mere glimpse of Jamison's narrative of her illness, forceful in the telling of the power of manic flight (the meteorological metaphor is her construction of the remarkable experience of mania—its energy, unceasing expansion, and creative consorting with the cosmos itself), the raging departure from the ordinary. The narrative of recovery, however, is calmer, more chaste—the demon has been tamed. And Jamison well knows that it was lithium, an antimanic drug, that saved her life. But in no way did this tinkering at the level of molecules compromise her particular, distinctive, and continuing construction of her experience and its meaning.

Healing is not the diminishing of symptoms promoted by drugs. Healing is the re-integration of body and mind and environment through a variety of determined efforts, catalytic events, faith and hope, and connections with others. A number of studies of the recovery (I prefer the word healing) process have implicated some of the following factors in surmounting the devastating experience of serious mental illness. For many people, encounters with others who care or who are steadfast in their concern and friendship made a difference.

I was lucky. I was given a contact person, a counselor who knew my brother. He was a social worker. He had been to sea. *He wasn't at all like the social work graduates I had met in the services* [now what in the world do you suppose she means?]. No, this was a dependable, kind of chubby guy around 30. . . . *He boosted my confidence from the very first moment: "You can do it!" "You'll make out just fine!"* (Topor, Svenson, Borg, Bjerke & Kufas, 1998, p. 25)

Finding someone who believes in you, who can bridge that desolate landscape of psychosis with faith in you and promise in your future, can be a turning point. It is interesting to note, as you probably will, that many of these elements of healing are the very same as those that promote resilience in children facing what seem to be insurmountable difficulties.

Other people relied on their own interpretive cunning to rethink and recast their experience into something that held the promise of movement

away from their demons, a shift toward assuming some degree of control of one's experience.

Sometimes you keep fighting and fighting. Like I have a fight in me all the time that I've got to keep going. I've got to keep going and I've got determination. I could just sit down, yeah, I'm not going to do nothing. (Tooth, Kalyanansundram & Glover, 1997, p. 43)

Part of this, for some, is the struggle to recapture some sense of the self as an agent, someone who can confront the illness, develop a more hospitable understanding of it, and choose to take action against the problems faced and to create a better quality of life. For far too many people, this is done in isolation, does not get much of a boost from the professional mental health institution, and invokes a struggle between the symptom-reducing effects of medication and its soporific side effects. For many people, it was hope—even optimism—that they could surmount the difficulties posed by their illness that kept them going (Tooth et al., 1997, pp. 56–57). Others found that the healing began when they entered a new environment; one in which they found respect, encouragement, and interesting and challenging ways to engage oneself.

So I went along with the interview and got the job. I was so glad to get that job, even if I was scared, too, and wasn't all that sure I wanted it, but I was glad anyway. I felt like . . . [I] was a little bit normal again. *That I could do the interview and get the job without putting on an act.* [author's emphasis] (Topor et al., 1998, p. 40)

The job proved to be challenging, but the individual, with support, met these challenges and had experiences that suggested that her self was truly good enough to get the job done.

All of the constructive (and constructed) factors above were substantially heightened by the presence of at least one other person who provided encouragement, belief in the person with schizophrenia, positive expectation, and support. Sometimes that person was a professional. Most times it was a friend, relative, or fellow sufferer (Ralph, 1998).

A recovery paradigm is each person's unique experience on their road to recovery. . . . my recovery paradigm included my reconnection which included the following four key ingredients: connection, safety, hope, and acknowledgement of my spiritual self. (Long, 1994, cited in Ralph, 1998, p. 1)

Kay Redfield Jamison (1995) knows that she will always confront unsettling swings of mood, intensity, and energy. She knows, too, that lithium

saved her life. While lithium spoke to the molecular, however, it was love that spoke to the narrative of her life.

But love is, to me, the ultimately more extraordinary part of the breakwater wall: it helps to shut out the terror and awfulness, while, at the same time, allowing in life and beauty and vitality. . . . After each seeming death within my mind or heart, love has returned to re-create hope and to restore life. It has, at its best, made the inherent sadness of life bearable, and its beauty manifest. It has, inexplicable and savingly, provided not only cloak but lantern for the darker seasons and grimmer weather. (p. 215)

Enough said.

CONCLUSION

How we become human, evolve into our very self, confront the challenges, and seize the opportunities of the moment is still a story full of more mystery than certainty, of more poetry than science. In this chapter, we have drunk from the well of science; the rational, objective, manageable, predictable well of knowing. But in all the story fragments here, we slake our thirst as well with the ineffable and the artistic; the world of metaphor, imagination, story, and irony. Both worlds satisfy in their own way. In a sense we move in the world through the power of metaphor (“lurching through cloud banks and ethers” Jamison says of her struggle with manic fervor) and through the power of empirical generalization (Fuller Torrey says the evidence is that schizophrenia is a brain disease, and the dysregulation occurs most obviously in parts of the limbic system). And as we confront the conundrums of nature and nurture we are refreshed, perhaps, by the knowledge that many human traits are heritable but malleable. But we are cheered by the stories of the unfolding of two distinct life courses despite the fact that two beings share a substantial biochemical and environmental resume.

In social work practice, we surely find comfort in methods, forged in experience and honed through empirical test. But there will always be moments when “dependable understanding seems just beyond reach, when one has to take the risk of choice, assert one’s identity and values, without certainty or verification” (Goldstein, 1997, p. 56). Here the art of practice is to find meaning and understanding in the moment and in the relationship.

In this chapter, we have seen in our discussion the incredible elegance of the interplay between body, mind, environment, and soul; instances of courage and resilience in the face of serious adversity or an unkind world; liberation from the oppressions (bodily and social) of mental illness; and the

ingenuity of the body and mind as they negotiate with each other and their surroundings to move toward the possible and the hopeful. Nature may deal you a tough hand to play and your environment may be full of challenges and disappointments, but your DNA or your parents are not your final destiny. Your fate is a matter under question until you draw your last breath. The soul would have it no other way.

M and M Dialogue

MEREDITH: In thinking about nature and nurture, I don't know whether to jump for joy or cry. Thank God I may not be to blame for some of my boys' foibles and flaws. But some of the research you talked about made it sound like I can't have much influence at all, for good or ill.

MITCHELL: It certainly would be easy to come to that conclusion. I truly don't think we have come full circle in understanding the interplay of nature and nurture. In the past few years, the influence of those who study the biology of behavior has taken off. In the case of nature, the behavioral geneticists have been especially persuasive and eloquent. And they have heavy-duty science on their side. In our society that carries a lot of weight. But let's think about what you "know." You are a parent and a good one, I gather. You were a child to parents you admired, especially your mother, and my guess is you know other parents who, even though they may struggle at times, are doing well. What does the evidence of your eyes tell you about what parents can do for their children?

MEREDITH: I have the feeling that you've just done the old therapist ploy—turning the question or issue back to the client. Actually I am glad you asked because I need to continue to work on this. I think most parents want to get a grip on what they can and should do for their kids. Obviously, we provide shelter, food, care, safety, maybe even a haven for them. But like you and others have said, and I agree, this culture often is not good to families or good for children. Parents have to work real hard to teach their children solid values, values that encourage respect, understanding, tolerance of others. We have to protect our kids, too. I am a real tyrant when it comes to TV. I think many of the shows on TV corrupt the whole idea of being a good neighbor or decent human being. So I make sure that what my boys watch is, if not thoroughly wholesome, at least not morally offensive. If I had the strength, I think I would ban TV altogether.

MITCHELL: And do these things vary if your child is "born shy" or "over-reactive?"

MEREDITH: Of course not. I know you are trying to raise the issue of nature

here. Like I said before, my 12-year-old, Benjie, is a dear, sweet little guy but he is pretty shy and things get to him pretty easily. So, if that is, in part, his nature, as a parent I have an obligation to help him find comfortable places, to help him understand and accept who he is, and to change in ways that he wants and needs to in order to do as well as he can. So sometimes I push a little. Other times I provide a little buffer. So I guess parents provide acceptance. In families, you don't have to be absolutely fabulous to be a member. You are a natural-born member. We love you. We teach you too. We teach lessons about being a citizen, about responsibility, about limits, about being a good friend. We even will teach you to drive a car, hold a fork right, and, this makes me shudder a little, about sex and making babies or not. I think that parents also help provide connections to the bigger world for their children—like going to church or taking a trip to the countryside to see Aunt Mary or taking clothes or food to a community pantry. Doing this becomes harder when they are teens. I am already beginning to see in both boys the importance of peer ideas, many of which seem to come from the media.

MITCHELL: But I think you've laid out a pretty impressive list. The behavioral geneticists and those with a similar view of nature and nurture are not saying that parents have no influence, they are saying that we cannot predict exactly what influence parents will have, and they raise a lot of questions about parents being responsible for how their children turn out as adults in terms of personality traits or psychopathology. We give parents, they say, a lot more power to construct the future of their children than they really have. Judith Rich Harris recounts the story that David Lykken—remember he was one of the researchers on the Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart—tells about a set of identical twins reared apart since infancy and raised in different adoptive homes. One twin became a concert pianist, talented enough to have appeared as a soloist with a symphony orchestra. The other twin can't play a note of music on any instrument. Since these women share the same genetic background, most of the difference must be due to environment. One of the adoptive parents was a piano teacher who gave lessons in the home. The other adoptive parents were not musically inclined. So there you are. But here's the rub—it was the child of the nonmusical parents who appeared as a concert pianist; the daughter of the piano teacher can't play a note.

MEREDITH: My guess is that the mother of the pianist really pushed her daughter and made sure the environment around her was conducive to becoming musical. I'll bet she made sure her daughter practiced, too.

MITCHELL: That's what Lykken discovered. But it must be said here that

this example, in some ways is an exception. Most times, musical parents have musical kids. That's because there are many things you can learn at home—directly and indirectly. These may influence choices that you make and directions you set sail upon. But, if you were to become a concert pianist, you would have to have a modicum of genetically endowed talent, and, I think you would have parents who created the environment conducive to musicality. In addition, as you suggested, a certain amount of pushing and high expectations from the parents are probably requisite, too.

MEREDITH: As you talk, I am thinking of the stories of artists who went mad or slightly off the road because of excessively demanding, insistent parents. Or did they go mad because of some other thing? The most compelling story is always about these parents who cannot accept failure and create such enormous and such a pressure-packed environment for their kids.

MITCHELL: That's an interesting point. Frankly, I don't know how common that is, but it does happen. It must be some combination, wonderful in its complexity, terrible in its result, of biological vulnerability, great interpersonal stress from parent to child, cultural imagery and expectations conjured up from that; you know we all have read books or seen movies about genius gone mad at the hands of an overbearing ogre of a parent.

MEREDITH: For some reason, this whole issue of parental influence makes me think of my Mom. I told you she was one of the first feminists. Even though she struggled with her own demons, she communicated a set of values and possibilities to me by her words and what she did. I do not think I would be here today if it were not for her. I do not think I would have gotten out of a bad marriage were it not for her. I know that how I am as a person—my personality would you say—is in so many ways quite different from hers. But in terms of my core beliefs and values, I am my mother's daughter, no question. This memory makes me feel a whole lot better about the influence I can have on my boys.

MITCHELL: You've hit the nail on the head. Let's have another carpentry session soon.

MEREDITH: I'm game.

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CHAPTER SIX

Theories: Part I

The effort to keep psychically warm, to stave off the cold that seeps in, shunts aside any time for or possibility of sustained thought and theory.

—RUSSELL JACOBY

Jacques Barzun once remarked that the etymological heart of the word theory is “to see.” I would add that good theory also might allow us to see differently, to gaze at the ordinary world we inhabit with a new appreciation and insight. Theory often offers us an uncommon look at the commonplace; it may dramatically jolt our taken-for-granted worldview. Theory is a more or less systematic way to make more sense of, to come to an understanding about, the world of our sensations and experience. But as Russell Jacoby suggests in the above epigraph about the decline in Marxist theory, building theory is hard work and requires critical and creative thought and ingenuity. In this chapter and the next, I will attempt a definition of theory and then set out to describe and critique some theories that have currency in social work—psychodynamic theory, ecological/systems theory, cognitive/behavioral theories, and radical theory. To begin, let us agree that the more usual definition of theory as guesswork or unproven fancy is not applicable. For example, in the contentious debate between those who want to only teach evolution in schools and those who want to add creationism, the definitions of theory on each side seem to be thoroughly at odds. This hoary debate boils down to something like this: people who support the teaching of the creation story appeal to something they call creation science. This science and the theory derived from its application means that the biblical story of the origin of the world, Genesis, is true; that the world is really only 10,000 years old. In a sense, the “theory” they forward is the account made apparent to prophets by divine revelation. Thus, theory is a godly creation and unimpeachable by ordinary humans. From the amicus curiae (friend of the court) brief in 1986 regarding the teaching of creationism in Louisiana schools (1986, cited in Shermer, 1997, p. 166), this statement of belief by the Creation Research Society was cited: “The Bible is the written word of God . . . all of its assertions are historically and scientifically true in all of the original autographs. . . . This means that the account of origins in Genesis is a factual presentation of simple historical truths.” Supporters of

creation science charge that evolutionary theory has no empirical proofs and no actual data on the nature and process of speciation that form the heart of the idea of natural selection.

To the proponents of evolution, creation science is not scientific theory but religious proclamation and the assertion of dogma. They argue that theory, and science by implication, is tentative and must explain, conform to, and be testable against the empirical world (the world of senses and experience). Likewise, it must be falsifiable and be the best approximation to explaining known facts that is available. Robust and potent theories account for more of the accumulated empirical generalizations that describe a particular segment of the world. Evolutionary theory, given this definition, is not just a shot in the dark but, *more than any other theory*, forges richer links between relevant discoveries about the age of the earth; the rise of humanoids; and the development, effusion, and comparative morphology of species. There are gaps and puzzles in the story of evolution, to be sure, but the core idea of Darwinian evolution is natural selection, a conception supported by an impressive array of facts and generalizations drawn from a variety of scientific investigations in many fields over many decades. Steven Pinker (1997), in his usual erudite and engaging way, says this about natural selection:

Of course, natural selection does not have the foresight of engineers, but that cuts both ways: it does not have their mental blocks, impoverished imagination, or conformity to bourgeois sensibilities or ruling-class interests, either. Guided only by what works, selection can home in on brilliant creative solutions. For millennia, biologists have discovered to their astonishment and delight the ingenious contrivances of the living world: the biomechanical perfection of cheetahs, the infrared pinhole cameras of snakes, the sonar of bats, the superglue of barnacles, the steel-strong silk of spiders, the dozens of grips of the human hand, the DNA repair machinery in all complex organisms. After all, entropy and more malevolent forces like predators and parasites are constantly gnawing at an organism's right to life and do not forgive slapdash engineering. (p. 167)

THE ELEMENTS OF THEORY

Theory, Fact, and Method

Theory, in its more conventional sense, is inextricably attached to the scientific method. The scientific method is that cluster of assumptions,

practices, and techniques that are thought to be the best means to discover (or assert) truth.

Scientists have the ability to pose questions and resolve them in a way that critics, philosophers, historians cannot. Theories are tested experimentally, compared to reality, and those found wanting are rejected. The power of science cannot be denied: it has given us computers and jets, vaccines and nuclear bombs, technologies that, for better or worse, have altered the course of history. Science, more than any other mode of knowledge—literary criticism, philosophy, art, religion—yields durable insights into the nature of things. It gets us somewhere. (Horgan, 1996, p. 4)

John Horgan's enthusiasm for the scientific method notwithstanding, his is a terse but accurate reflection of the appeal and uncommon sense of normal science.

Modern science begins with an impulse to dredge up the secrets of nature, to find out the truth of the matter, and to seek it out in every nook and cranny of the natural world. Darwin's theory of natural selection, Einstein's theory of general relativity, and Freud's theory of the unconscious are all *grand* theories. The first two, however, "are true, empirically true, in a way that no work of art can be" (Horgan, 1996, p. 6). Freud's theory is rather more like a work of art, a metaphorical and narrative superstructure that is wondrously clever, excruciatingly detailed, one that opens our eyes to a human nature that none of us, without Freud, could have imagined. But, unlike quantum mechanics in theoretical physics or Newton's laws of motion, it lacks the proofs, and it hasn't survived well the tests of its claims in the world of human conduct. All theories, even those that seem to have brought us "progress" or immeasurable benefits, are composed of words, metaphors, terms, that are constructions, agreed upon by a particular community of interest, but constructions nonetheless. Ego and superego are no less constructions than neurotransmission, stem cells, and social class. They mean something, but only by agreement of members in a community.

Theories address empirical generalizations and, in essence, string them together in novel and original ways. These generalizations are "facts" or, more correctly, observations that have been noted time and time again under a variety of circumstances. For example, this empirical generalization has been observed countless times: the best indication of how far individuals will go in the educational system, in this country, is their parents' social class—income, education, occupation, and residence. Using techniques to ensure that the self-interests and biases of researchers do not corrupt the view of the phenomenon of concern (objectivity) and ensuring as well that other investigators can employ precisely the same design and techniques

that the original investigator did (replicability), demonstrated empirical generalizations cry for theory. A theory, then, is a set of interconnected propositions, usually abstract—a systematic formulation that seems to account for the relationship between recognized specific social uniformities (empirical generalizations or clusters of facts).

Let us take a centerpiece of the Freudian perspective, the theory of the unconscious, and see how it pulls together some confirmed observations about the real world. In this theory, common though apparently unrelated events are seen to be related to each other by the mechanisms of unconscious wish fulfillment, unconscious striving, and unresolved conflicts and wounds far removed from the grasp of consciousness. We all have day and night dreams that can frighten, puzzle, and intrigue us; we all forget things we should remember, even important names; everybody has embarrassing and revealing slips of the tongue; and all of us engage in repetitive and seemingly implacable patterns of behavior even if they are not particularly healthy or positive. Freud argued that even significant choices in one's life (of an intimate partner or occupation) are symbolic and substitute manifestations of unacceptable sexual or aggressive impulses or the symbolic reliving or attempted resolution of painful conflicts and thwarted desires from our past. We cannot experience these unconscious phenomena directly. As a matter of fact, Freud insisted that only the methods of psychoanalysis could provide the clues as to what elements of our unconscious life these overt circumstances, relationships, and petty mistakes and misstatements refer to. Nonetheless, Freudian theory gives us a means to connect seemingly independent elements of daily life in a novel, revealing, and unsettling way. Unfortunately, proof still awaits this construction. Freudian theory and some other theories of human behavior, such as those of Karl Marx or Talcott Parsons (structural/functionalism in sociology), are enormous in scope, ambitious undertakings toward explaining the sum of the human condition.

Other theories, however, are more modest and address a smaller, more circumscribed part of human experience. For example, if we were asked to hazard a guess about the effect of a conscientious, attractively and competently done anti-smoking campaign directed at a certain population, say teenagers and young working class adults, a campaign that graphically and realistically portrayed the dangers and costs of smoking, we might suppose that people, appealing to reason, would respond relatively favorably. All but the most hard-bitten of smokers might either give up smoking (at least temporarily) or at least seriously consider it. But, lo and behold, after some months of this terrific, dramatic campaign against smoking, the frequency of smoking goes up in our population, both in terms of the number of smokers (a small but noticeable increase probably due to the normal growth in the number of first-time smokers, although there is a more no-

ticeable rise in the number of first-time adolescent smokers) and the frequency of smoking among confirmed and dedicated smokers (many smoking more per day and very few quitting). What happened? How can we understand such seemingly irrational and unpredicted behavior? Many explanations are possible. But the theory of *cognitive dissonance* (Festinger, 1957; Aronson's discussion [1999] of this phenomenon is quite good) gives us some disarming and unexpected clues. The theory says that two mutually exclusive and conflicting cognitions (thoughts, beliefs, values, memories) existing side by side in our mind, or a conflict of that kind between belief and a pattern of behavior, create "dissonance," an uncomfortable psychological/motivational state that clamors for resolution. Pressed by the discomfort, the individual searches for clues, information, and opinions that allow the support of one cognition over the other or the support of the cognition over the behavior (or vice versa). It wouldn't be surprising if many of smokers are confronted with the basic dissonance: "I am smoking" and "Smoking is bad for your health and pocketbook." It is only dissonant, of course, if they value health, longevity, and economy. Individuals want to resolve this conflict in an easy and pleasant fashion, if possible, although it may not be particularly rational. (Eliot Aronson [1999] says that we humans are not necessarily rational animals; rather, we are rationalizing animals.) So our smokers, for the moment, continue to smoke, and many of them begin to amass some comforting and justifying ideas and images and beliefs and opinions that support continued smoking and mute the health and economic issues. These might include "Uncle Buddy smoked until he was 93 and never had a serious health problem"; "I enjoy smoking, it relieves stress and relaxes me. If I didn't smoke, I would probably either do something worse or get high blood pressure from stress"; "A lot of guys on our city basketball team smoke and they are pretty fit"; "If I wasn't smoking, I'd be spending my money on something else—candies and treats"; "I read in the newspaper that some studies have shown that there is not much of a relationship between smoking and illness."¹ By smoking more, then, the individual in effect suppresses the bad news and affirms his or her behavior and the associated cognitions. Multiply this by thousands and we have, perhaps, a partial explanation for the inexplicable increase in smoking. The increase in the number of novice adolescent smokers might be accounted for in the same way but with slightly different rationalizations: "I'd rather be cool and besides, I'm going to die when I die—no big deal." "Middle range theories . . . provide structures for the interpretation

1. No doubt smokers read the research reports put out by the Tobacco Institute, not the Surgeon General. They might be in a state of dissonance but they are not stupid.

of initially puzzling behavior, situations, and events. Moreover, they [may also] unify what is known by common sense” (Fawcett, 1999). For the most part, then, clever theory can provide explanations that may exceed common sense in both power and range and freshen our understanding of common situations.

THEORY AND PARADIGM

We discussed paradigms (in their largest and loosest sense) in chapter 1. To briefly reiterate, a paradigm is a conglomerate of beliefs, assumptions, appreciations, values, and orientations, broad in scope, that provide a worldview. Paradigms of this enormity often beg the question of truth. Culture and social institutions, the very fabric of everyday life, are saturated with paradigmatic assumptions and appreciations. There is surely disagreement about the number of reigning or competing paradigms that have currency and relevance. But any vast paradigm provides a way of organizing our experience and planting our feet more firmly on the shifting sand of human fads and foibles and provides an anchor for confronting the whims of nature and circumstance.

The paradigm of our age, thoroughly modernist, is probably “Science,” with a Big S, or “Science and Technology.” The canopy of science, the very idea of scientific knowledge, covers untold elements of our lives—from selling toothpaste, to designing psychoactive drugs, to erecting a superstructure of defense against nuclear attack. To the modern mind, unraveling the complexities of parental love or sexual intimacy through the ministrations of science is no more remarkable than understanding the life cycle of a fruit fly. We believe that science will allow us to scale the height of ultimate understanding and to penetrate the mysteries of the world. The fog of ignorance and confusion of people will be burned away by the hot sun of science. The institutional scientific enterprise, the scientific method, and its associated technologies and products are more contained but obviously related phenomena. But the Big Science paradigm leaps out of that skin of modesty and insinuates itself in both the mundane and fantastic elements of our lives together. We do not think it odd to believe that a cure for cancer is imminent; we may be disturbed but not surprised that the human genome project is closing in on the specific details of human genetic structure; we are convinced that science will solve the riddle of the hole in the ozone layer; we anticipate that science will extend the human life span by decades; we believe that mental illness will be cured. Big science allows us to make such assertions without so much as a second thought. So, a paradigm constitutes our “assumptive world” (Frank, 1974). We have become so immersed in the paradigm that we cannot help but see or appeal to science as the final arbiter

of experience, human conflict, and unresolved questions. The notion that we could treat questions about the human condition with the paraphernalia and predispositions of, say, natural science is, I think, testament of the growing influence of the paradigm over the past two to three hundred years.

But there are many countervailing forces. Philip Slater (1976) once pointed out that the dominant predilections in every society have an underbelly, a human attribute or penchant that, by definition and practice, refutes, contorts, or departs from the claims of the prevailing view. In our society we have any number of practices and belief systems that counter the brash rationalism and progressivism of science. Further, “there is a cooperative underside to competitive America, a rich spoofing tradition in ceremonious England, an elaborate pornography accompanying Victorian prudishness” (Slater, p. 7). From astrology to reflexology, from Satanism to Sufi dancing, from belief in UFOs to conspiracy theories of all kinds, there is a full cupboard of ideas, “theories,” customs, norms, and prescriptions that run counter to the governing paradigm in our culture.

In chapter 1 I spoke of the paradigm shift, the challenges to the prevailing worldview that spring, generally, from postmodern impulses. These provide another range of contrasting perspectives. More specifically, there are worldviews that instruct, chasten, comfort, and guide that have their origins in a far different past, different cultures, and lattice-works of experience other than that of the scientific paradigm. For example, people from a variety of cultures and classes, “outsiders”—divergent, marginalized, and thwarted people, groups outside the pale of institutional power and influence—all have a variety of backdrops and perspectives that provide a thoroughly contrasting view of a familiar landscape. Supporters of these views do not think of them as lesser in importance, less rigorous, or ineffectual than “the hierarchically invidious monism” (Minnich, 1990, p. 179) that pervades most social institutions—that monism wrought by the scientific, modernist paradigm. Cornel West (1994), in a call to liberate black spirit, intellect, and humanity and to reject the necessity of black nihilism, calls for a politics of conversion and an ethic of love and care:

A love ethic . . . is a last attempt at generating a sense of agency among downtrodden people. The best exemplar of this love ethic is Toni Morrison’s great novel *Beloved*. Self-love and love of others are both modes toward increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance in one’s community. These modes of valuation and resistance are rooted in a subversive memory—the best of one’s past without romantic nostalgia. . . . *Beloved* can be construed as bringing together the loving yet critical affirmation of black humanity found in the best of black nationalist’s movements, the pe-

renial hope against hope for transracial coalition in progressive movements, and the painful struggle for self-affirming sanity in a history in which the nihilistic threat *seems* insurmountable.” [author’s emphasis] (p. 29–30)

West and other critics know that vocal political, social, and individual agency for many groups of people has been stymied by the suppression of their own native voices and experiences—their own paradigms. He also knows that social science knowledge is not necessarily liberating but often supports the dominant institutional ideologies and practices.

Theories that are extruded through the dominant paradigm often have a presumptive base that celebrates or certainly does not challenge those of the reigning one. The assumption of immaculate objectivism, rationality, and that truth is possible within the convention of the scientific paradigm does not always bring untold benefits. It can suppress alternative and divergent views of the world. Peter McLaren (1995) makes an impassioned plea for a critical pedagogy in our schools, one respecting and reflecting the wildly variant views of those heretofore characterized as “others”; one courageous enough to challenge the classroom reality that is “rarely presented as socially constructed, historically determined, and mediated through institutionalized relationships of class, gender, race, and power” (p. 35). His plea could be extended to the work of the social sciences and social practices (like social work).²

Egon Guba (1990), a long-time supporter of social constructivism and postmodern approaches to inquiry, contrasts the paradigmatic assumptions of four approaches to understanding and research: the prevailing paradigm—conventional science (positivism)—and three “contenders” (p. 27): critical, postpositivism, and constructivism. They are examined in terms of three assumptive areas—*ontology* (what is the nature of reality and being?), *epistemology* (what is the relationship between the knower and the known—how do we come to understand a phenomenon?), and *methodology* (how does the inquirer go about discovering knowledge and developing understanding?) Here, I will briefly present Guba’s contrast in these areas between conventional science (what we have called the scientific method, the offspring of Big Science) and constructivism (see chapter 2).

The *conventional paradigm* has a *realist* ontology that assumes that there

2. It must be said that social work for years has been conscious of its obligation to confront and work with the realities of class, race, gender, and culture over the years. Yet, we still find ourselves splitting hairs over the meaning of cultural diversity and multiculturalism or transculturalism, and we still have some reluctance to examine the “hidden injuries of class” (Rubin, 1976).

is a reality out there, driven by immutable laws and principles that can be discovered. These are timeless and context-free. The epistemology is *objectivist*. The inquirer can and should adopt a distant, neutral, noninteractive posture with the object of the investigation. Self-interest and values and other biases are excluded and do not influence outcomes. Finally, the methodology is *experimental* in that questions (hypotheses) are stated in advance and subjected to tests of validity or falsifiability under carefully controlled conditions. You and I, being social worker researchers, are interested in differences in altruistic behavior between certain groups. We assume that it *does* exist (although the concept, altruism, is a human contrivance), that it operates and reveals itself in a *lawful* way, and that we can remove our own beliefs and emotions about both altruism and the groups that we are studying. But it is important for us to make known why we are interested in this topic; what motives and concerns drive us. In any event, we devise a study that involves administering a behavioral checklist, known to be reliable and designed to measure the perceived degree of altruistic behavior in respondents. We are testing a hypothesis that comes out of our reading of the altruism literature that proposes something like “students who go into social work have a greater degree of perceived altruism than those who go into engineering and business.” This turns out to be what we find; significantly (statistically) more social work students than engineers or business students report altruistic behaviors as defined by our instrument.

Constructivist assumptions run as follows. The ontological assumption is *relativist* in that there are thought to be many realities, constructed through language and relationships, and that all such realities are formed and have a content dependent on the person(s) who interpret them. Epistemologically, the constructivist is a *subjectivist* who believes that the knower and known interact in such a way that whatever the inquiry concludes is a result of the continuing relationship between them. Methodology is *dialectical* and *hermeneutic*. The constructivist believes that all constructions (beliefs, values, perceptions even) are subject to interpretation. These constructions are, in the process of inquiry, subjected to dialectical contrast (in essence, a discourse or conversation between all involved parties about the meaning of things) and comparison until they are refined. Thus, the “findings” that emerge represent a substantial and maybe hard-won consensus between the involved parties. So you and I are at it again, only this time inquiring about altruism as constructivist social work researchers. This time we want to know how student social workers, student engineers, and business majors understand altruism, how they see themselves in terms of that particular understanding, and how they see it being related to their study and future professional work. To do this we are going to interview a few social work students and a few engineering and business students in considerable depth.

Although we might have a general idea and some structured questions we will ask, we will go where the person interviewed takes us. We will at the outset also make clear our own biases. As each interview is completed, we may revise our approach to the next interview and perhaps start the development of a set of interpretive propositions that are subject to revision all during our study. From these we will extract some themes—relatively persistent interpretations and observations of those we interviewed. We will bind these together in the form of a treatise about altruism in this particular context with these individuals. Our conventional study showed that in terms of responses to a questionnaire designed to elicit the self-reported degree of altruistic behaviors that social work students, as we suspected, saw themselves more altruistic than their counterparts in engineering and business. Here, we discovered that engineers, for example, believed they had a heavy strain of altruism in their professional thinking and doing, but it just did not present itself in the way that we usually think of altruism. Building a bridge, resolving a traffic problem, designing a safer jumbo jet, and tackling the problem of air bags and the safety of children were seen by these students as contributions to the well-being of society and the quality of life of many people—acts of altruism. So we came to quite different conclusions and, in the end, our contribution to the “theory” of altruism (see discussion of Kohn [1990] in chapter 3) was to expand the range of its possible meanings.

THEORY, CONCEPT, AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Concepts are ideas; words that reflect our attempts to think about and communicate our experience. The word or concept can be more or less approximate to the phenomenon it reflects: *shovel*, for example. Although there are many kinds of shovels and other concepts can be used—*spade*, for instance—there is little distance between what the word/concept shovel denotes and the reality of shovels in the world. Other concepts and the words or phrases that indicate them are more removed from ordinary experience. The concept *bureaucracy* refers to a set of complicated and dynamic organizational configurations, processes, and structures. Though Max Weber (1947) gave us the first thoughtful and lengthy treatment of the concept and its referents (for instance, organizations in the real world, such as the Catholic Church), his ideas have been examined, revised, amplified, amended, and challenged. In addition, we have developed more common usage of the concept of bureaucracy. If you asked your brother, a colleague, or a guy walking down the street what the meaning of bureaucracy was, it wouldn't be an exegesis on Weber's and other organizational theorists' notions. More likely it would be an emphatic assertion that bureaucracies are top-heavy,

complex, usually public, and often unresponsive organizations. I would not be surprised if the federal government were prominently mentioned in this discourse. So a concept is a linguistic device to epitomize, reflect, and capture actual experience, observations, events, and human experiences.

A concept summarizes complex and dynamic circumstances as well as more straightforward ones. Earl Babbie (1998) says this about concepts: “Although the observations and experiences are real . . . concepts are only mental creations. The terms associated with concepts are merely devices created for the purposes of filing [mentally] and communication” (p. 122). In one sense, every word or phrase is a concept—but it is not the reality. A mistake often made is to confuse the term with the reality it refers to. Or, as Benjamin Whorf (1940) said, “to confuse the map with the territory.” But more important is the idea that our language, any group’s language, is our only way of organizing the natural and human world we inhabit. Whorf gets to the heart of the matter in this quote:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, BUT ITS TERMS ARE ABSOLUTELY OBLIGATORY.” (p. 368) [author’s emphasis]

So Jerome Frank’s idea that paradigms are our “assumptive world” is rooted in the very nature of language. The opportunities for misunderstanding between different language/cultural groups, as you can guess or have already experienced, are abundant. When I say *love*, I am probably referring to individual, romantic love. When my Lebanese friend says *love*, she is probably referring to love of family. When I say *family*, I am likely referring to parents and their children. When an Oglala Sioux says *family*, she may more likely be referring to the tribal community.

Theories, as noted above, are explanatory or descriptive propositions that tie together facts and empirical generalizations. They do this stitching together with the thread of concepts. Grand theories often have a conceptual makeup that is far removed from the experience of daily life (have you hugged your *unconscious* today?). The concepts of middle-range theories are

often closer to our experience—cognitive dissonance does not seem that distant from my recent experience of buying a camera and then wishing, for a time, that I had bought the other camera I was considering. But, among cultures, subcultures, and social classes, opportunities are plentiful for misunderstanding what the concepts of theory actually are meant to refer to and for misunderstanding that comes from translating theory from one culture to another. Katherine Tyson (1994) points out that, in this country, social work has embraced the work of the late Paulo Freire (you may have read parts of his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1973); see chapter 1). Social work practitioners and educators use Freire's concept of conscientization (*conscientização*) frequently in discussing the liberation of oppressed groups and individuals. Often, the idea is taken to mean consciousness raising—moving to a higher level or plane of awareness and consciousness. Conscientization does have that implication. But Freire intended it to mean becoming aware of the social, economic, political institutions, and ideologies that specifically oppress groups and the contradictions and mystification inherent in languages of oppression. Only when the oppressed can see the intrinsic negation and incongruities therein can they begin the work of liberation.

So concepts vary in their complexity and how near they are to our own direct experience. *Breast cancer* is a term that is firmly grounded in the experience of many individuals and families, and all of us understand, in a visceral, emotional, and cognitive way, what it refers to. The meaning of the *quality of life* is much further removed from our experience, although most of us would have some sense of its meaning. It can be elaborated and brought closer to home by detailing its components—physical health, gainful employment, adequate shelter, and so forth. Concepts far removed from direct sensory apprehension are sometimes called constructs. A prominent concept from Karl Marx (Harrington, 1972), alienation and its related ideas, alienated labor and political alienation, are critical to his theory of social class and social class conflict. But it is a long road down from these constructs to the lives of workers who have just experienced a “downsizing” and “outsourcing.”

THEORY AND NARRATIVE

The methodological sophistication and self-consciousness of modern science sometimes obscures the reality that we always mediate the world of experience and the senses with language. “Facts” do not easily or necessarily convert themselves into propositions, and propositions into theories. The landscape of the history and philosophy of science is dotted with a variety of perspectives on the nature of theory and theorizing. There are those who

have believed that we can know the truth unsullied by human intent, bias, social position, interpretation, and motivation; the logical positivists are one such group. (Rudolph Carnap was one of the first; see his article entitled “Testability and Meaning” [1936].) But since the Enlightenment,³ the actual status of observation, fact, and theory has been debated, and several claims have been made. Two are of importance here. First, all facts are theory laden. That is, every observed and designated event, object, or process is only seen, understood, and interpreted through already existing theory (even the logical positivists have a meta-theory about what constitutes knowledge and how to discover what is true) (Bhaskar, 1975). Second, data collected by scientists do not become facts *until* they are interpreted, and the interpretations, as they become more articulate, may eventually stand as theories. Karl Popper, philosopher of science and advocate of the “conjectures and refutations (falsifiability)” approach to science (realism) was often thought, incorrectly, to be a positivist. He insisted that “observation statements . . . are always *interpretations* of the facts observed” (1968). In his interview with Popper toward the end of Popper’s life, John Horgan (1996) recounts

He thus denied the assertion, often made by the logical positivists, that science can ever be reduced to a formal, logical system in which raw data are methodically converted into truth. A scientific theory, Popper insisted, is an invention, an act of creation as profoundly mysterious as anything in the arts. “The history of science is everywhere speculative,” Popper said. “It is a marvelous history. It makes you proud to be a human being.” (p. 36)

As interpretations, theories are often bound to become narrative in form, with central plots, characters or characterizations of people and things, dramatic tension, and a sense of movement and coherence as well as endings. This, of course, is especially true of theories about the human condition. Many conventional theories, however interesting and novel they may seem to us, often celebrate the dominant cultural narratives. For example, theories about the nature and causes of mental disorder often support these themes: (1) the individual is the locus of the problem and the treatment; (2) the individual has a definable deficit of some sort that influences most of his or her behavior and dealings with the world; and (3) the deficit can only be

3. The Enlightenment was that period of time in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when science and philosophy began to flourish and promoted the idea that progress and perfectibility of the human condition were the inevitable by-products of the freeing of the human intellect (Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment* [1969]).

corrected by professional, technical intervention (Gergen, 1994; Sampson, 1988). Here, the narrative is a common one: the troubled individual, struggling in life, probably fighting demons of the past or demons in his brain, finds redemption and salvation, cure and comfort at the hands of doctor, minister, or counselor.

If our cultural conventions as well as our theories are constructions, often with narrative form, then they are contingent—related to circumstance and context. That also means that they can be revised, critiqued, discarded, or amended. These activities may lead to transformation of the way that we think about common methods. New visions and new language may bring new practices (Gergen, 1994; Pfohl, 1992). For example, the strengths approach in a variety of fields (see chapter 3) provides a means to critique and recover from the language and story of “progressive infirmity” that dominates our culture and the mental health field. The strengths and promise narrative is about individuals, communities, families, and groups marshalling their resources, using their wits, and coming together in the pursuit of a better or different life. This new vision came from practitioners, many of whom felt confined by the infirmity narrative. “Rather than separating one’s professional commitments from one’s passions, trying to pry apart fact and value, the constructionist invitation is for a fully expressive professional life—for theories, methods and practices that may realize one’s vision of a better life” (Gergen, 1994, p. 57).

Finally, this debate about the nature of science, about the nature of theory and its relationship to fact, has been very much on social work’s mind since its beginnings as a profession. Two examples will suggest this persistent interest and its related tensions. In 1948, the Social Work Research Group (SWRG) was organized after a workshop on social work research at Case Western University. The SWRG’s avowed purpose was to develop systematic, defensible, and comparable (with other disciplines and professions) approaches to social work research and to bring together all facets of social work research. In a word, members of the group wanted to ensure that social work research was “scientific” and respectable (Maas & Varon, 1949). Some 30 years later, Martha Heineman (1981) set off a continuing and unusually contentious debate about the nature of science, the scientific method, and its influence on then social work profession. In her often raw-boned commentary, she writes:

In the face of findings in the last two decades of the philosophy of science, however, the desire to cling to logical empiricist theories and methodology can be understood psychologically as the wish for a certain, knowable world but should not be mistaken for proof that such a world exists. (p. 393)

The polemical dissension continues today.⁴ It has many different faces, but one that has recently emerged in the development of empowerment approaches to social work practice is the tension between local knowledge and formal knowledge or, as Mary Ellen Kondrat puts it, “Whose knowledge counts?” In answering that question, she claims that

It is not surprising, then, that theories purporting to explain aspects of human life have been shown to systematically underrepresent or misrepresent the voices and experiences of those in less privileged positions. . . . When we promote an understanding of professional practice that explicitly accounts for both formal knowledge and knowledge derived through “lived” cultural experience . . . we are providing an important corrective to our inevitably imperfect efforts at knowledge building and knowledge dissemination. (1995, p. 420)

PART/WHOLE ANALYSIS

Thomas Scheff (1997), wrestling with the problem of actually understanding any human interaction or event as well as ferreting out their meaning as understood by the participants and the influences of the near and far contexts in which they occur, suggests a morphological approach to research. I spend time with it here, although my comprehension of it is limited, because I think it has importance for social work knowledge and practice. This approach was derived from morphological botany, which involves understanding as fully as possible a single plant as a system and then the system of many comparable plants as a community. In human terms, it would mean relating the smallest instance of interaction (e.g., a single exchange—verbal, nonverbal, cognitive, emotional—between people) with the largest wholes (say, how social bonds and attachments are formed between people). The latter might also include understanding how those bonds are broken, say, in family violence or in war (in Bosnia, for example).

The question of text and context here is important. It is virtually impossible to understand the meaning of any exchange between people or text (a dialogue, an argument, a book) without some reasonably clear sense of the relevant historical, biographical, and contemporary cultural/institutional context. Empirical/quantitative scientific methods, the gold standard of modern social science, do not have, alone, the power to determine meaning, nor

4. For a useful and full-bodied account of the social work profession’s struggle with its own understanding of professional knowing and doing, see Katherine Tyson’s *New Foundations for Scientific Social and Behavioral Research* (1994).

are they particularly helpful in understanding the three-way relationship between meaning, text, and context. Empirical studies that employ quantitative⁵ methods usually do not question the meaning of subject's responses to a questionnaire or self-report check list (like the Hamilton Scale for Depression), nor do they ordinarily have methods at their disposal to determine meaning. Qualitative research, the intense investigation of a small range of human interaction or understanding, attempts to interpret the meaning of exchanges, responses, and interactions, but often without understanding the context in which they occur (Scheff, 1997).

C. Wright Mills (1959), in his classic *The Sociological Imagination*, says that such imagination involves

The capacity to shift from one to perspective to another—from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to the comparative assessments to the national budgets of the world. . . . It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self. (p. 7)

Let us say we want to understand the eruption of violence and mayhem in public schools or, more specifically, school shootings and murder, from many vantage points and at many levels of meaning. Our first problem is the most difficult. How can we detach ourselves from the “commonsense” (Geertz, 1983) understanding of the world—both cultural and that of our discipline (social work research). The commonsense is virtually invisible because it is routinized and unobtrusive; we just don't even think about it. The way out, according to Scheff, is the microanalysis of the exchanges between people, the beginning of part/whole analysis. “Microanalysis of interaction . . . estranges the analyst from her own culture. By getting beneath the smooth surface of behavior [the commonsense], it exposes the invisible process and structure that give order and meaning” (p. 231). So our study might well begin with deep analysis of specific though limited verbatim interactions between students in different groups in a given school where a shooting has occurred. How students talk to each other, what they talk about, what language and gestures they use, and how the language is freighted with emotion are all important. We might well look at samples of other exchanges in depth—between students from different groups, between teachers and students, parents, and their adolescents. Then, we gradually move out to look at community perceptions of these disturbing events. Expanding beyond

5. Quantitative research relies on methods and tools for measuring and quantifying (turning into numerical values) variables (phenomena) under study (say, measures of intelligence).

that, we may attempt an analysis and understanding of media and journalistic treatment of the event. The history of these dramatic events in this country might propel us closer to the whole. We might then move to a textual analysis of some policy proposals and programs designed to curb such outbreaks. Even examining how other cultures or subcultures give meaning to these explosive outbreaks would be useful. We are in the laborious process of developing a set of concentric rings of understanding the meaning and text in various contexts.

The reality of embarking on such a study is stupefying. It would require years and scholars and researchers from many disciplines. But the orientation, attitude, and appreciation of part/whole inquiry and theory-making is important. It relates very much to social work's claim, in every instance of helping, of carefully examining person–environment interactions. Part/whole analysis, at least, gives us some ideas about what to look at and how to look. In chapter 7, we critique ecological/systems theory, an approach that purports to do part/whole analysis of a kind (although it is not called that nor is it as rigorous as Scheff's proposal).

In the rest of this chapter and in the next, let us turn to some of the more influential theories (narratives) for social work practice.

PSYCHODYNAMIC THEORY

The influence of Sigmund Freud and psychoanalytic theory and practice on American culture and society would be hard to overstate. The technical theory and operations of classical psychoanalysis have diminished in scope over the years; the number of psychoanalysts who practice classical or newer versions of psychoanalysis is modest, at best, compared to the 300,000 professionals (200,000 of them social workers, by the way) in the field of mental health. But Freud's influence extends far beyond the boundaries of a theory and practice of psychotherapy. Fans and critics alike have argued that many of his ideas and their offshoots have burrowed their way into every corner of our culture (Malcolm, 1981; Reiff, 1966; Torrey, 1992), for example, the idea that common practices toward and behaviors of children, such as nursing, weaning, toilet training, setting limits, displaying affection, and tickling, are not innocent or innocuous. Rather, they can arouse primitively sexualized or aggressive feelings, so they harbor the potential of creating difficulties in later stages of development and, ultimately, misery, self-doubt, "neurotic behavior" in adulthood if the caretaker—usually the mother—makes mistakes. But Freud's most enduring contribution to American culture (which he, in some ways, loathed) may have been to bring sex and sexuality into the living room and salon and not stay locked in the closet of respectability

and civility. Havelock Ellis, one of the first sexologists in America said, in 1939, “Whatever we may ultimately come to think of psychoanalysis as a technical method, it supplied an immense emphasis to the general recognition and acceptance of the place of sex in life.” (p. 315) (And, I might add, helped Ellis to have a smashingly successful career.)

In terms of theory and practice, the “most original and radical discovery . . . is that we invent each other according to early blueprints,” stated Janet Malcolm (1981, p. 6), an admirer of psychoanalysis. That is to say, we carry around in our unconscious mind memories, associated conflicts, and wishes that have their origin in our early relationships with parents, siblings, and caretakers. So our responses, say, to a boss, a teacher, a psychotherapist, or a potential spouse or life partner are threaded through the warp and woof of these deeply buried fragments of earlier relationships. The technical term for this is *transference*. This means that if you have a seriously emotional reaction to your psychotherapist or social worker unwarranted by circumstances, these inappropriate but powerful and surprising feelings spring from your unconscious and the memories of prior and potent relationships buried there. The memories are visceral and in the form of distorted fantasies and perceptions of other people. You dream of having a sexual relationship with your therapist or have a working fantasy about that. Although the sense of it is contemporary, and maybe embarrassing or frustrating, the energy and emotion of it are attached to “ghosts” from your past. Relationship is “at best an uneasy truce between powerful fantasy systems. . . . We have to grope for each other through a dense thicket of absent others. We cannot see each other plain. A horrible kind of predestination hovers over each new attachment we form” (Malcolm, 1981, p. 6).

A related idea that Freud embellished and heightened, and that Freud regarded as central to his theory, was the concept of the unconscious and the importance of unconscious determinants of behavior and motivation. In his view, much if not most of the energy and motivation that drives us, the feelings that grip us, and the fantasies that lure us, come from our unconscious. In his masterpiece, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud makes an exceptional and elaborate argument that all dreams are wish-fulfillment dreams (unacceptable wishes to the conscious mind) filtered through the distortions of dream life. Dreams have a manifest content that superficially seems related to events of the day. But, Freud argued, they also have a latent content, symbolic and imagistic, “whose significance far surpasses that of manifest dream-content” (Freud, 1900/1952b). Freud thought that dreams were the avenue to understanding repressed wishes, impulses, and conflicts and that the method of free association he invented was the means for uncovering the meaning of the disguised dream contents. Psychoneurotics—those individuals who are afflicted with psychological symptoms and the associated sapping of psychic energy and shrinking of conscious awareness—suffer

more than others from what came to be known as the Oedipus conflict, an unacceptable wish repressed early in life. "Falling in love with one parent and hating the other forms a part of the permanent stock of psychic impulses which arise early in childhood, and are of such importance as the material of subsequent neuroses" (Freud, 1900/1952b, p. 246).

If we accept Freud's notion that most of our behavior is determined, not accidental, and certainly not a product of reason and contemplation, you can see that he put us at the mercy of our unconscious mind. "Sometimes we suffer desperately, would do anything, but are lost, see no way. We cast about, distract ourselves, search, but can find no connection between the misery we feel and the way we live" (Wheeler, 1973, p. 111). How many times do we find ourselves unaccountably morose or suddenly anxiety-ridden about a task or an intimate relationship that never before caused us worry? How many times do we repeat behaviors or get caught in painful or difficult relationships that we know we should eschew? Our unconscious, trying to relive the past, resolve the knots of painful conflicts never untangled, or satisfy an appetite never sated, propels us to patterns of behavior that often end up in dissatisfaction, harm, or disappointment. We do not know the source of either our misery or our compulsion to behave in this way. Interestingly enough, Freud's development of the idea of the unconscious was dramatically related to a period of inscrutable suffering in his own life.

Freud's own uncovering of the human unconscious was in part his creative way of mastering hostile ambivalence toward his ineffective father, an ambivalence that surfaced at the time of his father's approaching death. Freud branded himself a budding Oedipus⁶ and therefore a guilty perpetrator, not a victim, of childhood pain. But beneath the surface of Freud's conscious statements lay his very real contempt for his father. . . . Freud's self-deception [with regard to his feelings about his father] produced a book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, that won him immortality and raised the consciousness of humanity to the fact that children do lust after their opposite-sex parents. (Vaillant, 1993, p. 92)

It is to Freud's credit, however, that he was able to identify human beings' extravagant capacity for self-deception and self-delusion and to identify those processes that make it possible (generally, the ego defenses that

6. Shorn of its finer points, the Oedipus drama played out by every boy, according to Freud, is that in which he attempts to replace and usurp the father's power and sexuality in relationship to the mother. Freud's "discovery" of the Oedipal conflict came at a time when he was suffering from a number of disturbing psychological and physical symptoms that he could not understand. The discovery of his own Oedipus drama unleashed a torrent of creative power.

we will discuss later). As Vaillant points out, he did this but never uncovered his own core deception about his relationship with his father. And, as we will see soon, this deception eventually caused him to ignore the reality of his female patients' reported seductions by their fathers and to recast them as fantasy, unacceptable childhood wishes for sexual relationships with or revenge against powerful parents.

In the classical Freudian lexicon, all psychic phenomena "are shaped and determined by the need to have a wish or impulse gratified, a conflict resolved, a painful memory exorcised, a feeling dissolved and made painless" (Malcolm, 1981). The battle for our souls and sanity takes place in our mind, given grist from the mill of our earliest struggles to establish ourselves as human beings and distinctive individuals. The basic struggle is between those untamed impulses and urges we are born with. As infants and young children, we want to have our way no matter what, to exercise our primitive and urgent sexual and aggressive cravings. These are primal and wordless, mostly organismic.⁷ In the interest of civilizing and taming these impulses (the id, Freud called them), society, usually in the guise of parents, sets about to stem the tide and direction of these atavistic whims and drives. Of necessity, they are driven underground.

It is the alliance with the realities of the world represented by parents, caretakers, and the culture itself that pushes children into developing two other elements of the psychic infrastructure that become, for the most part, agencies of their conscious minds—the ego and the superego. Also, the fact that perception and sensation are largely conscious experiences gives content to the conscious mind from the very start. The ego rules as the chief executive officer of the mind, and it is still regarded in much the same way as Freud defined (discovered?) it. "Goaded on by the id, hemmed in by the superego [conscience], and rebuffed by reality, the ego struggles to cope with its economic task by reducing forces and influences which work in it and upon it to some kind of harmony" (Freud, 1923/1952a). Vaillant (1993) puts it more simply, "The self-preservative executive ego, [is] the agile rider of Plato's⁸ two horses: selfless conscience and selfish instinct" (p. 7). The superego, formed later in childhood, is roughly the conscience, composed of those prohibitions, prescriptions, and ideals conveyed by society, through parents and caretakers, and whittled by the child's own immature mind.

7. Organismic means experienced in and through the body, much like our emotions are—whatever else they are—bodily sensations. Infants and little children do not have a very big dictionary, otherwise.

8. Plato describes the unlucky charioteer who must control two horses, one upright and the lover of honor and propriety, the other the intemperate, insolent one not given to respond to commands. The ego, here, is that unfortunate charioteer.

This is the essence, then, of the original psychodynamic view. We will discuss later more contemporary views of the ego and the mechanisms of defense—very useful ideas for understanding people and helping them understand themselves.

Another element of Freudian thought that has evolved and become a cornerstone of psychodynamic thought—as well as developmental theory, educational practices, and even social policy—is that events, relationships, and trauma that occur in childhood, even very early childhood, can be decisive in determining the kinds of adults we become. In mental health, for example, it is a commonplace that when parents develop patterns of relating to their children that are dismissive, unpredictable, disorganized, and perhaps even abusive, then psychopathology in adulthood is sure to follow. No longer unusual (or suppressed) is the tale of a woman with unfathomable bouts of serious depression who recalls, with some aversion and only gradually, that as a child she was systematically sexually brutalized by a lecherous father. Tormented nightmares, sudden and unaccounted-for bouts of tears, consuming anger at an innocent friend, the soothing effects of alcohol, wariness in close relationships—the woman has been experiencing these behaviors for some time. But plummeting into the quagmire of depression is new. Psychoanalytic theory would have our depressed woman look not so much around her as within her and behind her (the past). We discover that anger has been smoldering beneath her outward demeanor for years. Its targets are displaced (it should be directed at the father), and the feeling is separated from the events that caused it (the continuing abuse and violation of the vulnerable self and body). At other times, the feeling is muted, and the sense of self is altered through dissociating (drinking heavily, in her case).

As a way of demonstrating just how human and fallible the process of building a theory can be, let us take a brief look at how Freud came to change his belief that the stories of women who recalled being sexually seduced and abused by a parent as a child were factual remembrances to a belief in which they were seen as fantasies. Think, too, just how critical this shift has been in the lives of women struggling against the remembrance of the violation of their own bodies as children. It was just as critical to the foundation of psychoanalytic thinking that Freud was to develop.

In October 1885, Freud went to Paris to study under a man whose work he deeply admired, Jean-Paul Charcot. While he was there, he became exposed to the work of some of the French theorists and clinicians in forensic medicine. The French were the first to document that, indeed, there were many instances in which children had been sexually and physically seduced, assaulted, and brutalized, often by a parent. Charcot, himself, had written with a colleague an article claiming that people who engage in sexual assaults have a kind of moral/instinctual illness that leaves their intellect intact. The

individual who first made this public was a young, theoretically brilliant analyst trainee, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (1984, 1991). Masson was appointed in 1981 as the curator of the Freudian Archives in the Library of Congress. Shortly thereafter, he became editor-in-chief of a series of translations of Freud's previously unpublished letters to be published by Harvard University Press. The latter position required him to spend time in Anna Freud's (Freud's daughter) house in London where many of the letters were. He stumbled across evidence that Freud, indeed, was familiar with the three most important works on the sexual seduction and assault of children of that time (Auguste Tardieu, Paul Brouardel, and Paul Bernard). It is also probable that Freud, while he was in Paris, attended many of the clinical autopsies conducted by Brouardel of children who had been sexually violated. Furthermore, Freud was also exposed to the literature of those, in France, who were convinced that dissimulation by children of sexual assault was common, more common than actual abuse. So, at some point, early in his career, as he constructed the theory of psychoanalysis, heavily reliant on the notion of infantile sexuality, he abandoned the notion that the women he analyzed or studied actually were seduced as little children by adults, usually parents. Rather, he theorized that these memories were infantile fantasies and wishes, fantasies of control, of consuming the parent's interest, less sexual in real purpose than in magically being accorded dominion over the powerful one. This allowed Freud to proceed down the path of creating a theory based on wish fulfillment (often sexual and aggressive) and its frustration in the real world and of the Oedipal conflict as the critical developmental moment (between the ages of 3 and 5, he thought) in which these unconscious forces and intimate realities clash and begin resolution. But the Oedipal conflict resolution is an uneasy truce and is usually neurotic (psychic misery characterized by a variety of symptoms such as denial or repression) (Brenner, 1973; Vaillant, 1993). Why Freud changed his mind and altered the course of our understanding of the damage of incest is uncertain. But Masson suggests, somewhat cynically, that had he persisted in touting the reality of seduction, he would have been ostracized and maybe penniless. Again, theory and story, reality and creativity have a sometimes troubled and often complicated relationship.

The Mechanisms of Defense

Many branches grow from the trunk of classical psychoanalytic theory. One is modern ego psychology theory. It is not a monolith—there are varieties here. But the roots of the idea of how the ego develops and what

barriers to maturity exist are quite similar between various versions of ego psychology.

It was Freud's daughter, Anna, who really articulated and extended the idea of mechanisms of defense. Her book, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (1937), a book she gave her father in 1936 on his eightieth birthday, provides the foundation for the eventual elaboration of what has become known as ego psychology. Her father had, over the years, identified several mechanisms of defense. But it was Anna who drew these ideas together to make a more coherent theory of ego and defense. She had begun making notes in 1934 for a new psychology of the ego and came to believe that the defenses were more important for understanding the evolution and functioning of the ego than her father did. Unlike her father, she also believed that defenses have a variety of psychic and environmental sources. She was convinced, too, that defenses forged out of anguish, anger, disappointment, and distress can take remarkable and healthy configurations from altruism to creativity. She was the first to begin the construction of a hierarchy of defenses and to refine the idea that defenses had adaptive purposes beyond unconscious conflict resolution or diluted wish fulfillment.

To leap forward in time, the work of Heinz Hartmann (1958), Robert White (1952), Erik Erikson (1963), and Jane Loevinger (1976) have all contributed to the evolution of ego psychology. In social work, the writing of Howard Parad (1958), Florence Hollis (1972), and Eda Goldstein (1995), among others, extended the theory for use by social workers. But the most compelling and perhaps useful articulation of mechanisms of defense and ego functioning comes, I think, from George Vaillant. Not only has he put a more human face on the idea of defenses, but his longitudinal studies and analysis of other such studies have demonstrated, in the lives of many people, the plausibility of defenses. The following discussion relies heavily on his ideas (1977, 1993).

The ego, as we saw that Freud suggested, serves many masters. In balancing these persistent responsibilities and the inherent conflict between them, the ego develops a variety of adaptive strategies and coping devices. These are patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving that emerge as the ego struggles to manage the insistent demands of conscience, people, desires and impulses, and reality. *Conscience* (the superego of classical psychoanalysis) contains our identifications with our cultural and societal norms, pro- and prescriptions, and our own emerging ego ideals the introjection—taking into our identity—of elements of people we admire and to which we aspire. *People* refers to those individuals “to whom we are peculiarly attached but with whom we are ‘not at peace’; we can’t live with them and we can’t live without them” (Vaillant, 1993, p. 31). *Desire* refers to those intense emotions and feelings, those urges and wishes that impel us or which we attach to

objects (people and things that attract or frighten us). These range from being fiercely felt to being muted and not fully in awareness (lust, rage, grief, anguish, love, for example). *Reality* pertains to those facets of our external environment that pose challenges to our ability to adapt: changes and transitions that come too fast, too hard, and too unpredictably. To restore some degree of psychic balance, then, your ego has to distort, ignore, or reshape one or more of these four sources of challenge and tension. Defenses also alter the connection between your emotions and ideas and between you and the person toward whom these feelings are directed. As an interesting confluence of ideas, recall our discussion of the brain in chapter 4. Many of the links between affect and idea occur along the mesolimbic pathway and the cingulate gyrus, uniting parts of the limbic system with the frontal lobes. Furthermore, the intensity of emotion, the recognition of emotion, and the connection of emotion with memories occur in the limbic areas and critically involve the hippocampus. One could draw some parallels between id, ego, and superego and reptilian brain, limbic system, and cerebral cortex.

The erected defense system is largely unconscious, and its purpose is to master and manage stress and conflict (Vaillant says “the ego is to the mastery of stress as the immune system is to the mastery of tuberculosis” [1993, p. 11]). Most of the time the defenses involve a distortion of the four arenas of life discussed; they alter inner and outer life in a variety of different ways, often quite creatively. Most importantly, defenses are “healthy”; that is, however bizarre or troubling they are seen by colleagues, relatives and friends, *they are attempts at adaptation to long-term challenges or abrupt demands* on the individual (Vaillant, 1993, pp. 17–25).

People may use many defenses. At different times in their lives, they may employ a different mix of defenses, depending on their outer circumstances and their own developing ego. When is a defense merely a coping device and when does it become pathological? Generally speaking, if a defense is used inflexibly, even exclusively, to the detriment or diminishing of other defenses; if it is a response more to inner tension, conflict, and impulse than to external realities; if its content seriously distorts the present; if it shrinks rather than just limits gratification; if it dams rather than re-channels the expression of feelings and remembrance of ideas; if it occurs in a context where its expression is no longer appropriate, then it may be pathological (Brenner, 1973; Vaillant, 1977).

THE HIERARCHY OF DEFENSES

Defense mechanisms range from the healthy to the neurotic to the immature to the psychotic. Healthy defenses are not like the other three. Their implicit solutions to the conflicts between the four areas of tension, although

unconscious, would be hard to surpass. Not only are they creative, but they preserve a large degree of psychic energy to be used in daily life, they generally involve behaviors that are personally gratifying and socially productive, and, to a small degree, but more than any other group of defenses, they have elements of conscious choice. Humor, anticipation, suppression, sublimation, and altruism are the most common. Altruism, for example, allows you to do for others what you might have desired for yourself. Although you might deny yourself certain pleasures in the name of altruism, you do so with joy and gratification. You may have come into social work as a mostly unconscious, budding demonstration of altruism. Smarting from parents who neglected you, angry at your abandonment feelings, which are largely out of your current awareness, but clearly anxious about your acceptance by other people and determined to provide some redress for yourself, you enter a school of social work. As you study and partake of the field experience, you find yourself drawn to the idea of working with children who have had their relationship with their parents severed for a variety of reasons. You delight in helping these children find the best possible homes or placements. Not only that, after you graduate, you and your partner open your home to hard-to-place children and adolescents. Although you have a conscious sense of how this relates to your past life, you do not identify what you do as altruistic nor do you necessarily see it as related to your own disappointments and hurts as a child. Others often see those who use mature defenses as admirable, likeable, and attractive—morally and interpersonally.

Neurotic defenses allow the user less energy to be used in managing the demands of everyday life and relationships. There is also a sense that there is something a little painful or disappointing about one's inner experience and outer connections. The self-deceptions involved in neurotic mechanisms are more than those of healthy mechanisms, but not anywhere near as dramatic of those who employ psychotic or immature mechanisms. These neurotic mechanisms alter feelings and ideas but not so dramatically that the user is so removed from the conflicts that confront her or him. Observers do not see much wrong here, but those who use these mechanisms are sometimes suffering inside. These mechanisms include some very familiar ones such as displacement, intellectualization, repression, and reaction formation. Let us discuss reaction formation because, as Vaillant points out, it bears a little similarity to altruism. Reaction formation turns a wish into its opposite for what are perceived as legitimate, even noble, reasons. Reaction formation might encourage you to care for someone whom you really might detest (for highly personal and largely unconscious motives). Our social worker discussed above may decide to go into a field of practice where she works with neglectful and abusive parents. But she does so without the

dynamic energy and the great sense of pleasure that she had using healthy mechanisms. And it is likely that the energy expended in maintaining this alteration of wish and object will leave her with less tolerance for intense and lively intimate relationships. She may eventually find herself burning out, but she cannot move to another field of practice—her defensive structure at this point won't allow it.

Immature defense mechanisms are, not to put too fine a point on it, a pain in the butt for those who are exposed to users of such defenses. These are common in children and adolescents, as the name suggests. These, in the short run, cause no distress for the user but can precipitate everything from outrage, agitation, and revenge to garden variety irritation to the observer, especially if one has an intimate or required relationship with the individual. Many of the behaviors associated with these defenses involve violations of conventional morality or the law. Oddly enough, though they can drive others to distraction, they also have a peculiar way of binding those others to the user. These defenses

Get under other people's skin. . . . [and] help the user maintain an illusion of interpersonal constancy and attachment. The suspicious bigot, the schizoid dreamer, the passive aggressive adolescent, and the reproachful hypochondriac all hug their love/hates tight even as they hold them at arm's length. (Vaillant, 1993, p. 58)

In projection, which bears some resemblance to altruism, individuals project their own unacceptable feelings (say anger at their parents for abandoning them emotionally) onto others. In the case above, although our social worker may work with parents who have failed to fully provide for their children, she determines that their anger at their children or the limitations imposed by having children is a critical element in promoting their parenting flaws. She works with that anger, but because it is not necessarily a part of the actual parents' experience, she has bound herself to her clients as they work to find and metabolize the phantom anger. She also gets angry with them when they cannot "find" or "admit" this supposed anger and resentment of their children.

Psychotic defenses are those that profoundly alter the perception and understanding of the external world. Reality is dramatically redefined in a way that is idiosyncratic and possibly harmful. Although a delusion may seem grandiose, the round of daily life of someone using these defenses is sorely narrowed. Psychotic defenses are seen in daily life in children, in our own fantasies and day dreams, and even in some creative endeavors. But unlike someone grappling with psychosis, we are not bound to them or hemmed in by them. It may be that on occasion these defenses bring about or are brought about by changes in brain chemistry because they respond

to pharmaceuticals more than exhortation. Psychotic projection, distortion, denial, and delusion are those mechanisms that we speak of. (The hierarchy is discussed in Vaillant, 1993, pp. 28–75; 1977, pp. 75–90.)

The idea of mechanisms of defense is a useful one in trying to understand behaviors or patterns of behavior that seem self-defeating and destructive or that fly in the face of the demands of everyday life. But they also point us to ways of understanding the exceptional, the creative, and the magnificent in the affairs of human beings. They bind us together because—whether it is our struggle to reach out to other people, our fascination with the mechanical, our poetic flair, or our mistrust of strangers—they are all about adaptation and the necessity to put desire into the real work of the world in our real historical time (Kovel, 1981).

A POSTMODERN NOTE

There have been many offshoots from the Freudian sprout, from object-relations theory to radical Marxist psychoanalysis, from self-psychology to the varied psychologies of Freud's original disciples (Jung, Horney, Adler, Rank). In recent years, there has been a small but interesting attempt to understand Freudian theory as metaphorical and constructed. Donald Spence (1987), a major spokesperson for a paradigm change in psychoanalytic thought and practice, puts it this way:

The central issue facing us [psychoanalysis] at the present time is not one of confirmation or disconfirmation—a metaphor, after all, can never be validated—but, rather, which metaphors to choose and whether they facilitate or interfere with the discovery of clinical wisdom. Whatever metaphors we finally adopt, it is important to realize they are functioning primarily as models . . . which allows us to see certain sorts of phenomena and certain kinds of causal relationships that would otherwise go unnoticed. But the paradox is this: Their power as an aid to comprehension is directly proportional to our awareness of their metaphoric nature. (p. 4)

The same might well be said about all theories that “explain” elements of the human condition.

Critique of Psychodynamic Theory

The critiques of psychoanalytic/psychodynamic theory have fallen around two central points (there are others, of course). First, the idea that early familial experience is central to the evolution of adult personality does

not seem to hold very well in terms of evidence. We discussed earlier the importance of genetic factors: no matter what percentage of influence genes have (depending on the trait or behavior pattern, maybe from 30 to 60 percent), much room exists for environmental influences. But the fact remains that children raised in the same family are very different, maybe not much more alike, along certain dimensions than children selected randomly. The similarities that do remain seem more easily attributed to genes and constitutional factors. Children in the same family have different relationships with their parents and with each other, and they are very sensitive to the meaning of those differences for themselves. Future mental illness as adults seems hardly attributable, given these factors (the idea of the non-shared environment of siblings and its interaction with genetic influences has been researched heavily in the past few years), to the intense, emotional, and perhaps toxic influences of a parent or parents in early childhood. These influences have an effect, of course, but they are tempered by contingency (luck), the child's perception of things and his or her place in the world, and environmental factors (social, cultural, and both small and epochal happenings in the child's daily world) (Plomin, 1990; Torrey, 1992). For example, the extensive negative effect of poverty on the health, well-being, comfort, education, and safety of a child seems far more influential on the child's mental health than, say, some sort of noxious parental influence. Of course, parents do have an effect. Their values and beliefs can influence how a child's personality and temperament are expressed. They can make a significant contribution to the safety and well-being of a child. And they can provide an intimate environment of respect, security, sincerity, and predictability, all of which can be beneficial for a child. Extremely harmful and destructive parental behaviors can seriously alter the behavior and personality of children. But in more children than we might expect, these circumstances—whether extreme because of illness, serious psychosocial trauma, or abuse—have much less of an effect than expected. So, one continuing challenge to the Freudian legacy is based on the variability and range of influences that affect how children are and how they turn out. The fact that more children do okay than might be expected, given the untoward circumstances that many children have to live with, is a tribute to the hardiness of the human spirit and the range of factors in the world of a child that may provide a life jacket in a raging sea of troubles.

A second critique turns on what Russell Jacoby (1997) referred to as social amnesia. There was, in Freudian thought, a hefty critique of bourgeois society, a trenchant revealing of the madness of social relationships and an exposing of the vast repression of psychological, biological, and even moral capacities of humans by social institutions and those who would retain political and social power for themselves. Freud and some of his followers who

revised his thought extended this critique of society and social arrangements and the sociohistorical costs of becoming civilized. They also thought that the conventional wisdom, common sense, was a means of denying the realities and terrors. Freudian theory, at its best, was a “stinging critique of social conditioning” (Becker, 1968, p. 150). In order to tame the anxieties of living, society offers, through parents and other institutions, the means for giving up the full range of possibilities for being human, for the narrower, socially conforming self. Over the years, however, this Freudian message has been lost. After coming to America, psychoanalytic and psychodynamic thought over the years lost, among other things, the inherent dialectical (the continuing tension between the energies of the self and the repressions of society) message in Freud. In its place, a subjective reductionism (all can be found in the mind and the unconscious ultimately) and a kind of hopeful and positive spin on the human condition (that Freud did not intend) have emerged. Lessen repression (individual by individual—through therapy, maybe education) and we reach a kind of Nirvana, an Eden of expressiveness and sensuality. But we ignore, in this project, the institutional and political need for repression and subjugation of human organismic energies. This would lead us to a more dangerous, politically active stance that we dare not take. What we see around us today—the open portrayal of sexual and violent scenes in media, even in real life—is not the result of the undoing of repression. Rather, it is the result of the lack of social and political avenues of real transformation of instinctual energies and repressed human possibilities (Jacoby, 1997; Masson, 1991; Torrey, 1992) Where Freud and some of his later followers (perhaps along with Marxists) may have led us down the path of true social and psychological revolution, we have instead been led down the path of therapy and the healing of the emotional hurts of the mind and its past.

M and M Dialogue

MEREDITH: I really want to clear something up here. What you said about creationists irritated me a little. I consider myself fairly religious. No fanatic but I am a Christian. It sounded to me like you think creationists are kind of stupid. I don't believe that the earth is only 10,000 or 4,004 years old, whatever. But I do believe that the miracle of life, the universe, cannot be explained very well without the hand of God.

MITCHELL: I'm not here to pass judgment on any religious belief. The point of what I was saying was, if we define theory too loosely or too arbitrarily it causes problems. Creation scientists have two beliefs, in this regard, that I think should be called into question. First, and most important, is their misrepresentation of evolutionary theory. Evolutionary

theory accounts for thousands of replicated observations—facts—far better than anything we have constructed so far. There is no contest here. Second, while the literal interpretation of the story of creation may be beautiful, beguiling, and instructive; there is no evidentiary support for its status as a theory—using the usual scientific definition of theory.

MEREDITH: But didn't you say that all theories are constructions? Couldn't the story of creation qualify as that kind of construction? A sort of narrative tale that does explain some things?

MITCHELL: Yes, I did say that. But as a construction it has to still explain or describe in detail, observations, facts, or empirical generalizations. The Bible cannot explain the findings of carbon dating as well as some recent astronomical discoveries in the galaxies that the earth is billions of years old, maybe even older than we thought.

MEREDITH: I think I see, but I am going to have to mull this over. Something just occurred to me. Two things actually. The first thing is, the story of evolution is so remarkable, so complicated, almost beyond human comprehension, wouldn't there have to be some sort of divine force, some almighty, all-knowing grand plan?

MITCHELL: I cannot possibly say. But if that is the case, I can live with that. Many scientists, as a matter of fact, have found the hand of God in the magnificence of their discoveries. In fact, I am always surprised at the number of scientists and theorists who see a divine instrument at work. Stephen Hawking once referred to the universe as "the mind of God." Of course, plenty of scientists think of themselves as atheists.

MEREDITH: My other idea has to do with Freudian theory. I sure agree with you that it is elaborate and, in some ways, a magnificent accomplishment. But you said that someone said it is more like a work of art than a scientific theory. So how is it different than the creation story?

MITCHELL: Tough question. First, it is rooted in observation. Freud's work with his patients, but even before that, his analysis of himself were both thoroughgoing. His inductions about dreams, slips of the tongue, repetition compulsions, the primitive eroticism of children, however bizarre they may seem to others, all came together in his theory. That is, he was able to explain them in a painstaking and ever evolving fashion. And they were always rooted in experience. The problem is that it has been hard, using the scientific method, to independently find proofs of many of his concepts and propositions. But the idea of ego mechanisms of defense has found some grounding in research. The most compelling being the studies and reanalysis of other studies done by George Vaillant. Also, the intense and often angry response of some intellects to the basic revolutionary political and social nature of his ideas suggests that he may have struck a nerve.

MEREDITH: Okay. Nice try. But I think that I am moving to the idea that maybe the difference between theory and stories or whatever may be a really hard distinction to draw.

MITCHELL: Frankly, I think it is too. But I believe that is mostly true about so-called “grand theories.” More modest theories, like many in social psychology for example, seem much more hospitable to empirical test. Attraction theory, attribution theory, cognitive dissonance that we discussed all have a fairly impressive array of research supporting at least elements of them.

MEREDITH: But is research limited in just how deeply it can plumb the complexities of human behavior? You mentioned that in social work there is a pretty big debate about that.

MITCHELL: My personal opinion is that research into the human condition is limited by a number of factors. Things like the influence of social, historical context on individuals (is adolescence or mental illness the same in 1930 as today or the same in Rwanda and Dublin?). How close can instruments of measurement get us to the phenomena we are studying? What about the inherent value statements that lurk in theories or even in the questions that we ask? And everything we do is mediated by language and the deeply embedded cultural texts and metaphors we carry with us.

MEREDITH: So maybe we should just chuck the whole enterprise. Given my performance in research class so far that would really be helpful to me.

MITCHELL: My guess is you’ll do fine in research class. But, for example, if we want to study how AIDS is spreading, the survey and epidemiological methods of public health research is invaluable. But even there, we confront some tough questions. How do we identify who has AIDS, for example? But if we want to find out what the experience of being infected with the virus in its full blown state is like, we are in a different realm and may have to rely on intense conversations with some sufferers, journalistic and artistic discourses and presentations about this, and so forth. We still may be a distance away from capturing or understanding any individual’s distinctive experience with this virus.

MEREDITH: I’m going to have to go in a minute. But I have one more thought. As you talked about altruism as a mechanism of defense and talked about a woman who got into social work because of turning a difficult and painful experience into something that was golden for someone else in a similar place, I really thought about myself. My Dad was a great guy in some ways, but very punitive and unpredictable in others. He hurt me more than once—usually more psychologically than physically. It never occurred to me that those experiences were important in my choosing social work—especially the idea of working with

families and kids. But as you talked about it, it really struck something inside of me. I'm going to do some more thinking about this. It is important to me.

MITCHELL: I'm sure it is. Shall we talk again?

MEREDITH: Sure.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Theories: Part II

Scientific inquiry is “unsettling work” and theory is “unsettling practice.”

—ADRIENNE CHAMBON ON MICHEL FOUCAULT

From chapter 6 it should be clear that there are many ways to think about theory and its role in understanding human nature and the human condition and in guiding professional knowing and doing. Theory as narrative, theory as ideology, theory as authoritative claim, theory as collective construction, theory as hypothesis, and theory as explanation all, in various combinations, have been asserted as the nature of the beast. But, in one sense, the test of any theory for a social work practitioner seeking some wisdom to guide practice is the extent that it can unravel complex human experiences; it has some confirmed capacity to explicate the unfamiliar, surprising, or unknown; it informs particular aspects of professional practice; it upholds and reflects social work’s core values; and it can generously incorporate the views and meanings of the clients we serve. In this chapter, we will tour three theories that have had varying degrees of impact on social work practice: ecological (systems) theory, cognitive theory, and radical/critical theory. In a sense, I am using the word theory loosely because these views might be regarded as models, conceptual frameworks, or clusters of various theoretical propositions. But what should be our concern here, as with our discussion of psychodynamic theory, is how useful, how relevant, how poignant, and how revealing of human behavior the theory is.

ECOLOGICAL THEORY

Ecological theory has many forebears in sociology, psychology, biology, botany, engineering, and anthropology. Its infancy was in general systems theory, but its birth was in botany. Sir Arthur Tansley (1871–1955) was an English botanist who, with others, founded the British Ecological Society—the first such organization in the world. The word ecosystem is his and is based upon his recognition that animals and plants, in any given biosphere (habitat), live in extraordinary dependence on each other and on the nonliving world as

well (Odum, 1997; Tansley, 1935). I suspect it is the notion of transactions between and interdependence of all the elements of a given environment that has drawn social work to the idea of ecology and ecosystems. Ecological theory¹ has long been associated with social work's quest for a knowledge base compatible with its values, interests, and appreciations. The search for a foundation generous enough to house the range of its practices and vital interests, one that would provide a sense of unity of purpose and coherence of perspective for the profession, has long been social work's hope (Bartlett, 1970; Gordon, 1969; Meyer, 1983). In addition, social work has continually advertised itself as a profession that works both sides of the psychosocial street (and the street itself). Its interest is in understanding the elegant and often befuddling interactions and transactions between people and their environments and the relationship between human development and environmental supports and barriers. Because "ecological thinking focuses on the reciprocity of person-environment exchanges, in which each shapes and influences the other over time" (Germain & Gitterman, 1996, p. 7), the ecological perspective has been touted as the signal theoretical magnet drawing to it social work's various interests and values. Such a viewpoint nourishes the sense that, more than any other profession, social work regards the human condition holistically.

Stress and Adaptation

The principal fascination of the ecological perspective is the binding together of people and their environments. The ecological framework seeks to understand how and how well people adapt to the challenges of their natural, built (physical, human-made constructions), and social environments. This framework also requires an analogous concern about the abundance and quality of resources and opportunities these environments provide for the safety, growth, development, and health of individuals and families. The definition of purpose of the social work profession is often couched in language that is ecological in nature: "To promote or restore a mutually beneficial interaction between individuals and society in order to improve the quality of life for everyone" (Minahan, 1981, p. 6).

In considering the nature of person-environment fit, adaptation is a pivotal idea. Neither an adjustment nor merely a passive response to environmental challenges and changes, adaptation is an active, dynamic process.

1. There is a long and unresolved debate over whether ecological theory is a theory or merely a framework or perspective. See Jerome Wakefield's two-part critique of ecosystems (1996).

It proceeds from individual, family, or group decisions, choices, and actions to strive for a better accommodation between needs, hopes, and capacities and the contingencies and conditions of the environment (Germain, 1991). Adaptation is also spurred by the need to respond to subtle and dramatic, sudden or gradual changes in the contours of one's environment. Robert W. White (1974) makes some classic distinctions between the kinds of adaptive moves made by people. *Defenses* are adaptive struggles wherein perceived peril or real attack are central elements. A sense of danger and anxiety runs high. Defenses forged out of such conditions are often relatively inflexible and usually not a matter of conscious choice (very much like the neurotic defense mechanisms discussed in chapter 6). Imagine an individual facing for the first time the sudden possibility of the destruction wrought by a natural disaster—a tornado, let's say. For this individual, existing adaptive capacities are deluged with anxiety and terror. Vigilance intensifies. The tornado passes nearby, wreaking havoc and the destruction of physical structures—parts of homes and cars flying through the air, winds howling like banshees, the sounds of the physical world coming apart. Luckily this individual isn't hurt, just stunned, displaying what has been referred to as the disaster syndrome. Were you to see her at the site of the catastrophe, she would appear dazed and disoriented, numb and unresponsive, wandering aimlessly perhaps through the rubble of her neighborhood. Months and years later, this dissociative response (the splitting up of emotion, memory, and behavior) to the tragedy and its memory still lingers. This kind of numbing may well characterize the individual's response to other life challenges, thus giving it a kind of cumulative aftermath.

Mastery refers to the conscious development or elaboration of strategies to deal with problems that have a certain manipulative and cognitive complexity but are not freighted with overwhelming or intense anxiety or emotion. The development and growth of children, in one sense, is about mastery. The shift from toddling to walking and running, if not made difficult by interfering stressors (an insistent, demanding parent relatively insensitive to the tempo and pace of the child's adaptive endeavors), can be a transition that provides a satisfying emotional, behavioral, and cognitive base for future attempts at control over developmental and environmental transitions and challenges. In a sense, mastery of increasingly complex and demanding tasks and environments is what development is about.

Coping refers to fairly drastic changes, some expected, some not, in the internal and external environment that defy the usual ways of behaving and require the development of a range of new behaviors. Most often, such environmental factors prompt a range of difficult feelings—agitation, uncertainty, anguish, anxiety, dread, guilt, grief—depending on the nature of the situation. A young husband and father must cope with the sudden and

unexpected death of his wife. Anger and grief over this cruel and unforeseen misfortune, fear about how his two young children will manage the loss, and anxiety about how he will carry on all mingle and clash, clouding his sensibility and subverting his stability. As a parent, as an employee, as a single person, as a grieving spouse, he must develop new ways of thinking about himself and his family and dealing with the enormous relational and emotional gap left by the absent spouse. Sudden death poses all sorts of problems: the lack of preparation for and anticipation of the loss (both emotionally and practically—e.g., wills, insurance, settling of estates), the intensity of the grief reaction, the lack of resolution of developmental and relationship issues that may have existed, and the deadening effects of shock. So our young father will have to develop skills, attitudes, and capacities that will allow him to assume new roles, develop different relationships, and discover new depths of emotion. Whether he does or not depends on his internal resources and the supports, assets, and resources in the environment (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999).

In a word, adaptation refers to all those decisions and related actions that are meant to achieve personal change or environmental change in the service of promoting more salutary transactions between the person and the environment.

Clearly, ecological theory also is about the nature of stressors, internal stress responses, and attempts to respond to the challenges issued by a given stressor. Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick (1999) have a useful formula for understanding the impact of stressors and the responses to them. Theirs is a family-based model, but it could apply to individuals as well. Any family's or individual's management of a stressor is composed of the following elements. There are *stressors from external sources*, some predictable and anticipated, others not. There are *notable family transitions* that though expected may or may not be the occasion for the experience of stress—the birth of the first child, the moving away of older children, aging of the parents, for example. Then there are *other unforeseen and unanticipated stressors*—the untimely death of a family member, a natural disaster, the laying off of a family member at work, or an accident. Each of these tests the resilience and mettle of the individual and the family. How they respond is dependent in part on *sources of family anxiety and conflict* that inhere in family relationships and structure, that may have been passed on from generation to generation. These include family taboos, secrets, myths, labels, and contentious themes. In addition, family rules, roles, rituals, norms, communication patterns, and hierarchies of authority all temper the family's efforts to adapt. Finally, these may be intensified or ameliorated by *social, economic, and political factors*—extended family relationships, community associations and involvements, peer relationships and friendships, economic conditions, availability of

environmental supports and resources, or oppressive living conditions. Poverty, or living in a densely populated area, for example, may have an effect on the availability and quality of the communal and social capital supporting successful adaptation. I would add to these *the strengths and resources* of the family and the surrounding community.

More subtle elements also shape the evolving adaptive capacities and decisions of individuals or families. For years, Richard Lazarus (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994) has studied how people respond to stressors. An important element to every response or attempt at coping is the cognitive appraisal of the stressful event: “What does this event, this situation mean? Is this a threat? Is it harmless? Can I cope with this?” How you assess the situation triggers feelings, and these, in turn, help fashion behavioral strategies. If we decide the event or the situation threatens harm, is actually harmful, or represents a loss (of a relationship, a value, a role, etc.), then it becomes a stressor. A perceived *threat* (it has not happened yet but is thought to be likely to occur) is the most common source of stress and pushes you to maintain the status quo or anticipate and attempt to plan for the distress the event will bring. Appraisal of an actual event as *harmful* or *damaging* requires you to overcome, reduce, or tolerate the effects of the stressor. On the other hand, evaluation of the event as a *challenge* means that you may regard it as an opportunity, even though it may require struggle and introduce obstacles.

According to Lazarus, secondary appraisal occurs after the stressor is evident and provokes attempts to answer the questions, “What can I actually do about this situation? What resources do I have to deal with it? Where can I get support or help?” If you view the situation as a challenge and if you think you have the emotional, intellectual, physical, social, and spiritual resources to confront and manage the stressor, then successful adaptation is a likely outcome. Other factors come into play here as well. Whether the stressor is chronic or sudden, expected or unbidden, depending on what time of life it strikes, and whether or not you think you have any degrees of freedom to manage it or have any control over its likely consequences all affect the properties of your adaptation.

Finally, certain personal and environmental factors regulate the success of adaptive measures. Some *personal qualities* that promote adaptation include accurate knowledge of or information about the stressor and how to respond to it; motivation to meet the challenge; a sense of competence and self-efficacy; an abiding and convincing personal system of meaning; a sense of autonomy and the possibility of choice; problem-solving skills; previous success in meeting the challenges of stressful situations; and personal qualities like humor, creativity, and insight. Luckily, some of these can be taught or enhanced (Bandura, 1995). Aaron Antonovsky (1988), in his studies of health and the formulation of the salutogenesis model (how people face stress and

manage to stay well), says that an extremely important personal factor is what he calls the sense of coherence. The sense of coherence is composed of three elements: *comprehensibility*, *manageability*, and *meaningfulness*. Comprehensibility refers to the extent that you perceive stimuli impinging upon you as making sense and being understandable, consistent, or clear—as information rather than noise, no matter how menacing. You have been through tornadoes before. You know the warning signs, you understand the time frame in which this is going to happen. Manageability is the degree to which you believe that the resources at your disposal are adequate to meet what you understand as the challenge or threat before you. You know that you should go to the basement or to an interior room on a lower floor, preferably surrounded by walls, not windows. Meaningfulness is the sense that even though you face problems, barriers, and demands, they are worthy of your best efforts in overcoming the distress they impose, and you summon your commitment and engagement in their resolution or in coming to terms with them. You live in the Midwest; you expect this kind of threat from the weather. You are proud of the kind of hardiness it requires to face tornadoes, drought, snow and sleet, killer thunderstorms, etc. Or recall our young widower. Maybe it is because of the suddenness of the death of his spouse that he sees in the immediate future nothing but disorder and emotional anarchy and cannot make sense out of it. But from somewhere deep inside, he knows he must begin to marshal the resources—to undertake the long hard work of coping. His church and spiritual beliefs are comforts, a close relationship with an older sister and brother-in-law provide immediate support and some relief from daily burdens, and he finds some surcease in his daily walks with his children along the lakeshore. Although he cannot shake the sense that it is unfair, especially to the kids, he knows that it is going to be a challenge to his beliefs and to his religious mettle. Much of his motivation now is concentrated on the children—his mission from this point on is to ensure that they have the best possible quality of life. It may be that later, upon reflection, and as his grief metabolizes that he will come to see something comprehensible in all of this.

Environmental resources include informal and formal support systems—networks of friends and neighbors; schools; health, child welfare, disaster relief, and social service agencies; physical resources—shelter, food, etc.; safety and security agencies; cultural and social institutions that comfort, guide, and provide respite or knowledge (churches or ethnic associations, for example); elements of the natural world such as green spaces, pets, areas that protect and provide safety (in certain natural disasters, the latter become extremely important—to confront an onrushing tornado in an expansive flat plain poses risks that an environment of hills and gullies does not) (Germain & Gitterman, 1996).

Jimmy Buffett, the singer, songwriter, pilot, writer, and raconteur describes a takeoff in his seaplane that turned calamitous and demonstrates several of the ideas we have just discussed.

My life did not flash before my eyes; no ancestors called to me from white fog on the other side of eternity. The nose of the plane slammed into the water, and I heard the engines stop. I had braced myself for the impact, but my head still slammed against the side of the plane. I did not lose consciousness. . . . I was in what pilots call “condition red.” That is, maximum human survival output, when adrenaline runs everything. . . . *Okay, now how do I get out of here? Don't panic. Can't go out the pilot's windows. Too much jagged metal. Don't want to make things worse by going through a Cuisinart on the way out. The rear door won't open until it is totally under water and the pressure is equalized. Oh, shit, that means I have to stay in here until the god-dam plane is full of water. Don't panic. Don't like that idea too much. Other options. Crawl to the rear of the plane and make it sink faster so the door will be under water. Don't panic: Remember what you learned in survival school. Wait a minute, the flight deck windows slide forward and backward and are already under water. That's it.* (1998, pp. 48–49)

Well, you get the idea. Here, information and knowledge, previous encounters or rehearsal with the similar sorts of stress (survival school), motivation (I'm going to die if I don't get out of here), a sense of self-efficacy, coping talk (“don't panic”), and in Buffett's case, a pretty healthy ego all contributed—along with luck—to his ability to surmount this sudden and unexpected adversity.²

There are always elements that compromise the capacity to adapt. One of the most pernicious and widespread is *oppression* (Freire, 1996; Germain & Gitterman, 1996). To devalue and dispossess people on the basis of their ethnic heritage, religion, social class, political beliefs, sexual orientation, gender, physical ability, or age is to deny them, directly and indirectly, the resources—personal and environmental—to surmount the political and economic challenges of being oppressed and ideologically suffocated. Oppression takes many forms and ranges from the ludicrous and obvious to the subtle and spirit-draining. But whether we are talking about the blithe technological polluting of a poor neighborhood by an industrial giant or the subtle put-downs or ignoring of kids from public housing in a classroom,

2. In some ways, it was not unexpected. All pilots train for the eventuality of a crash, aborted takeoff, and other life-threatening possibilities. This sort of “pre-ambulation” is a way of inoculating individuals against excessive emotional responses to stressful situations.

these forms of oppression are too often interconnected—the kids from public housing in that school are more likely to live in that neighborhood swarming with pollutants and toxins. The net effect of oppression can be to undermine an individual's, family's, or community's capacity to adapt, rebound, and tap into the innate and communal sources of health and wholeness. The terrible irony here is that we often impose on powerless people such burdens and stresses—psychological, physical, moral, and institutional—that the demands in their environment exceed by far what is normatively or commonly expectable in anyone else's environment. As always, the amazing thing is that, given oppression, so many individuals and families still manage to rise up and even flourish.³ The work of empowerment or liberation, the core of social work practice, involves a set of preferences. As described by Judith A. B. Lee, these include a

Preference for social work activities that give priority to work with oppressed and stigmatized groups: to strengthening individual adaptive potentials *and* making environmental/structural change through individual and collective action; preference for holistically transactionally oriented helping concepts that include knowledge about oppressed groups; preference for social policies that create a society where equality of opportunity and access to resources exists. (1994, p. 21)

The capacity to adapt, to sustain self-direction and identity, and to expand the range of one's competence is also compromised by the relative absence of *community*. Many observers have commented on the decline of vibrant communities and the consequent drain on social capital in contemporary America and other parts of the Western world (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1991; Germain, 1991; McKnight, 1997; Putnam, 1995; Specht & Courtney, 1994) The ideal definition of community, beyond the merely geographical, persuades us of its potential topography of resources and assets. People in a genuine community:

- Perceive themselves as a community.
- Share a core of common values and beliefs (“The most important thing for us is good schools for our kids, and public and cheap transportation for our elders”).
- Have a communal identity (“We’re from ‘the flatlands’”).

3. The strengths perspective would have us understand more clearly how they do this so that we might turn it into programs and policies for those who still struggle. Of course, nothing can substitute for a societal and governmental commitment to extend the reach of social and economic justice to all citizens.

- Have their communal identity as part of their individual identity (“I’m a flatlander”).
- Participate in some common practices (the annual barbecue and street fair; an informal childcare network, a block parent program).
- Have some common goals and visions (“We want a park in the center of town where families can gather and play together”).
- Make some decisions and act on those decisions together (“We do not want commercial zoning in the neighborhood, so we will make a presentation before the city commission”).
- Understand that there are common problems that need solving (“There is nothing for teens to do on the weekend except hang out”).
- Commit themselves to some purposes beyond self or family (“We need to do something about the frail elderly in this neighborhood who live alone”) (Shaffer & Anundsen, 1993).

No community is a utopia, of course, and many communities struggle with transience, competition for power, limited resources, diminishing social capital, rapid change, exclusion, discrimination and the like. But person–environment fit is most obvious at the community or neighborhood level. It is here where capacities of individuals and groups are summoned and deployed in the service of mutual aid. It is here where people may work collectively to provide each other support, to pursue common interests, or to resolve common problems. It is here where the assets and resources of people are exchanged in terms of helping others or in securing a common goal. It is here where stories and narratives connect individuals and families to each other and the larger sense of their community. It is here where celebrations take place and tragedies are acknowledged and lamented. It is here where use-values (what can I make or produce; how can I contribute something of value?) can surpass staple-values (what can I buy or consume that will make me feel better, soothe my pain, etc?) (McKnight, 1995, 1997). And it is here where we can most clearly see the stunning effects of political, social, and economic oppression.

Andrew Billingsley (1992) recounts the story of single parent Larry Tolson, a remarkable study in adaptation to strenuous circumstance and demanding environment:

In 1991 at age twenty-seven, Tolson was already father of nine children, whom he was raising alone. It all began when he was twenty-one and decided to get married and settle down. He did and in rapid-fire order three children were born. . . . Then the mother moved out. He soon struck up a relationship with another woman who was eager to help him make a family. Together for five years,

they produced six children, including two sets of twins . . . Then she left.

While numerous local authorities and others who do not know him frequently question whether he can possibly raise these nine children well, Tolson continues to do what seems impossible.

Who is this determined young man? He works part-time as an auto mechanic. He is a full-time student at a local technical institute. In addition, he finds time to do volunteer work for the local senior citizens group and the neighborhood council. An observer has confirmed that Tolson's children are always clean, well fed, and well dressed. Those old enough to attend school always test in the top levels of their class.

A local community leader and member of the city council . . . described him as "an exceptional father. He's determined to make something of himself and is totally dedicated to his children." Tolson has described his own source of strength. "My saving grace is that I took home economics from seventh grade throughout high school. Even changing diapers is not so bad . . . when you get used to it."

. . . Tolson also gets a hand from the neighbors. His volunteer work pays off. "There are many elderly women out here, and they help me a lot. . . . They baby-sit, braid hair, and sew. So my volunteering is one way to say thanks."

He also gets strong moral support from his mother. When asked if he feels burdened by such responsibility at such a young age, Tolson responded as though these responsibilities have saved his very life. "A lot of my friends are either in prison, strung out on drugs or dead. . . . And I was heading along the same path until these babies started coming. I no longer get high, unless it's on my kids. Through them, I've experienced the joy of true devotion, and now I know what love really means. I can't give that up."
(pp. 380–81)

Embedded in this narrative are many of the factors that foster a better than expected person–environment fit, including Larry's own sense of coherence (see discussion of Antonovsky [1988] above), his evolving sense of competence and efficacy; the supports found in his neighborhood; the knowledge, information, and tools that stand him in good stead as a parent and home-maker (taking home economics classes); his positive emotions (especially his love for his children); and, I suspect, some combination of intertwined biological and psychological capacities that lead to extraordinary energy and persistently high levels of motivation and optimism.

Ecological theory pushes us to understand the significance of the social and physical spaces where individual and environment meet (the interfaces) and recognize that in those spaces the work of supporting human development and the nurturing of esteem and competence is done; in those spaces the dirty work of oppression can also be done, along with the stifling of human possibility and the deepening of vulnerability.

Critique of Ecological Theory

There have been many criticisms of the ecological approach and its predecessors, such as systems theory. Critics have pointed out, among other things, that the ecological perspective is inherently conservative and approving of the status quo. That means, among other things, that even in working with people who are exposed to economic and social privation, for example, or who face any number of environmental or organizational threats to their health, the primary focus of our work would be to help them adapt to these stressful conditions rather than to confront the institutional and environmental sources of their misfortune and injury (Gould, 1987; Morrell, 1997). Critics claim that there is no program or encouragement in this perspective for essential social transformation or the “righting of wrongs” because the basic assumption is that any ecosystem inherently functional and capable of self-righting. Furthermore, the essential role of conflict in producing social change is virtually ignored. However, recent literature on the ecological approach seems more attentive to both the effects of environmental stress and oppression and its identification (Germain, 1991; Germain & Gitterman, 1996; Gilgun, 1996). Nonetheless, the practice principles that have come from the theory still tilt to the side of emphasizing the adaptation and coping of individuals and families rather than the reformation of social institutions.

Although ecological theory is ostensibly about the fit between environments and people, it is heavily weighted to understanding individuals, the sources of their adaptability and coping, and their ego development as it unfolds. The theory, thus, fails to reflect the complexity and elegance of the actual transactions between people and their environments (Brower, 1988). The literature is rich with descriptions of how adaptive capacities develop, what they are, which are more successful than others, and how development is heavily reliant on adaptation to environments. By comparison, the discussion of environments—social, built, and physical—is thin.

One of the apparent virtues of the ecological model is that it seems essential for accounting for, elaborating, and putting into practice the ultimate purposes of social work and assuring the profession its conceptual and ethical coherence. Jerome Wakefield (1996) says otherwise:

Yet one gets the impression that the perspective is somehow intimately related to the nature of social work. The reason is not hard to find; whatever social work is about, person–environment interactions of some sort must play a role in defining its domain, and the perspective captures this part of social work’s definition. This is what makes the perspective so plausible and appealing. What is still needed, and is not provided by either the perspective or other current definitions, is an analysis of the organizing value of social work *that explains exactly which aspect of person–environment interactions is the proper and distinctive domain of the profession.* [emphasis added] (p. 209)

Finally (for our discussion—this doesn’t exhaust the critiques), it has been argued that the ecological perspective gives the physical/natural environment the short shrift. The rising field of ethnoecology, for example, dramatizes the importance of local knowledge and awareness of the natural habitat as a singular component of the survivability and prospering of a people:

The intimate relationship and interdependence between local people and their environment developed a deep sense of the responsibility humans have to nature as well as to each other. However . . . population pressure and modern lifestyles have derailed many of these cultural priorities. (Nazarea, 1999, p. 17)

How would we better understand the sources of stress, the occasions for growth, if we knew more clearly the character of the relationship between the local natural world and people’s perception of it (Besthorn, 1998; Weick, 1981). In a similar vein, the ecological approach, as is the case of so many others, really doesn’t pay much attention to the fact that humans are biological beings and that adaptation to any environment is often an organismic matter. The natural world, naturally, includes us (Saleebey, 1992).

COGNITIVE THEORY

Cognitive theory has not only a rich ancestry, but a far-flung extended family, some of whom are not exactly on speaking terms with each other. The basic surge of interest in cognitive theories is to discern what exactly the mind is and how the mind functions as both a vehicle of meaning-making and information-processing. Attention to the details of memory, learning, language, motivation, and attribution is very much on the mind of cognitive theorists. In the seventeenth century, René Descartes proclaimed the

distinction between the body (material and mere organism) and the mind (immaterial and rational), leaving us with the centuries-old conundrum about how the mind and body are different and how they interact. The mind operates apart from the body, Descartes argued, and where the body is essentially a machine, the mind is the sentient arbiter of what is truthful. Ideas do not come from the external world, but from our innate capacity to reason, imagine, and calculate. Ideas also extend from that central organizing entity, the self. Descartes must have known the philosophical dilemma he induced, making it so difficult and clumsy to describe or theorize—beyond the simplest incorporation of percepts from the external world—about how the mind and body interact (Descartes, 1641/1954; Gardner, 1985) or to imagine, as some neuroscientists do, that the mind and body are one (Restak, 1995).

Over time, philosophers and others disposed to tackle the problems of the constitution of the mind and the body and the nature of thought itself have separated themselves into various camps. Some see the mind as the modest receptor and organizer of sensory experience. Others claim spectacular powers for the mind, according it the symbolic basis of our very humanness. More mechanistic others, such as Gilbert Ryle (1949) think that the mind is pretty much an overblown “ghost in the machine” and could be explained like any other set of behaviors as predictable responses to provoking circumstances and environmental contingencies (Gardner, 1985; Mahoney, 1991). Richard Rorty (1979) has questioned the idea that there are superior innate internal representations of the world in our minds that can purely describe and explain things (this he called epistemology—seeking the truth). What we would regard as knowledge is, in fact, the result of conversation between people, a hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenon and not some sort of impeccable, common understanding of the “real world.” “Hermeneutics sees the relations between various discourses as strands in a possible and continuing conversation. This discourse presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts” (p. 318). Rorty went even further by suggesting that although discourse and conversation yield propositions and ideas we might agree and act upon, in the end, the pith of psychological phenomena may be found to be neurophysiological (the brain explains the mind).

In this brief review, we can see some of the interests and concerns that have driven cognitive theory: Does the mind exist as a separate entity? Can it be explained in terms of itself? Can what the mind knows accurately represent the external world? Are there innate ideas that we are born with and which stand as ultimate arbiters of reality? Is the computer an apt model of mind? Is the brain the same as the mind? Some have characterized the

debates at this point as those between empiricists (there is nothing in the mind but the mechanical—the brain—and/or what is urged upon it by the environment) and rationalists (mental states do exist, there are innate ideas and structures we are born with, and mental states can be causal).

But let us take a slightly different tack here. Jerome Bruner, often considered one of the forebears of the cognitive revolution (many attribute its modern beginning to *A Study in Thinking*, published by Bruner and colleagues Jacqueline Goodnow and George Austin in 1956) says that cognitive science, as he and his colleagues conceived it, was meant to bury (or, more politely, replace) objectivism and behaviorism and to restore human meaning-making to the center of psychological science. This long quote explains the purpose of the revolution:

It was, we thought, an all-out effort to establish meaning as the central concept of psychology—not stimuli and responses, not overtly observable behavior, not biological drives and their transformation, but meaning. It was *not* [author's emphasis] a revolution against behaviorism with the aim of transforming behaviorism into a better way of pursuing psychology by adding a little mentalism to it. Edward Tolman had done that, to little avail.⁴ It was an altogether more profound revolution than that. Its aim was to discover and describe formally the meanings that human beings created out of their encounters with the world, and then to propose hypotheses about what meaning-making processes were implicated. It focused upon the symbolic activities that human beings employed in constructing and in making sense not only of the world, but of themselves. Its aim was to prompt psychology to join forces with its sister interpretive disciplines in the humanities and in the social sciences. (Bruner, 1990, p. 2)

You can see, in this quote and in the recent revitalization of Bruner's quest, that cognitive science, as he interprets it, has much in common with if not quickly becoming indistinguishable from constructionism (see chapter 2). The philosophy of mind, epistemology (how we come to know what we know and act upon it), ontology (the character and unfolding of being), the role of language and linguistics in forming ideas about the world, and the importance of culture in developing lexicons of interpretation and passing on assumptions about the world all have, in the past ten to fifteen years, flourished.

4. See his book, *Purposive Behavior in Animals and Men*. New York: Century, 1932.

About the same time (1956), others took cognitive theory down a very different path, a pursuit of understanding the mind as information processor. The rise of computational science, the possibility of artificial intelligence, the explosion of information-processing technology as a remarkable commercial and industrial exploit, and the development of cybernetics all made the idea that the human mind was an artful but predictable and perhaps even replicable information processing machine reasonable (Lyddon, 1988). Oddly enough, the idea of artificial intelligence, the notion that one might develop computer programs that could think like human beings, rose to something of a fever pitch with a conference at Dartmouth in the same year—1956—that Bruner, Goodnow, and Austin wrote their book (Gardner, 1985; Mahoney, 1991). This is not the place to conduct a tour of the parallel developments in these two somewhat different versions of cognitive theory. Let it be said that like all schools of thought, though serious differences remain, each school has had significant accomplishments, and each has wended its way into academic culture as well as the culture at large. In spite of the marvelous accomplishments in computer modeling and the development of connectionism,⁵ it is the construction of meaning, the unique or creative thought or assertion, and the importance of intention and purposefulness that remain as problems to be solved at this point.

Another field in which cognitive theory has flourished has been psychotherapy, counseling, and social work. The grandfather of cognitive therapies is Albert Ellis. His rational-emotive therapy (1962) has become the spinning wheel from which the fabric of many of our current ideas about the role of cognition in developing and solving problems and meeting life challenges has been spun. Ellis made it clear that activating events (say, breaking up with your life partner) lead to emotional reactions, often distressing and excessive. But it was not the event itself that caused emotional and behavioral upheaval, rather it was your nearly subliminal thoughts about and attributions of the event that caused them. These thoughts came in the form of self-talk and usually were “catastrophic” (“Since she left, I’ll never find love again; I’ll be lonely and miserable the rest of my life”). These thoughts were often predicated upon themes or schema that were deeply buried in one’s mind and usually supported by the culture (“I must be loved or I am worthless”). Ellis since has moved more toward the constructionist orientation:

5. Connectionism relies primarily on the understanding of neuroscience (not computers) in its modeling of the brain and its processes. Likewise, rather than appealing to linear and logical processes, connectionists have a preference for multiplex, widely distributed parallel processing models (Mahoney, 1991).

I myself, though one of the early phenomenologists in the field of therapy . . . was indeed a logical positivist up to the mid 1970s. But Bartley . . . Mahoney . . . and Popper . . . showed me that I was wrong, and therefore I have been a nonpositivist, a constructionist, and even a postmodernist since then. . . . So many other clinical psychologists now followed Kelly [see next paragraph] . . . in taking a constructivist position in their theory and practice that quite a long list of them could easily now be compiled. (1996, p. 18)

As Ellis says, it was another theorist and practitioner (who did not identify himself as a cognitive theorist) who produced the body of work that would foreshadow many of the developments outlined below—George Kelly and his psychology of personal constructs (1955). Kelly was an advocate of assisting people who came to him for help to consider other possibilities through the conjuring up of a different world, a different *modus operandi* and even, if only briefly, a different identity. He said:

Instead of assuming . . . that the therapist is obliged to bring the client's thinking into line, or, on the other hand, that the client will mysteriously bring his own thinking into line once he has been given the proper setting, we can take the stand that client and therapist are conjoining in an exploratory venture. The therapist assumes neither the position of judge nor that of sympathetic bystander. He is sincere about this: he is willing to learn along with his client, and then to examine, and finally to assist the client in subjecting alternatives to experimental test and revision. (1969, p. 82)

Kelly just might have been a social worker at heart. Nonetheless, his work has continued to inform many of those cognitive theorists and therapists who have inched their appreciations ever more toward meaning-making.

Other practitioners and authors who have assumed leadership in the evolution of cognitive approaches to change are Aaron Beck (1978), most notable for his work in treating mood disorders with cognitive and behavioral techniques; Michael Mahoney, a prolific writer and scholar whose book *Human Change Processes* (1991) is a masterful integration of various cognitive and constructivist approaches to producing change in thinking, doing, and feeling; and Donald Meichenbaum (1977), who has continued to develop and elaborate a cognitive-behavioral approach to change. In social work, Howard Goldstein (1981) and Harold Werner (1982) were among the first to detail what a cognitively based social work practice would look like. Both of them proceeded from the belief that cognitive approaches were, more than some other approaches, inherently humanistic and compatible with the purposes and values of social work. Later, Sharon Berlin (1996) brought an

understanding of how cognitive approaches could enrich our understanding of the relationship between human meaning-making and the striving to meet environmental challenges. Aaron Brower and Paula Nurius (1993) also elaborated a cognitive–ecological model based on the necessity of mastering our interdependence with the environment and how, out of these interchanges, we develop and hold in mind and memory more or less consciously held schemas (cognitive representations of events, people, concepts). The work of Berlin and Brower and Nurius will be discussed further in this chapter.

The many recent strands of cognitive understanding and intervention may obscure its interesting evolution, which included the following:

1. George Kelly's idea that we could reconstruct our identity and experiment with its consequences.

2. A central concern with cognition (how we think) and how thinking affects our behavior and emotions and that cognitive change is central to changes in both emotions and behavior (Beck, 1978; Ellis, 1962, 1993).

3. A melding of behaviorist and cognitive approaches so that we came to understand that we could change behavior by changing thinking and, to a degree, vice versa (Mahoney, 1974; Meichenbam, 1977).

4. The idea that cognitive/behavioral approaches provide a spacious expanse for the development of social work's essential humanism (that what makes us distinctly human is our capacity for symbolic thought and the necessity and capacity to make meaning) (Goldstein, 1981; Saleebey, 1975; Werner, 1982).

5. The idea that understanding cognition and the development of frames of reference and meaning are critical to enlivening the person/environment perspective—social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1995; Berlin, 1996; Brower & Nurius, 1993).

6. The current idea that constructivist and cognitive approaches are virtually synonymous (Franklin & Nurius, 1998; Granvold, in press; Neimeyer, 1985; Neimeyer & Mahoney, 1995).

Let us latch on to the last idea since it integrates so many previous developments and is becoming more central to social work practice. Before we begin, we must distinguish between two sorts of accounts of the relationship between human cognition, understanding, and action. This distinction is not agreed to by all cognitive theorists and practitioners but is becoming increasingly the norm. Social constructionism relies upon the more postmodern notion that how people come to understand and know, explain, and account for their worlds and their situations is a social and relational process, channeled by culture, inspired by language, and shaped by historical context. Our view of the world and of reality is molded by conceptions created in conversation and discourse with others as well as the historical discourses we

know as culture and institution. Social constructionist approaches to helping are very much compatible with the ecological, person–environment view of social work and with social work values (Franklin & Nurius, 1998; Witkin, 1989;). Helping done under this rubric is collaborative, conversational, and oriented to hearing and “rewriting” individual, family, group, and community stories and narratives; acutely conscious of the role of culture in creating the language of understanding, and action; affirming of client capacities and resources; renouncing of the role of expert; and bent on “deconstructing” the privileged discourses of, for example, institutions of social control or of the media. Narrative practice, the strengths perspective, and solution-focused therapy all, to different degrees, employ constructionist methods involving the careful use of language in sculpting understanding and initiating behavior, the reconstruction of meaning (usually through stories and interpretive devices) as a means for generating positive change, and defining the work of the helper and the person(s) being helped as collaborative, egalitarian, and dialogical.

Social *constructivism*, according to Michael Mahoney (1991), involves three central themes. First, human beings are active creators of their reality whether done in league with others or on their own. Second, there are core and “deep” cognitive structures from which more peripheral ones emerge. These core themes are deeply embedded in belief systems, culture, and behavior and are very difficult to change, although they often are the target of change for constructivists. Third, learning, knowing, and memory are “phenomena that reflect the ongoing attempts of body and brain to organize (and endlessly reorganize) their own patterns of action and experience—patterns that are, of course, related to changing and highly mediated arrangements with their momentary worlds” (Mahoney, 1991, p. 95). The key to change, for the constructivist, are those deep cognitive structures that operate to create sense, relatedness, and harmony in experience. These are not necessarily “unconscious” but are a kind of “tacit knowledge” (Polanyi, 1958), knowledge that is more important (and more fundamental in this sense) and about which Polanyi says, “We can know more than we can tell and we can tell nothing without relying on our awareness of things we may not be able to tell” (p. x).

Granvold (in press) describes the differences between the constructionism and constructivism more starkly as being the disjuncture between *critical constructivists* (these would be the constructivists as described above), who believe that there is an external reality and that personal and collective constructs can come close to reflecting or understanding that reality even if not completely, and *radical constructivists* (these would be the constructionists described above), who do not require a belief in external reality because any

discussion of reality proceeds directly from the meaning systems of human beings, mediated by culture and language.

Bruner tells a slightly different story about two worldviews. There are two modes of cognitive functioning he says that, while complementary, cannot be reduced to each other. These are two distinct ways of ordering experience and constructing reality. One is argument, the other is story:

Arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness. The one verifies appeal to procedures for establishing formal and empirical proof. The other establishes not truth but verisimilitude.⁶ . . . One . . . attempts to fulfill the ideal of a formal, mathematical system of description and explanation. It employs categorization or conceptualization. . . . The imaginative application of the narrative mode [on the other hand] leads instead to good stories, gripping drama, believable (though not necessarily “true”) historical accounts. It deals in human . . . vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course.” (1986, pp. 11–13)

So no matter how you slice it, human beings are capable, at the very least, of telling a variety of stories about what it means to be human, to think, and to act. All versions of cognitive theory appear to contend that individuals view themselves and their world in terms of beliefs and ideas that they have developed or inculcated. These beliefs organize themselves around some basic themes in a person’s life (and are purchased from a culture’s storehouse of assumptions and stories). These themes appear, in different forms, in the self-talk and dialogue of the individual or the stories told by the person. These systematized core beliefs affect behavior and relationships. The difference between cognitively based approaches is, in part, about the role of the external world, of reality, in the creation of meaning and the development of cognitive structures of understanding. On the one hand, the viability of meanings or beliefs (schema) is thought to be dependent on their consequences in action in the real world and their coherence with other personal beliefs; on the other hand, the relevance of ideas is to be worked out in relationship with other people. With respect to the latter (a radical constructivist—i.e., constructionist—position) Gergen puts it this way:

To illustrate, let us consider more closely the question of whether putting a lighted match to gasoline will produce an explosion. There are two specific questions the constructionist would ask: first, is

6. The quality of appearing to be true or real.

there any alternative way of describing the same state of affairs? Clearly the answer is yes: the artist's account of colors shifting in hue and intensity, the poet's detailing of soaring spirits, the chemist's analysis of heated molecules, the shaman's account of magical forces, and so on. . . . a second question: is one account more objectively accurate than another? If so, on what grounds? (1994, pp. 72–73)

Gergen's answer to the second question is no surprise: it is always a matter of local convention (the means and processes, the language and practices through which people relate and talk to each other).

Cognitive Theories and the Environment: A Social Work Perspective

The work of Sharon Berlin in developing a cognitive–integrative perspective and Paula Nurius and Aaron Brower in building an approach to social cognition and personal change have been among the most recent developments in social work theory and practice. Although these approaches are different, they do share some common elements that I will attempt to outline here.

1. Human beings, given the appropriate supports, actively attempt to survive with some degree of aplomb through active exploration, understanding, and adaptation to their interpersonal, social, and physical environment. To survive as a species we have become extremely sensitive to the environmental cues around us so that we are aware of danger, threat, and harm as well as pleasure, possibility, and advantage.

2. Our ability to adapt is funded, to a large degree, by our symbolic capacities—our propensity to use words, ideas, and images in construing our world. The motivation and skill at making sense out of our world, of using symbolic means—language, for example—allows us as not too swift or sensually adept creatures to manage our world better than the capacities of our bodies would suggest. So, in an important sense, survival and thriving is, at heart a cognitive skill. A key to survival is memory, to be able to derive from personal and collective history and experience those ideas and conceptions that further survival or foretell of ruin.

3. The environment and the individual are interdependent. Although we actively make hypotheses about the nature of our world and what we must do to adapt, the environment influences us through the symbolic and ideological devices of culture and social institutions, through the available

physical and natural resources, and because of the impact upon us individually and collectively of particular arrays of stresses and challenges.

4. We develop schemas over time that help order our experience and make sense out of it. These are reliant on memory as well as our meaning-making capabilities. They are also, in some ways, distinctive for each of us. These schemas become interpretive patterns and often take the form of stories, narratives, anecdotes, reminiscences, epigrams, and aphorisms. They also allow us to compress an incredible range of experience and sensory data in compact form. One of my schemas is “expect the worst” and, as a consequence, anything less than the worst looks really good! But I also must go through a degree of agonizing before the end result is known. You, on the other hand, may have deeply nestled in your mind the optimists’ schema, “it’ll be okay.” Confronted with the same challenge—facing a job interview—you summon up thoughts and images and interpret events through the reflection of the core schema that things will turn out just fine, if not better than just fine. These lead you to experience certain emotions and engage in certain behaviors as well as to judge the situation somewhat differently than me. You experience the upcoming interview as full of possibilities (“Imagine if I get the job!”) while I experience a seizure of self-doubt and anxiety over an alarming prospect. These sorts of schemas or core processes are what cognitive therapists often set out to change by offering more flexible and beneficial alternatives and pointing out other countervailing elements of the supposed “reality.” Obviously, in this case, it is unlikely that anyone would tamper with your schema, whereas mine would require the therapeutic equivalent of a root canal.

5. The environment is an unsettled and dynamic set of relationships, institutions, structures, and cues. It could lend itself to any number of interpretations. That is its boon as well as its bane. It is beneficial because it allows us the opportunity to make—alone or together—a variety of interpretations, all of which, if supported by others or by memory, may serve to give the environment a sturdy and predictable cast. On the other hand, it means that the environment can be a slippery slope, and small changes in it, or affronts to our usual understanding of it, can produce havoc with our sense of stability and safety.

6. We have two clusters of activities that help us manage our environments. The first is the manipulation and arrangement of both immediate and distant social, physical, and natural environments. Mrs. Jones lives in public housing. The community has undergone many changes in the thirty-five years she has lived there, some of them for the worse. Physical deterioration in recent years is common, some of it due to the neglect of the local housing authority. But Mrs. Jones has always worked to create a soothing and attractive personal environment. She plants and maintains a

lush flower garden with the help of her children, providing a bright spot, a respite, for her and her neighbors—a “signal of home,” she says. In this small way, she has had a salutary effect on her physical and social environment. A second means for managing the environment is to create and formulate ideas, metaphors, stories (modes of meaning-making, in a word) that render the environment accessible or not, or friendly or not, for example. Mrs. Jones sees her immediate environment as worsening but basically pliant and friendly. Her neighbor, Mr. Thompson, sees it in terms of threat and neglect. He retreats inside his apartment as much as he can, and he thinks what Mrs. Jones does is a waste of time. For social workers working in difficult environments, these two broad categories of activity can be the focus of helping.

A NOTE ON THE EMBODIED MIND

In recent years, one of the major criticisms of cognitive theory—that it is about talking heads and ignores the body—has given rise to a form of cognitive theory that is embodied in the flesh, as it were. The ideas are difficult (for me, anyway) but important. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999) have rendered an exciting and challenging statement of the principles and proofs of the idea that our concepts and metaphors and our capacity for reason are rooted in our very biological nature and the ways our sensorimotor equipment is structured and exercised.

From a biological perspective, it is eminently plausible that reason has grown out of the sensory and motor systems and that it still uses those systems or structures developed from them. This explains why we have the kinds of concepts we have and why our concepts have the properties they have . . . [This] is a crucial part of the explanation of why it is possible for our concepts to fit so well with the way we function in the world. (p. 43)

Our metaphors, so important to the making of meaning, if we examine their domains, reveal their ties to sensorimotor experience. Take, for example, the primary metaphor “bad is stinky.” The subjective judgment is about evaluation. The sensorimotor domain is smell. An example would be, “This example stinks.” The primary experience that gives rise to it is being repelled by foul-smelling objects (and, thus, this correlation between evaluative and olfactory experience) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, pp. 50–54). The importance of embodied realism is that, in this sense, we have never been divorced or separated from reality: “What has always made science possible is our embodiment, not our transcendence of it, and our imagination, not our avoidance of it” (p. 93).

Critique of Cognitive Approaches

One of the criticisms of the cognitive group of theories is not unlike the critique of ecological perspectives: namely, that the theory is apolitical. That is to say, while cognitive theories have come over the years to a greater inclusion of the environment in their calculus, the environment is still something of a backdrop to the active cognitive development and behavior of the individual. The political and economic aspects of the social and built environments are not given the power and force that they may play in the everyday lives of individuals and families. It is one thing to live in a gated community with security personnel and neighbors of like presence and like mind. It is entirely another to be in prison for five to ten years. Though one should never discount the cleverness and audacity of the human mind, neither should we discount environments made dire or constrained by political decisions or needs (Saleebey, 1994).

Although conceptions of the environment are increasingly a part of cognitive approaches, there still has been little attempt to distinguish between kinds of environments. Physical environments have been virtually ignored by most theorists, yet we are coming to understand that phenomena such as pollutants and toxins, crowding and density, noise, and privacy can have dramatic effects on health, mental health, and the way that we see the world (Gutheil, 1992). The natural environment—trees, water, mountains, plains, beaches, gardens (recall Mrs. Jones)—all can have a beneficial or, in their absence, a negative effect on individuals and groups. More positively, a sense of calm, interest, health, control, enjoyment, and sensual enhancement can result from the world of nature (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Then there is the environment created as a result of human effort and ingenuity—the built environment. Often the point of the construction of place and habitat by humans is to overcome limitations or conditions in the natural environment. But too often, these efforts bring with them destructive and unhealthy after-effects and consequences. This is not just an effect of modern technology either:

Ruins of civilizations and human-made deserts in various parts of the world stand as evidence that societies preoccupied with population growth and economic growth (and sometimes with war) often do not recognize the need for protective as well as productive environments until it is too late. After the hills are denuded and all the soil is washed off, only a massive infusion of outside capital can rehabilitate the land (as is the case now occurring to some extent in Israel). Likewise when urban growth is allowed to mushroom . . . it may be too late to protect air and water quality. (Odum, 1997, p. 231)

But the built environment can also be engineered to preserve safety, create interest, protect the natural environment, and foster human interaction as well. The abundant interaction between these three kinds (social, natural, and built) of environments is often fateful for the sustenance of cultural meaning systems (Rosaldo, 1989). As James Hillman declared in his scintillating dialogues with Michael Ventura (1992), “*City is psyche*” (p. 82).

Like most theories in our culture, the cognitive focus is essentially on the individual and the family. Conceptions of the environment are diluted at best. In itself, it is not bad to become as clear as possible about the relationship between thinking, emotions, and behavior and to wrap it all up in the blanket of meaning-making. But social work practice is multiphasic and multidimensional, and we must be as clear and resonant as possible about the continuing interplay and dynamic dialectic⁷ between people and their several environments in order to be effective at what we do. The late Harry Specht and his colleague Mark Courtney in 1994 called for social work to return to a more collectivist understanding of the professional mission and approach. We have, they argued, found ourselves immersed in the work of helping one-on-one. Certainly, the theories that have grown and flourished often have encouraged this, not to mention social and cultural changes as well. A collectivist understanding is predicated on an astute understanding of the interactions between individuals and groups and their environments:

An alternative view of human development tends to support a more communalistic approach to the solution of social problems. We refer to this perspective as the collectivist view of human development. With this view, the process of human development is perceived to be one in which individuals learn to become participants in the organized social life around them—the family, neighborhood, school, work, voluntary associations, government and so on. The focus is not the individual but, rather, the process by which individuals participate in and utilize collective life. (pp. 138–39)

In fact, social work must, in order to be loyal to and to preserve its mission, figure out even more penetrating ways of conceiving of, talking about, and practicing in that complex area of human life where environment and individual collide—that is to say, everywhere!

7. Dialectic has many meanings. For our purposes, it means development through continual apposition and resolution of tensions in beliefs, norms, etc., between individuals and between individuals and their environments.

RADICAL/CRITICAL THEORY

The radical/critical theory is a polyglot group of theories, and proponents of each do not necessarily regard others as kin. They include critical theory (the Frankfurt School), radical-Marxist theory, postmodern theory, certain feminist theories, and multicultural perspectives. Although they are all different in certain respects, they do present some common themes and principles important, I think, to social work practice and philosophy. They are coming together in a very interesting way, perhaps foreshadowing the development of a larger “social theory,” a “grand narrative . . . [and] analyses that paint with a broad brush” (Agger, 1998, p. 2). This emerging theory has several features. It rejects positivism and the idea that there is a lawfully wrought reality lying just beyond our nose. For critical theorists, all knowledge is assembled out of the raw materials of political and social inclinations, usually unwritten or unspoken. Scientists, philosophers, and theorists typically make a variety of prefigured assumptions—often unexamined—about the world out there. Critical theorists are determined to make their biases and values known, and they also are energetic in figuring out the assumptions of other theories and programs. For these theorists, society is best understood in terms of its historical evolution and progress; the past, present, and future inform each other. Given discerning and critical analysis of history, societal transformation toward freedom is always possible. And that is the point of critical theory—to understand the historical and political sources of oppression and then to use knowledge to move toward social transformation and individual freedom.

Take oppression. As we have seen, much oppression is structural and issues from overbearing social institutions and ideologies. Oppression often goes untended or unnoticed because of false consciousness—usually involving an unwitting accommodation and adjustment to oppressive normative structures (whether schools, churches, governmental regimes, HMOs, it doesn't matter). In this regard, critical theorists score positivist science for what they see as support of the sway of the “normative” world. A more critical social theory, on the other hand, would require the raising of consciousness, the strengthening of individual and collective agency (toward real autonomy, choice, commitment, and action), and the restoration of genuine communication between those who share the same lifeworld. These are defined as preconditions for the liberating metamorphosis of society. Such transformation begins in the smallest and daily nooks and crannies of life—the family, the school, the workplace, the expression of sexual roles and orientation, and the unfolding of individual identity, among others (Agger, 1998; Brown, 1973; Habermas, 1996; Lyotard, 1984; Marcuse, 1966). Critical

theorists in recent years have also found in modern popular culture a fraudulent kind of consciousness that mystifies the reigning institutions of power and rationalizes existing conditions while soothing any impulses one might have to object or see through what is actually happening (Pfohl, 1992).

Unfortunately, much of the language of these theories and perspectives is overblown, unnecessarily obscure, and inaccessible to people who are, in fact, oppressed. This is a supreme irony, and many theorists have tried to address it, for example, Jurgen Habermas (1983), Russell Jacoby (1983) and more recently, Ben Agger (1989). Agger claims that this is a defect that also afflicts most scientific and theoretical writing:

As such, then, the essay is literature that refuses to suppress the author's [perspective] and passion. The essayist recognizes that science is an essay too—simply that, an attempt to disclose a fundamental world. As often as the essay succeeds in provoking thought, it also fails. Either its language is too private, its prose too leaden, or its imagination too limited to spark insight and thus provoke other literary versions of it. (p. 213)

There are differences between various schools of radical/critical thought. For example, many interpretive theorists—radical constructivists—do not like the idea of false consciousness, believing that it is disrespectful of the beliefs that people actually hold deeply. But the theme that unites them all, in my opinion, is that oppression and the constraints on the freedom of people(s) are real, historically grounded, and institutionally transmitted. Likewise, liberation and freedom, always difficult, are always possible. Liberation of the human spirit can even be demonstrated historically, but it always begins with the development of insight and awareness of one's condition and one's prospects. And, regrettable but inevitable is the fact that oppressed people often come to oppress themselves through self-loathing (Freire, 1996; Moreau, 1990).

Nonetheless, the difference between normal science (see chapter 1)—positivist theory—and critical theory is relatively simple: the positivists look for lawful relationships in the world and are about the business of formulating them from the evidence they gather. Critical theorists emphasize the importance of historical evolution of society and social relationships (especially ones of domination, oppression, and hegemony) and are disposed to plumb history and search its body for insights about how the present and the future might be changed (toward the liberation of consciousness and action). Critical theorists know they have a political agenda; positive theorists deny that they do (Agger, 1989; Freire, 1996; Habermas, 1996; Moreau, 1990).

The Frankfurt School, sometimes known as a part of Western Marxism, has been most influential in the development and later articulation of critical

theory. Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, and, later, Horkheimer's student, Jurgen Habermas, began the Institute for Social Research. Later, under the threat of Nazi suppression, Adorno and Horkheimer came to America. Lacking a vigorous Marxist/leftist environment in academia, Adorno collaborated with other social scientists in a massive study of prejudice that resulted in the enormous and influential volume, *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950/1982). Spurred initially by the attempt to discover what possessed ordinary German citizens to suspend their moral judgment about the genocide occurring before their eyes, the study found that there existed a personality type in all capitalist/industrial societies that they defined as the authoritarian personality. These essentially were powerless people, painfully aware of their condition at some level, who as a means of achieving a sense of power and influence, identified and cooperated, often unknowingly, with the ideas of fascism and were susceptible to its propaganda. A compelling strain of the authoritarian personality was the need to find enemies—usually vulnerable ones—and the propensity to be dependent upon authoritarian, antidemocratic, and persuasive leaders. These attitudes and personality patterns appear in every aspect of a person's life from family to work to religious belief (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson & Sanford, 1950/1982).

These theorists and their intellectual kin departed from Marx by insinuating themselves in many areas of cultural and esthetic life beyond class and the economy. Herbert Marcuse, for example, absorbed psychoanalytic theory, and in his classic *Eros and Civilization* (1966), he argued that in Freudian theory we might find an exquisite evidence for the individual and social roots of repression (oppression). For civilization to perpetuate itself, the id, and its operating method, the pleasure principle, must be tamed. The ego, the agency of civilization, operating on the reality principle, accomplishes that domestication in the individual. But social institutions—the workplace, the school, the family, the polity, the church—continue the work of suppressing the pleasure principle and assuring that the repressed will not return. Social and political institutions exact way too much in the way of repression (of wishes, fantasies, organismic energies) in the service of maintaining their domination. So, in the end, people knuckle under by restraining their delight, delaying their gratification, throwing themselves instead into their work, transforming sexual and sensual energy into becoming productive workers and unquestioning citizens, and doing this in exchange for imagined security. As subsequent “radical” psychoanalysts have realized, this magnificent program for repression ensures there will be no rebellion of those whose voices are silenced—homosexuals, women, people of color, the working class, and so forth. Unfortunately, it also exacts a terrible price in terms of limiting awareness, sapping somatic and psychic energy, and reigning in the

possibility of genuine organismic pleasure, the possibility of which lies at the heart of a genuinely critical consciousness, and effective action (Kovel, 1981). Capitalism has a way of transmuting and deforming these pleasures through consumerism and the constant supply of “bread and circuses” (Harrington, 1965) whether they are sports, shopping, cinematic sex, or technological trinkets. Given this, who would know that they were not genuinely fulfilled or aware?

The Terms and Conditions of Critical/Radical Theory

In 1949, Leonard Mayo, speaking before the National Conference of Social Work, said this about the moral requisites of the social work profession:

[It is] our concern for people; our respect for the dignity, integrity, and rights of individuals; our abhorrence of injustice as one of the greatest foes of freedom; our responsibility to speak and act with respect to causes as well as the consequence of social maladjustment; and our major concerns, not only for prevention, restoration, and rehabilitation, but for helping to create homes, neighborhoods, and nations in which beings may live out their lives and develop their full potentials as people. (1949, p. 24)

In the hyped-up environment of professionalism, certification, the rise of the psychiatric/medical/pharmaceutical/insurance cartel, the roguish psychologizing of the social condition, the psychotherapy and medication prescribed for every conceivable human frailty and struggle, Mayo's summons now seems quaint, if not antiquated. Its ambition may seem a bit naive to us, but it is important to remember that not just social workers but theorists and practitioners, citizens, and leaders of all kinds have cherished similar humane longings. In the 1960s, these longings seemed close to accomplishment. But the retrenchment of more progressive and radical impulses—culturally and socially, politically and professionally—has been steadily occurring since the mid-1970s.

Radicalism as a practice has fallen on hard times.⁸ Scorned by conservatives, given a bad name by mindless activists, ridiculed by political leaders, and muted by the enormous successes and excesses of the marketplace, radical theorizing and practice has virtually disappeared. Yes, the theories mentioned above all have their feet in the water of radicalism, if we take radicalism to mean getting at the “roots” of the matter. But today, public

8. Some of the argument here is borrowed from my 1987 essay, “Insight as Social Critique,” in *California Sociologist*, 10, 11–26.

philosophy and policy seem unremittingly conservative, the liberal (not radical but closer to it than most public views) agenda is in shambles, and the contempt now expressed for liberals and their ideas once was reserved for communists and deadbeat dads. Russell Jacoby (1975/1997) blames everybody for this state of affairs. We suffer from social amnesia, he claims, a blithe ignorance of the historical evolution of issues, events, and institutions; a puzzling gap in the awareness of the social and political configurations of our lives. He chronicles its demise in psychology and psychoanalysis particularly and ends with these words:

To read successively Freud, the neo-Freudians, and the post-Freudians is to witness the effect of social amnesia: the repression of critical thought. The vital relationship between mind and memory turns malignant; oblivion and novelty feed off each other and flourish. . . . A critical psychology must not succumb; it must not forget the madness of the whole and ideologically flaunt the virtues of a human existence that is today inhuman. It must aid the victims—the lost, the beaten, the hopeless—without glorifying them. (p. 151)

These words, passionate but angry and bitter, were written in 1975 when repression of the rebellious—whether people of color, students, prisoners, leftists—was at its height. In the 1997 edition of the book, Jacoby chose not to change a word. Yet my guess is that these words ring true with far fewer people today than a mere generation ago. The principles and conditions of critical/radical work, however, extend beyond generations.

THEORY IS PRACTICE

Every theory, even those that do not admit it, has practical intent. Critical/radical theories are not just fabricated to make people miserable over the state of injustice and the reality of oppression, but they are intended to provide the insights and principles of action that can lead toward the transformation of society. About her struggle and fascination with feminist theory, bell hooks (1994) says this:

I find writing—theoretical talk—to be most meaningful when it invites readers to engage in critical reflection and to engage in the practice of feminism. To me, this theory emerges from the concrete, from my efforts to make sense of everyday life experiences, from my efforts to intervene critically in my life and the lives of others. This to me is what makes feminist transformation possible. Personal testimony, personal experience, is such fertile ground for the production of liberatory feminist theory because it usually forms the

base of our theory making. While we work to resolve those issues that are most pressing in daily life . . . we engage in a critical process of theorizing that enables and empowers. (p. 70)

Here bell hooks also reaffirms the corollary principle, that practice informs theory. The related Marxist term *praxis* also suggests that critical consciousness and awareness of alienation are the preconditions for action toward redress. And, alternatively, praxis—liberating interaction and action in the material world of everyday life—breeds insight or “theory” (Hansen, 1976).

The great French postmodern philosopher and theorist (some critical theorists hope he was one of them as well) Michel Foucault was at great pains to understand how theory and practice fit together, especially in the human sciences and social practices. Foucault used the term “discipline” to describe the gathering and employment of institutionalized power by groups of people (like professions—social workers, for example) who, in turn, through the legitimating offices of society, turn human beings into objects of study (producing theories, for example, about people who abuse children or people who have mental illness). These defined groups become subjects for instruments, procedures, techniques, and applications that will control, change, or chasten them. How they shall be addressed and the terms of how they will be treated are expressed in discourse (theories, policies, etc.). “Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power. . . . [it] transmits and produces power” (Foucault, 1990, p. 101). Think of how we talk about (the discourse of) adolescent sexuality. We often limit it, for example, to complaints about teenage pregnancy, which is almost always discussed as a bad thing as are the teens who perpetrate it. Carol-Anne O’Brien, taking a Foucauldian approach to analysis, comments on the fact, in both social work and society, that we lack a “discourse of desire” when it comes to teenagers. That is, we assume that adolescent sexuality *should be* prevented or delayed on the basis of defining it as deviant or dangerous in terms of health or social behavior. Given such a discourse, the practices that emerge are often heavy-handed and punitive or marginalizing (in some school districts adolescent girls who do get pregnant can’t attend class). This pedagogy regarding sexuality also reflects our discourse (and practices) about adolescence as a stage of development as well (O’Brien, 1999). We alternatively do not like or are frightened by adolescence.

THE PERSONAL IS INSTITUTIONAL/
THE INSTITUTIONAL IS PERSONAL

The shackling of personal insight and awareness makes it difficult for us to see the institutional components of personal troubles. Let us examine

eating disorders to exemplify this principle. The usual understandings of eating disorders focus on the individual and the individual in the family. These are sometimes discussed as endless family struggles over the independence fought on the battlefield of the body and appearance. There is usually passing mention of the media and the marketplace and their distorting effects on body image of young women. But the primary focus is the individual locked in this fateful struggle within the family. For the moment, let us expand the discourse to include the culture, social institutions, and political factors more distinctly. Young women are a significant body of consumers (adolescents, generally, have serious buying power). Because of their influence and purchasing power, it is important that their appetites and desires be manipulated in the marketplace and the media in order to sustain and expand their consumption patterns. These patterns are rarely based on meeting genuine needs. For this to work, and for the profit margins and number of consumers to increase, the marketplace must convert wants and wishes into what seem to the young consumer to be serious and compelling needs. Advertising, for example, is often a device for creating enormous anxiety about the adequacy of one's self—mind, body, class—and this anxiety can be transmuted into an urgent sense that one needs this product to become whole, attractive, competent, desirable, accepted—whatever. Success of this ploy is dependent in part on three things: (1) the reality of peer pressure; (2) creating a “vacuum” in the self so that one feels the need to fill it with products and consumption in order to be adequate, desirable, smart, sexy or “with it”; and (3) blurring the distinction between reality and illusion so that it is difficult to discern what one really desires and how one really looks, even if one is really hungry or not. For many young women, struggling for autonomy and meaning, acceptance and relationship, the final battleground for success is also the frequent target of the media and the marketplace—the body and body image. Add to this the fact that American society is enormously ambivalent about food and eating (on every corner you can find an “All You Can Eat Buffet,” just \$8.95; at the same time realize that Dr. Atkins' *New Diet Revolution* has been a best-seller for months).

We suffer from a collective food angst, a sometimes fatal, sometimes merely fatuous, condition that has turned food into a mortal enemy, an obsession, an addiction, a religion, a do-it-yourself immortality kit, a fashion statement—everything and anything except that ordinary and sublime substance, plain as brown bread, fancy as Beluga caviar, which nourishes and enlivens our bodies, our hearts, our souls. (Wylie, 1999, p. 5)

In her own alienated way, an adolescent with an eating disorder is living out this extraordinary antithesis, wanting more from food than can possibly be

had and not wanting food's terrible joke on us—fatness. So an anorexic is struggling to retain control of her body against the onslaughts of the marketplace, family, and peers and this cultural tension between Puritan denial and sybaritic indulgence. But the estrangement from the reality of her body has become so exaggerated that she cannot protect it, nor can she make the distinction between the actuality of her painful thinness and imminent starvation and the prevailing cultural image of women and their bodies promoted through the media and the market. The scope of her battle to create a viable self comes down to the body. But the preoccupations and paradoxes of the culture (thin is wonderful, fat is bad; "Here, have another Twinkie") and the absence of more poignant and sweeping values and concerns for adolescent girls continue the deadly drumbeat: you eat too much, you don't eat enough; you are too fat, you are too thin; you are hungry, you are sated; you are ugly, you would be attractive if only. . . . This is all filtered through the manufactured imagery of how her body should look (Kaminer, 1996; Kovel, 1981; Slater, 1990; Wylie, 1999). Finally, like most people alienated from a vibrant and organismic sense of who they are, the person with anorexia may suffer from a submerged dialectic, and although I cannot say what it specifically is, I would not be surprised if it revolved around the tension over being controlled (dependence) and controlling one's own destiny (competence). The point here is not that family dynamics are not important (but, they, too, occur in a sociopolitical atmosphere) or that biology may not have a role in eating disorders. Rather, it is that any effort to help someone suffering from these difficulties that does not take into account the political and institutional is going to miss the real essence of the life-and-death internal struggle of the young woman.

One more example of the intimate relationship between the institutional and personal: the pharmaceutical sector of the U.S. economy has the largest legal profits of any industry. They are so high in part because there are no governmental controls or limits set on drug prices in the United States. Three times as many people, mostly in the tropical Third World countries, die of preventable, curable diseases (malaria, tuberculosis, for example) than die of AIDS—more than 6 million in 1998. These countries, often already poor, are decimated in terms of workforce, and the ripple effects of illnesses and deaths in families and communities are devastating to their economies and cultural integrity (Silverstein, 1999). This year in Angola, for example, polio will become epidemic among young children because of the failure to have available the tools and techniques and the medicines that would make it so preventable (McCarthy, 1999). Also, in the past 20 years or so, only 1 percent of the new medicines put on the market by global pharmaceutical companies were designed to specifically treat old and new tropical diseases

that stalk these countries. On the other hand, as Ken Silverstein points out, these companies can't get to the market fast enough with what have been dubbed "lifestyle drugs." These drugs address things like facial wrinkling, toenail fungus, impotence, baldness, and obesity (granted, obesity can be life-threatening). Silverstein puts it this way:

The drug industry's calculus in apportioning its resources is cold-blooded, but there's no disputing that one old, fat . . . bald, fungus-ridden rich man who can't get it up counts for more than a half a billion people who are vulnerable to malaria but too poor to buy the remedies they need. (1999, p. 14)

A bit pungent, nonetheless Silverstein's words are meant to draw the connection between the reality of the drug market and the needless death of a young father in a village in Tanzania. The drug companies did not cause this death, but the policies that encourage such practices are, in the end, public health matters and, thus, complicit.

THE ETHIC OF INDIGNATION AND HUMANE INQUIRY

John Romanyshyn, through the power of example and the force of his words, years ago called on social work to honor its ethic of indignation (1971). Not pontifical self-righteousness or mindless indignation, this ethic sustains a palpable sense of outrage and pain at the indignities inflicted—unjustly, unnecessarily, and often illegally—on vulnerable people(s) (Saleebey, 1990). Many of the groups of people of concern to social work experience on a daily basis acts and attitudes that subvert their dignity and stymie hopes for the better. The ethic of indignation requires of us not the slick and detached role of bemused expert or facile therapist but dialogue and collaboration with those we assist. We are called to strive for and support the triumph of organism over machine or bureaucracy, of home over institution, of community over marketplace, of learning over profit, of identity over celebrity, of the real over the illusory (Saleebey). In order to critically understand who people are and what they are about, to be respectful of the vagaries and varieties of human existence, we must give up, if only for the moment, our illusions and pretenses, our myths and stereotypes to get closer to the real life of the people whom we would help and assist. We must tolerate the reality of ambiguity, paradox, contradiction, and the continuing tension between what is hoped for and what is hampered in the lives of people. Typically, our knowledge of people, the inquiry that has produced that knowledge, is aloof and certainly not indigenous. "Mainstream pedagogy simply reproduces those forms of subjectivity [and knowledge] preferred by

the dominant culture, domesticating, pacifying, and deracinating⁹ agency [autonomy], harmonizing a world of disjuncture, and incongruity, and smoothing the unruly features of daily existence” (McLaren, 1995, p. 231). Social work is perhaps less culpable in these privileged and removed discourses than many of the social sciences and humanities, but we are increasingly moving to the beat of that drum (Gil, 1990; Specht & Courtney, 1994) Renato Rosaldo says this about social scientists and, by implication, social practitioners like social workers:

In my view, social analysts can rarely, if ever, become detached observers. There is no Archimedean point from which to remove oneself from the mutual conditioning of social relations and human knowledge. Cultures and their “positioned subjects” are laced with power and power in turn is shaped by cultural forms. Like form and feeling, culture and power are inextricably intertwined. In discussing forms of social knowledge, both of analysts and of human actors, one must consider their social positions. What are the complexities of the speaker’s social identity? What life experiences have shaped it? Does the person speak from a position of relative dominance or relative subordination? (1989, p. 169)

The import of this is clear. If we are to truly understand oppression, the limits of agency, and autonomy imposed by the privileged and powerful on those less so, we must see and honor how the oppressed analyze their own condition. “Hegel’s analysis of the master’s imaginative leap to discover slave consciousness . . . remains incomplete until it includes the fact that the slave, for reasons of workaday survival, already knows what’s on the master’s mind” (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 189).

EMPOWERMENT AND THE DISCOVERY OF STRENGTHS

The reality and force of oppression and its attendant processes—mystification, medicalization, depoliticization, for example—all work to obscure and/or undermine the legitimacy and reality of culture and the potent forces inherent, even though immanent or interred, in the individual or the community. It is the work of empowerment not to give power to the people (it is not ours to give) but to assist them in discovering, elaborating, and expending resources and tools, knowledge and wisdom, and determination and will that are already present or potential.

To discover the power within people and communities, we must subvert and abjure pejorative labels; provide opportunities for

9. I assume McLaren means by *deracinating* the ignoring of the reality of race and culture in the usual styles of pedagogy.

connections to family, institutional and communal resources; assail the victim mind-set; forswear paternalism; trust people's intuitions, accounts, perspectives, and energies; and believe in people's dreams. (Saleebey, 1997, p. 8)

Steve Rose (1990) argues that empowerment "means a process of dialogue through which the client is continuously supported to produce the range of possibility that she/he sees appropriate to his/her needs; that the client is the center for all decisions that affect her/his life." This would include "externalization and critical questioning about contextual experience" (p. 49).

People who are crushed by institutions, individuals, circumstance, or relationships often do not see their own capacities, wiles, and resources as strengths. This is a serious form of alienation. In a just society, personal, familial, and communal strengths and assets would be important goods, supported through social policies at all levels, articulated and developed through education and mentoring, and deliberately employed in community organizations, institutions, and associations. Given this view, the fact that we are so obsessed with problems and defects, that the "discourse of deficit" has spread so widely (Gergen, 1994), that we have become so enamored of explaining and explaining away social problems through individual fault, means that (1) we do not honor or deploy the wisdom and capacities of individuals, families, and communities in the service of addressing serious social concerns; (2) that we allow the ample fund of social capital of any community to erode; and (3) we turn citizens into clients in order to control, change, or chastise them. These all undermine the possibility of social justice: that each citizen will receive those basic social resources, formal and naturally occurring (education, health care, shelter, etc.), that underwrite the development of personal resources. To fail here is to ensure that the supply of strengths and assets will diminish through disuse and underdevelopment.

The argument above would seem to be an indirect slap in the face of psychotherapy. But there has always been a version of therapy that is rebellious, smart-assed, and sassy. Many years ago, the psychiatrist Robert Lindner, acclaimed for his case study, *Rebel Without a Cause*, which became a celebrated movie with James Dean, wrote a book called *Prescription for Rebellion* (1952). He accused psychotherapy for being a tool for promoting mindless adjustment to both oppressive and inane social norms. In this book, he claimed that the purpose of therapy is to promote rebellion, to help people develop those capacities that make life vibrant, and promote committed citizenship and social action. Among the qualities that a "rebel" possesses are

- Awareness: a quality of understanding of those people and institutions

that oppress and limit, and the capacity to bring knowledge to bear continuously on problems of living (this is much like conscientization, isn't it?).

- **Identity:** the feeling that one has control and use of self-powers and can have impact on the world.

- **Skepticism:** the courage to be critical and wary of any assumptive authority and to demand the best of it, whether it resides in an individual or institution (this could end up in social protest, for example).

- **Responsibility:** the ability to create and defend one's distinctive meanings and the capacity for conviction that sustains action. The commitment to the communal sources of one's meaning and support (culture, for example).

- **Employment:** the capacity to engage oneself in something that has importance and meaning rather than to dabble with the trivial.

- **Tenseness:** the awareness that life is serious, tentative, short, and demands one's best work.

Lest we think this is a phenomenon of another day, today the psychotherapist Cloé Madanes practices something she calls social action therapy. Her clients are frequently families in which people have been abused or violated. Her approach to therapy begins with the assumption that all psychopathology begins with defilement, persecution, violence, and discrimination of someone. These are spiritual, interpersonal, and social problems, and they occur from the most intimate setting to vast arenas where violence is carried out (like ethnic cleansing). Madanes says:

Within each therapy client stirs a rebellious heart, a desire to challenge the status quo. Therapy is a forum for thoughts and feelings that are often considered to be unacceptable, antisocial, unsafe, or dangerous to morality and good order. For this reason dictatorships typically persecute therapists and ban all but the most medicalized form of mental health treatment, which they use as punishment.

(1999, p. 49)

Although one might look with more than a little skepticism at the implied claims here, the idea is right from a radical point of view. The people that you see as a social worker are often among the most beaten down, abused, discouraged, and devalued in society. It is in the interests of our values and social mission to work to resuscitate the rebellious heart and to find alliances and resources for full-fledged, pulsatingly vital citizenship.

Critique of Radical/Critical Theories

Although the core ideas of these theories are admirable and do provide the basis for social critique, it has been argued that they really do not lead

to any practicable strategies and methods for working with individuals and families. The practice of a radical/critical approach falls far short of providing an enriched curriculum and impressive array of practice techniques and methods. But the argument could be made that, in fact, a more radical approach to practice heightens the relevance of social work values and ethics in practice; expands the reach of social work interventions from families to neighborhoods, to city commissions and state legislatures; and opens up dramatically the options for practice intervention. With regard to the latter, Mimi Abramovitz says it well:

The theories [systems, empowerment, and others] assume that individuals grow, change, and develop a sense of mastery best when they gain self-insight, have real choices, and secure access to the resources and power needed to realize these goals. The theories recognize that communities thrive when governments promote individual and collective responsibility, equal opportunities, and social solidarity. (1998)

So, inherent in social work practice, generally, is the kernel of the radical/critical agenda and promise.

Another apprehension that more radical theorists have is that social work, whatever else it is, is one of the social practices that is an instrument of social control for some people. Working in a public welfare agency requires a fealty and loyalty to the mission of that state organization. That mission, whether stated or not, is to keep a lid on poor families, to ensure that they do not have more than they are entitled to, to guarantee that they will resemble in obvious ways, "normal families" (Figueira-McDonough, 1995; Galper, 1975). For you as a public welfare social worker to engage in a radical and emancipatory practice under such conditions, and in the current environment of conservatism, is folly unless you are prepared to "go to the barriers" to bring about change.

A related mandate is that if social work practice is political practice, then it can occur only under the banner of a political movement. The unprecedented challenges to the strictures, structures, policies, and programs of the welfare state begun in the Reagan administration and ending in the welfare reforms of 1996 required, at the very least, sociopolitical protest and alternative ideological and programmatic frameworks. But, for the most part, there were none. Social work remained, if not silent, quieted (Reisch, 1995). One reason may be that social work has become slowly but surely shorn of political ideologies and requisites for action. In the end, social work, if it is to put a public face on its values and commitments, must rededicate itself to a political vision of the world. Democratic socialism, for some, has been thought to be a hospitable nesting place for social work action (Galper, 1975, 1980; Harrington, 1972). Such a coupling of social work with a specific

political view has actually been a part of its history. The rank-and-file movement in the 1930s, associated openly with democratic socialist ideas, was a vigorous, loose aggregation of social workers committed to social and economic justice, the dismantling of discrimination and racism, comprehensive social welfare programs, and the unionization of social workers. At its peak, at the end of the 1930s, it had some 15,000 members and a widely circulated professional journal, *Social Work Today*. There have been other upsurges in reformist thinking and activity, but most have not been as politically emphatic as the rank-and-file-movement (Ehrenreich, 1985). But though reform is a part of social work's past, it may not be much a part of its future.

Finally, the radical/critical view raises in dramatic relief the age-old debate about social work's focus and obligation: reform and activism or clinical treatment? The individual or society? It is often pointed out that this struggle between two impulses has been in social work's veins since its inception. The distinctive approaches to practice between Jane Addams and Mary Richmond, Porter Lee's differentiation between social work as cause and function, the writings of Bertha Capen Reynolds, on the one hand, and Virginia Robinson on the other, all speak to the ongoing strain between these two possibilities. Superficially, it might seem, given the current influences in medicine and psychiatry and the privatization of what was formerly in the public domain, that the debate has been decided in favor of letting our radical heritage fade from view and allowing our emancipatory impulse to wither. But Karen Haynes (1998), in concluding her imagined debate with the late Harry Specht (see above), says what may be on the minds of many social workers and social work educators:

As we embrace the notions that to act to right social wrongs, to work to increase diversity and reduce discrimination, to expand choice and opportunity are the goals of social work, then, I hope we will understand that these goals might equally and legitimately lead us to individual treatment or to social reform strategies, and we as professionals must follow them there. (p. 509)

CONCLUSION

This has been a long journey. After such a trek, what can one conclude about these diverse, engaging, and sometimes contrary theoretical perspectives? Well, the easy answer is "not much." The assortment here reflects, in an indirect way, the wondrous hodgepodge of social work practice—its many fields, its many appreciations, its many sanctions. But what seems interesting to me, more than that, are the consistent themes that run through

these seemingly variegated conceptual fields. All of these approaches, albeit in different tempos and with different intonation, sound the call to

- Regard with roughly equal interest, depending on circumstance, the interests of the individual and the requirements of the environment.

- Understand that life is tough, often not fair, frequently a struggle, but human beings, individually and collectively, have many resources upon which to draw, in making their way in life.

- Remember that the battle to be who one can be is often fought in the context of the most intimate relationships.

- Be aware that intimate relationships, indeed even our innermost thoughts, sometimes reflect uncannily what is happening in the larger social, political, and economic worlds.

- Use this knowledge to empower those we would understand and help, whether it is encouraging conscientization or the making of a new family narrative.

In the next chapter, we will begin a journey in understanding the relationships between individuals, families, and communities.

M and M Dialogue

MEREDITH: These ideas seem more like the reasons that I came to social work in the first place. Really, like working to empower people, helping them understand what's keeping them from moving on to a better place. I'm not really sure whether you have to be some sort of rebel to do that or whether working quietly and patiently with a kid who's disturbed is just as good and effective. Isn't it the values that make the difference in the end?

MITCHELL: I suppose values make an enormous difference. There are the values of our profession, for sure. But then each of these theories has values embedded in them, don't you think?

MEREDITH: Being a newcomer to all this, that sounds right to me, but I guess I would ask, if a theory doesn't uphold social work values, should we or why would we use it, anyway?

MITCHELL: You've touched upon something about which there is a lot of disagreement. Not about whether the theory should support social work values but, in the end, what is the test of a theory? Is it just that it works—I mean that it has been demonstrated through research to be effective in achieving certain outcomes or in making certain assessments more accurate? Or that it facilitates the achievement of social work purposes, that it is sensed by those who use it to be effective and to “feel right?”

MEREDITH: I don't know—at least I'd have to think about that—but something occurs to me that may be related. The talk about eating disorders hit home. I guess I was bulimic—what do they call them now—“me, too, anorexics”—for a few years in adolescence and early adulthood. I never got treatment, and I guess I grew out of it, or my life changed so much I had to change along with it. I can remember reading about eating disorders in secret, but I never really found anyone who said, let's look at this thing from the cultural or from a societal point of view. But when you were talking about radical theory and the social and cultural things that might affect something that seems so individual like bulimia, I was really struck. I can remember endlessly looking at models, movie stars, reading *Cosmo*, thinking, “Oh my God, I am really fat, gross!” Then after school, I'd come home, turn on TV and sit and eat for 2 or 3 hours while I'm watching these thin, beautiful people run around the TV screen. I guess this all made me feel so inadequate, so ugly and unattractive that I thought I could make myself feel better—what did you say?—by filling that void inside me with food. So I ate and ate. Then, disgusted with myself, I would sneak into the bathroom, run some water so no-one would hear, and bend over the toilet and stick my finger down my throat and vomit. And, so, the void was back again. But I didn't really think about it while I was doing it, it was like I was in a trance. Maybe that's what addictions are about. Society always is implying that you've come up short somehow and you sort of blot it out of your mind like a trance. Then you can use the substance, eat the food, buy the clothes you don't need, bet on the horse, without really thinking about what you are doing. Because if you did think about it—really—maybe you wouldn't do it. Maybe you wouldn't be such a consumer.

MITCHELL: That's quite a testimony and a lot of perceptiveness. I am humbled that you would share that with me. Maybe it shows how critical insight can deepen understanding or change your mind or behavior. What do you think would have happened if you had come across something to stimulate this insight in you when you were in the midst of this struggle?

MEREDITH: I'm not sure I would have been ready for it. I was so bummed out about myself, I just don't know.

MITCHELL: One other thing I'm interested in. Was there any one thing in all this theory talk that struck you or really stood out, besides what you have just shared with me?

MEREDITH: A lot of things. But two mostly. First, I do see a lot of similarity between all these theories even though the language is different. Like the defense mechanisms of psychoanalytic theory and adaptive strategies

in the ecosystems approach. But I was really fascinated when you touched upon the idea of embodied mind—who was it you said who developed this, Lakoff? The whole idea that the way our body is and reacts and the way that we think are so tightly related is weird but fascinating.

MITCHELL: Yes, it was Lakoff and Johnson. I find it fascinating as well. Another one of their base metaphors is “relationships are enclosures.” The subjective experience is, of course, an interpersonal relationship. The sensorimotor experience is being in an enclosed space. The example they use of the metaphor in action is: “We’ve been in a *close* relationship for years, but it’s beginning to seem *confining*.”

MEREDITH: I can relate to that!

MITCHELL: And the primary experience is living in the same enclosed physical space with the people you are most closely related to.

MEREDITH: I wonder if we really listened more carefully to how people talk if we couldn’t get a clearer idea of what they want or want to get away from or how they just see the world. Maybe we could use our talk to bring about a change in the metaphors that they use. Like if a purpose is talked about in terms of going some place, reaching some destination, if we shouldn’t use that same language to help a person get going to reach a goal. To get there.

MITCHELL: You are way ahead of the game, Meredith. Let’s talk again.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Person/Environment, Part I: Families—The Variety of Us

I knew other places besides home.

—NUALA Ó FAOLAIN

I have learned a few things about raising a family. First of all, I am no expert. Parenting is a learning experience. In a way we are no more than camp counselors to our children, guiding them through the woods. We do not own them or their thoughts. We can influence them, in the short time we have them, by our good or bad examples. I hope I have learned enough from the good and bad things that have happened to me in my childhood to give my kids a better shot at being caring and wise children of the late twentieth century with all its wonder and fright. (p. 105)

So says Jimmy Buffett.

Children identify with a group of others like themselves and take on the norms of the group. They don't identify with their parents because parents are not people like themselves—parents are grownups. . . . There has always been a bond between parents and their children, but the intense, guilt-ridden form of parenting we see today is unprecedented. In societies that don't send their kids to school and have not yet been penetrated by advice-givers, children learn most of what they need to know from other children. Although parenting styles differ drastically from one culture to another—too hard in some places, too soft in others—children's groups are pretty much the same around the world. That is why children get socialized in every society, even though their parents don't read Dr. Spock. Their brains develop normally in every society too, even though their parents don't read *Goodnight Moon*. (p. 358)

So says Judith Rich Harris.

I was seeing a lot of mother–daughter pairs. Most of these mothers were not perfect, but they were pretty good to their daughters. Their daughters' anger, out-of-controlness, just didn't seem to me

to be explainable by looking at the mothers. The more I got to know these girls, the more I realized the issues weren't really about their mother at all. They were about worrying about getting abused in a relationship with a boy or getting hideously teased or the terrible fearfulness of rejection by peers or about hating one's own body. I've always been interested in anthropology and how culture affects people's mental health, so I naturally turned toward looking at society to understand what was going on. (p. 6)

So says Mary Pipher.

Here are three views of the family, although implicitly different in some ways, suggesting to us, as individuals and professionals, that we may have been a little too ardent during the past two generations or so about promoting the family as the primary source of influence on children. Children are raised not only in families (if they are fortunate) but also in the midst of other people, crucial social and cultural forces and institutions, and signal historical and epochal events. The family is an extremely important influence within those environments. But it is by no means the only influence. And there are times in life that the family may be of little moment compared to the impact of other groups and social and cultural forces. Think of the importance of peer groups for adolescents. Parents attempting to overcome the sway of their son's peers about matters of dress, music, and language would be well advised to direct their energies elsewhere—perhaps into maintaining some harmony in the home and some predictability in their daily routines.

In this chapter, we will consider five basic concerns. What seems to be the current status of the family in our society? What is a family for? What constitutes a family? What is the relationship of the family to other elements of the social and physical environment, such as the community and neighborhood? What are the sources of family resilience? I want to be careful here not to throw the family out with the baby and the bath water. But I will try to develop an understanding of the family that is consonant with emerging knowledge and insight and with the experience of families, as I know them.

THE FAMILY AND SOCIETY TODAY: WHAT'S UP?

Our understanding of the family and its functions has changed as the world around families has changed. The 1990s, in particular, have seen dramatic changes in cultural beliefs, norms, and the social and technological tools that affect family well-being and in the pace and tempo of life. Communications technologies have flung wide the gates of connections with other people—known and unknown. The media have gradually and inexorably assimilated

themselves into every corner of our lives. The marketplace has become a standard-setter for all kinds of behavior, its incessant drumbeat thumping the importance of consumption and the value of acquisition. Drugs are widely available, and their lure is enhanced by the implicit celebration of addictions of all kinds (shop more, eat more, buy another lotto ticket, have another Miller Lite). Rampant and ubiquitous sexual imagery and sexual titillation push against the values that have traditionally sustained families in this society. The tensions and misunderstandings between the sexes (the abuse of women and girls continues to rise) and the disunity and discord between generations (much of our activity is age-segregated; the abuse of elders and children persists) make détente between the groups that make up families problematic. The reign and glorification of violence—implied and real—continues to jab at our sense of security. The widespread accessibility of guns, the actual violence done in formerly secure venues such as schools and the workplace, the continuing ravages of war around the world (families and children continue to be the primary victims in many of the scores of conflicts currently flaring up), and the graphic images of violence and destruction haunting our movies, TV shows, and video games paradoxically both increase anxiety about the possibility of mayhem and inure us to its reality. This litany is noted, often ruefully and with indignation by many observers and friends of the family (Lasch, 1977; Pipher, 1996; Walsh, 1998b). Looking out from the vortex of conflict and conflicting ideas about values and lifestyles, families often seem at a loss about what to do. Parents are at a loss about how to live well with their children and how to conduct their own lives in a satisfying and productive way, and children and adolescents are at a loss about how to grow up, what roads to follow, whose voice to attend to. But others see, through the smoke of these changes and stresses, the shadow of possibility. Judith Stacey (1990) comments on the postmodern family:

Men and women have been creatively remaking American family life during the past three decades of postindustrial upheaval. Out of the ashes and residue of the modern family, they have drawn on a diverse, often incongruous array of cultural, political, economic, and ideological resources, fashioning these resources into new gender and kinship strategies to cope with postindustrial challenges, burdens, and opportunities. (p. 16)

But the prevailing view about this culture—the dominant culture—is that it is hard on families if not at war with parents.

Good parents used to introduce their children into the broader culture; now they try to protect their children from the broader

culture. Good parents used to instill the values of the broader culture; now they try to teach their children values very different from the ones the world at large teaches. (Pipher, 1996, p. 11)

The Family and Community

Many of the pressures described above intensify because many families have been cut adrift from the moorings of the larger community and even the safe harbor of a smaller neighborhood. The pressure on parents or both partners to work, the distance between home and workplace, and the transience of many residents in neighborhoods mean a scarcity of social supports and a lack of time to connect with those that do exist. Neighborhoods change as well. Old houses are torn down, new condos and strip malls are built, and mom-and-pop stores—often a ligament of association for some families in a neighborhood—are pushed out of business by national and international franchises and corporations. The local institutions that help bind a community together often suffer from lack of interest or lack of time from resident parents and single adults. Parent–teacher associations, local co-ops, and boys’ and girls’ clubs and scouting organizations in many communities suffer because adults are too busy or harassed by their schedules to contribute their interest and time. Many families and individuals in communities are isolated; they don’t know or sometimes don’t care to know their neighbors. Others have found new, though sometimes anonymous, ties through the Internet.

Many things increase the assets of any community, but two important kinds of communal stock are an operating level of civility and social capital. Civility is that set of behaviors toward others that respects their feelings and ideas, cares about their condition, and honors their privacy. The words of civility are mindful of the interests and perspective of others and solicitous of their opinions. People who live in close or even hothouse conditions need an ample fund of civility that they can bank on. Even though they are grotesque charades, the opposites of civility or even community are the contrived and actual rudeness of talk shows such as Jerry Springer’s in which the lines between public and private and citizenship and savagery become blurred. Anything is fair game for the audience, host, and “guests.” In front of a live audience and millions watching on television, an obese young woman is reduced to tears because her mother and boyfriend (and some members of the audience) vilify her and express their repugnance with her because she eats too much and has gained fifty pounds in the past few months. The fact that she has agreed to go on the show may also demonstrate something about the disappearing boundary between what is

appropriately a matter for public airing or what is better left behind the doors of one's intimate relations or in the attic of one's innermost thoughts. That this would even be contrapuntal to the connections between community and family is probably ludicrous, but for many children and adults, watching the antics of these individuals on television is, in a sense, more real than being with neighbors, participating in a community celebration or event, or even facing a community tragedy.

Lisbeth Schorr, in her remarkable review of successful programs for overturning poverty and deterioration in communities, says this about the relationship between families and communities:

The research makes clear . . . that the capacity of families to do their child-rearing job is powerfully dependent on the health of their communities. A few children, blessed with extraordinary resiliency or unflagging adult support will be able to beat the odds,¹ but most children growing up in severely depleted neighborhoods face a daunting array of risks that greatly diminish their chances of escaping poor economic, educational, social, and health outcomes. Regardless of race, family composition, income or natural endowment, as Harvard's Robert Putnam of *Bowling Alone* fame pithily puts it, "of two identical youths, the one unfortunate enough to live in a neighborhood whose social capital has eroded is more likely to end up hooked, booked, or dead." (1997, p. 306)

I am tempted to point out that we must be as aware of the children and families who do make it (there are more of them than we think) as we are of those who fall by the wayside or whose lives take a tragic turn. But the importance of the links between families and communities and the human, economic, social, and spiritual stock of a community cannot be understated. I would also add that most families who struggle or whose children are not thriving usually are not deficient in decency nor do they have defective value systems. The families—extended, single parent, grandparental, and two-parent—who live in forbidding environments and under difficult circumstances most often have commonly shared and estimable values. Far too frequently, families embattled by these conditions are thought to be the cause of the difficulties they encounter. Policies and practices recurrently look only at the psychosocial interior of the family without regard for the realities of depleted community assets and capacities—churches, temples, and synagogues; quality schools; health care services; recreational facilities; child care resources; informal, neighborly help and support systems; and so

1. The recent resilience research, discussed in chapter 3, suggests the number may be higher than she implies here.

forth (Patterson, 1999). For a practitioner, “the balance between being supportive and being challenging, between providing security and new worlds to master, between building on family strengths without forgetting family pathology . . . requires a competent response, [and] is hard to achieve and maintain” (Schorr, 1997, p. 15). But, as social workers, we are going to have to be much more cognizant of and astute about the substantial relationship between family troubles and prospects and communal and institutional collateral.

One model of therapy, the ecostructural approach, developed by Harry Aponte (1994) and based, in part on Peter Laqueur’s (1973) model, requires that the cord between individual families seeking help, usually poor and “underorganized,” and the community or neighborhood be tightened. A combination of home-based family therapy for each individual family comprises the first tier of helping. The second is the participation of the family in a group with other families in similar straits, usually from their neighborhood (to boost the sense of community) in a community place and not the agency. The purpose of these groups is to (1) provide mutual support in pursuit of their respective familial goals; (2) to assist families in their dealings with community agencies upon whom they rely (case management); and (3) to act collectively as an advocacy group around issues common to all of them. Managed care notwithstanding, models of this sort will become more common in the future—no matter what the economic status of the family.

In concluding this section, I feel the need to reiterate that, despite the catalogue of cultural and communal troubles of families above, most individuals and families do as well or better than could be expected. To embellish that reality, in Froma Walsh’s words, “We must shift from faulty expectations of self-reliance in *independent* living to programs that bolster functioning and spirit through *interdependent* living” (1998b, p. 236).

WHAT ARE FAMILIES FOR?

The Care and Feeding of Infants

Humans are born helpless and ignorant. They are tiny, extremely vulnerable little beings. They are thoroughly dependent on others for survival. But they are bursting with possibility and will quickly become more adaptable than we might think. But they require a fund of nurturance and protection for that adaptability to flower. Fortunately, there seems to be a mechanism that all primates enjoy that helps ensure that the fund will not run out—attachment. When infants are upset or needy, they require the soothing of their discomfort and attention to their needs. Attachment is kind of

organismic guarantee that that will happen. Attachment is a relationship phenomenon, and it is a statement about how much human infants and toddlers are reliant on care, comforting, and attentive nurturing. There is great debate about whether it is an inherent phenomenon—but the importance of it remains, no matter what you call it, and whether implanted in our genetic makeup or not, *little primates need regard, protection, shelter, comforting, and care*. It also has been thought that the quality of attachment between the mother or caregiver² is a blueprint for future comfort in and quality of relationships with peers or with adult intimates, but there has not been much evidence (although there has been a lot of theoretical speculation) of that (Lamb & Nash, 1989). So, one of the most important things parents and caregivers can give children is demonstrable affection and love, sensations that are soothing, as well as comfort when they are uneasy (Greenspan, 1997). Judith Rich Harris says the following is one of two generalizations that she would make from the years of developmental and socialization (why children turn out the way they do) research: “Children who are treated with affection and respect do better at managing their lives and personal relationships than children who are treated harshly” (1998, p. 20). Seems simple enough, doesn’t it? If true, it could not be a stronger endorsement of the importance of family for children’s serenity and favorable maturation.

Minding Baby’s Brain

The brain is an important element of the care of children. The relationship of the interpersonal environment in the early months to the development of an infant’s brain (and mind) is only now beginning to be fully appreciated. The number of neurons (see chapter 4 to review some basic information on the brain) is fairly well established at birth (although there is some thinking now that infants continue to grow neurons for a time. More recent research [see footnote 4, chapter 4] indicates that adults may have this capacity as well). But the presence of neurons alone does not drive development any more than an engine drives a car without a driver and ignition. It is the connections between neurons that supports the development of human capacities. The relationships between neurons grow at a frenetic pace in the early months and years of life; although some cells die after birth, the richness of new synaptic connections is unparalleled in the life cycle for the first eight to ten years of life. After that, both the density of connections and levels of neural activity in various parts of the brain (as

2. I want to make it clear that some children are raised by people other than mothers; this is true cross-culturally as well.

measured by the metabolization of glucose in various areas of the brain—a sign of activity level or firing) fall to adult levels (Restak, 1995). But the brain, thanks to the remaining availability of millions of association cells (those that are not initially hard-wired) for affiliation, has a continuing capacity to warrant developing skills, behavior, and intellectual development, but it diminishes gradually.³ The regions of the brain develop at different times; the sensory and motor cortices, thalamus, brain stem are early developers, for instance. By eight months of age or so, the frontal cortex has become more active, and infants now become more aware of their immediate environment. (One upshot of this is that “stranger anxiety” becomes common at this time—the tiny brain/mind is able to perceive difference and danger as well as comforting environmental cues and pleasure [Kagan, 1994].) The plasticity of children’s brains is remarkable in these first months and years. If sections of the brain—even the frontal cortex (right or left hemisphere)—have to be removed or are destroyed because of lesions, children stand a good chance of developing other connections that will support the recapture of the lost functions. We all know, too, that most children have an uncanny ability to learn new languages, learn to play musical instruments, and develop superior motor skills in some areas.

Infants and children who live in deprived or harsh environs, however, face serious compromises to this incredible plasticity and responsiveness of the brain to evolving circumstances. Abuse and neglect, poor nutrition, inadequate medical care, illness, toxins in the environment, and high levels of chronic, unrelenting stress apparently speed up the process of cell death and can impede, in a very dramatic manner, the capacity of cells to regenerate connections or even form them in the first place. As remarkable as the brain is, it is also in some ways fragile. Because abuse, for example, can have such an impact on the salubrious development of children, prevention programs often succeed only to the extent that they take a biopsychosocial approach to prevention and intervention. The Healthy Start program that began on the island of Oahu in Hawaii mounted such an effort. In the community of Leeward, a community beset by an impressive and oppressive roster of social problems—poverty, unemployment, alcoholism, substandard housing, domestic violence, and child abuse—a physician and a health planner developed a program designed to prevent abuse and to minimize the effects of existing abuse. In the local hospital, trained paraprofessionals screened families immediately after birth with an assessment to determine the extent of risks and stresses in the family. Every family that scored high on the checklist

3. The sheer number of cells and dendrites makes this apparently depressing fact a less prevailing reality than it would seem on the surface.

was offered the help of a home visitor, and those that refused were approached with continuing “creative” but gentle and solicitous outreach:

The home visitors were trained to be compassionate and respectful and to develop a nurturing, caring relationship with the family. This essential trusting relationship . . . comes “from deep in the heart; there has to be a string from my heart to theirs; then when they tug on it, I’m there.” This invisible “string” links families to the program and to a network of essential services . . . tailored to each family’s needs, including a dependable source of medical care for parents and children, job training, housing applications, parent education, child development assessments, any indicated treatment, and crisis intervention, day and night. (Schorr, 1997, p. 43)

The stakes are high. The commitment must be intense. In a sense, we are talking about saving the potential that is nestled in a child’s amazing brain. Another program begun in San Antonio (called *Avancé*) by a first grade teacher also is based on teaching parents how to help their children learn (shall we say at the molecular level to make neural connections) from the moment of birth. In workshops with other parents from their neighborhood, parents learn how to encourage learning in their children and how to stimulate them to discover and master. So, in a sense, the program goes from the molecular level to the macro level—the community and neighborhood—from fostering neural connections through fostering community connections (Schorr, 1997; Shames, 1997).

So, the infant’s brain responds to and is cushioned by the immediate intimate environment of family or caretakers. It seems obvious then that what happens in the bosom of familiarity is critical for subsequent cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development. In our evolutionary past as a species, our vulnerability in terms of the forces of nature as well as the harshness of primitive circumstance made the survival of a new human being precarious at best. The necessity for a protective, nurturing environment grew out of early human life conditions and contingencies as well as its genetic roots to other primates. Myron Hofer (1995) has demonstrated how different maternal or caretaker stimuli (olfactory, visual, tactile, thermal) may strongly affect and shape different elements of an infant’s behavior, cognition, and physical state from activity level to appetite to heart rate to sleep/wake cycle to level of arousal. In essence, any child must have an operating level of incoming stimuli (neither radically insufficient nor overwhelming) to nourish social and physical development. This maturation is mightily dependent on the forging of neural connections in particular parts of the brain. Once again we see how human behavior is an outgrowth of an elegant, not well understood, dynamic, and continuing interaction

between the environment (both intimate and distal), the body, and the mind. Stanley Greenspan, a developmental psychiatrist, says this about those early days and months:

Th[e] earliest security is the foundation for the next level: establishing relationship. As sensations are exchanged between child and caregiver, the emotion of pleasure or joy often emerges. Out of the experience of joy grows a continuous sense of engagement as the caregiver responds to expressions of curiosity and assertiveness. [The caregiver] offers not simply pleasure and excitement but relief from distress as well as a safe haven in which to make bold declarations of anger and rage. The early sense of security and the capacity for relating send the mind on its lifelong journey of growth. (1997, p. 44)

From the work of René Spitz (1945) on the sad fate of children in interpersonally deprived and emotionally dank environments in an orphanage to Harry and Margaret Harlow's (1962) ingenious research on monkeys reared with wire, terry-cloth, and real mothers to Kenneth Kendler's (1992) research on the genetic and childhood roots of anxiety and depression in adults, it seems clear that stressful, deprived, and interpersonally spare intimate environments can inflict damage; some can be reversed, but some may lead to tenacious deficits. But once again, the larger story is how so many, even the majority of children in these situations seem to escape or modulate the effects of such ravages to their body and spirit. Not that they don't bear burdens and wear scars. They do. But many endure. Howard Goldstein's remarkable study of the residents of the home on Gorham Street (in essence, a children's home or orphanage for Jewish children), now elders (the home closed its doors in 1947), reveals the abundance of that indomitable human spirit that draws life out of jeopardy and hardship. These former residents, now in their advanced years, displayed, in so many ways, their insistence on life:

Few of these elders who joined with me in reconsidering their lives did so with great regret; pride and dignity, in fact, were common themes. Perhaps if these various explanations for essentially good lives were blended and a more fundamental interpretation was attempted, it might come out this way: They did well because there was no other way to do it, given what they asked of themselves: "I had to make good, I had to be something." (1996, p. 203)

One would do well as a social worker never to underestimate the harm that a difficult and malign family or intimate environment can do. But

neither should you ignore the determination of the human organism to be whole or simply to survive.

Socialization

Socialization is not easily defined.⁴ It includes those activities, behaviors, and attitudes of parents, siblings, peers, relatives, neighbors, and groups that are meant to provide a link to an immense, modest, or narrow world (depending on locale and circumstance as well as family preference) of meaning and people—the world beyond the family. This involves inculcation or introduction into the world of social institutions⁵ and local associations, civic responsibility, the *mélange* of values and beliefs, moral and ethical norms, and, more broadly, the system of meanings that give family and cultural groups a compass in the larger world. More specifically, it includes providing children with the wherewithal, support, guidance, instruction, and tools to become a citizen with a full portfolio. Children are taught in various ways: modeling; mentoring; didactic instruction; and observation of how others perform the roles that will be a part of their life, such as gender roles, family roles, community roles (student, neighbor, friend) and culturally specific roles (eldest son, matriarch, spiritual leader). There is also socialization into more informal roles, and in a given child's life at a given time, these may become just as important as more formal roles, for example, clown, brain, devoted daughter, or runt. The key to both of these socialization functions (meaning and role induction and instruction) is language. Clearly, humans are predisposed to learn language. Noam Chomsky (1965), for one, believes that children innately know and can intuitively understand the underlying rules of grammar and structure of language. Although not all would agree with Chomsky's assertions, it is clear that our genetic makeup prepares us for language. Complicated rules are found in all languages, and each language has its own and often complex rules of grammar and syntax, spelling, and pronunciation. As an adult trying to master French, I am a mess. It is hard work, and I cannot seem to wrap my tongue or brain around the nuances and subtleties of the language, especially the tenses and cases. Little French children master their language with relative ease. It may be that we

4. I intend that socialization will also include personality development—other researchers sometimes separate the two.

5. Social institutions are those constellations of ideology, practices, values, and beliefs that influence our behavior and attitudes. They include the family, the school, the polity, and the church, among others.

are born with something like a “language acquisition device” (Chomsky, 1965) but, as always, the environment and context play a critical role in how that device will function. The idea that immigrant children can learn the host language from their peers so well (see chapter 5), even though their parents speak the native language exclusively, suggests not only the importance of interpersonal context but something that has only been on the boundary of the research and theory on socialization—that peers are powerful agents of socialization—even in childhood.

As we discussed in chapter 5, most of the socialization and personality development literature has credited parents with significant power to shape the minds, hearts, and behavior of their children, reflecting a psychological jurisdiction so expansive that even the children as adults bear the marks of this extraordinary influence. But the role of peers is intriguing to say the least.

After years of waiting, I was finally the king in my house, the oldest kid, with the power to boss and torture my younger siblings the way I'd been bossed and tortured, but now that the moment had arrived I spent as much time away from home as possible. I quit church and avoided my deeply religious godparents. I was the first kid on my block to smoke cigarettes and reefer. I joined a soul band, Black Ice, on the other side of town, playing any instrument that I could round up—sax, flute, and bass, all borrowed. We played Kool and the Gang songs for hours, smoking weed, drinking Old English 800 malt liquor, and rehearsing in the drummer's basement for days at a time until the guy's mother threw us out, at which time we'd find another place to jam. The band attracted legions of followers—girls; of whom I was still deathly afraid, and new friends, cool cats named Beanie, Marvin, Chink, Pig, and Bucky, who smoked cigarettes and reefer, digging the band's sounds. “Oh, yeah . . . you can play man. You are smokin'.” (McBride, 1996, pp. 138–39).

James McBride's remarkable biography, *The Color of Water*, gives us this beguiling, familiar, and a little scary picture of the influence of peers. Here in James's story, as peers often do in adolescence, they ostensibly overthrow the solemn teachings of a devoted and undaunted Jewish mother of eleven multiracial children. Most observers, and certainly parents, would agree that in adolescence peers become the reflecting pool through which adolescents see their image. Their influence can be injurious or beneficial, but in our current culture, peer pressures on teens are often harmful.

While peers can be satisfying and growth-producing, they can also be growth-destroying, especially in early adolescence. Many girls describe a universal American phenomenon—the scapegoating of

girls by one another. Many girls become good haters of those who do not conform sufficiently to our culture's ideas about femininity. (Pipher, 1994, p. 68)

Recall the Columbine high school shootings. The two adolescent boys responsible saw themselves as outsiders and, to a degree, reviled and mercilessly teased by their more "popular" peers. The pains caused by being snubbed or taunted by peers in adolescence are intense and can subvert self-esteem and distort self-image. We will discuss more of this in the next chapter. For now, let us make two observations with respect to socialization. First, peers do not just become potent forces for conformity to nonfamilial norms and behaviors in adolescence; young children, as well, are intensely interested in the doings and reactions of other tots. Second, as adolescents move into adulthood, they often become more like their parents in terms of values, tastes, and some patterns of behavior (for example, voting or not in general elections; volunteering or not in community service work).

Judith Rich Harris, whom I have cited frequently, has made an eloquent case for the influence of genes and peers rivaling that of the parents in socialization and development. In her own case, she had an older biological daughter and younger adopted daughter. The oldest was much like her mother was as a child and adolescent, and now as an adult. The adopted daughter, on the other hand, was very different, energetically outgoing, seeking stimuli and variety. As a teen she was rebellious, hung out with a delinquent group, and her behavior was a far departure from family values, models, and expectations. Yet, in adulthood she is much more like her mother than not and more than her mother could have expected, after suffering through her daughter's teen years (Gladwell, 1998). What this means is uncertain. But in the end, the responsibility for socialization falls into the hands of parents, peers, neighborhoods, and larger social and cultural enterprises and institutions. So it is not just the family, and at certain stages of life, in this culture anyway, the family may not be as important as other institutions and contexts. But. . . .

Whatever we may think, however, children do better in families than almost anywhere else in terms of simply thriving—learning values, being nourished, being cherished, being made safe, experiencing the drama and variety of life, learning useful things, and getting resonant feedback about one's behavior. *It is not so much whether we are speaking of a biological family, a formed family, a single parent family, an adoptive family, or even, as Goldstein described above, an institutional family. It is the importance of being nested within a constant and steadfast intergenerational network of human connections. We are programmed to grow best and prosper most under these conditions.* Family relationships, even difficult ones, give us a perspective on the complexity and

possibility, the tragedy and triumph, and the astonishing forms and shapes that human life and the human condition can take. As is often the case, Mary Pipher makes the point:

Families, whether biological or chosen, are what give most people's lives their shape. They produce enormous pain and joy and all the emotions in between for their members. Most of our happiest and most tragic experiences are somehow connected with family. Families are flawed, complex, intense organic units whose members often fail each other in important ways. But family affection is the glue that holds lives together. (1996, pp. 225–26)

WHAT IS A FAMILY?

Let us begin with the question of what a family is. What is a family? you ask. Isn't that obvious? If you are Dan Quayle or Gary Bauer, the definition of family probably is not negotiable or debatable. But there may be more here than meets the eye or the conventional norm.

I know two men. They are gay. They are professionals and have been in an exclusive relationship for ten years. I know a woman. She has six children, three grown, and has been single since the birth of the first. I know four couples, all childless, who have established a common residence in which they share tasks and responsibilities and provide comfort and support for each other. They have had this arrangement for three years. My grandmother, my aunt, and, often, my niece lived together in an established household for many, many years. Are these families? What configuration do you think of when you think of family? Is it mom and dad and child(ren), mom at home, dad working? This particular arrangement—the nuclear, modern family, clearly has lost the statistical and moral dominance it once had. But, if it is in decline, there has arisen no other singular structure to supplant it. The often heavy-handed and contentious political debate about family values in the 1990s in my mind is about social and cultural anxieties over the waning of the nuclear family (although as many observers have pointed out, the nuclear family is a historical aberration—having rarely been a common family type). Certainly, political and social tension and debate about gender, sexual orientation, and social class and ethnicity are a part of the general anxiety about the state of the family. The idea of a family structure that might be more fully a matter of negotiation and equality and that would call into question the reign of male authority, heterosexuality, unequal distribution of family labor between males and females and other staples of middle class culture is, in many quarters, anathema. But the reality is that

in the postmodern world, institutional supports for “traditional” family life have eroded, although other arrangements have not emerged to reinforce or commemorate other and different family forms. Judith Stacey (1990) from her in-depth, qualitative study of families in the Silicon Valley in the late 1980s, says the following about what family form has emerged as the more common form of family:

Responding to new economic and social insecurities as well as to feminism, higher percentages of families in almost all income groups have adopted a multiple-earner strategy. Thus, the household form that has come closer than any other to replacing the cultural and statistical norm consists of a two-earner, heterosexual married couple with children. It is not likely, however, that any single household type will achieve the measure of normalcy that the modern family long enjoyed. Indeed, the postmodern success of the voluntary principle of the modern family system precludes this. The routinization of divorces and remarriage generates a diversity of family patterns even greater than was characteristic of the premodern period when death prevented family stability or household homogeneity. (p. 269)

Part of the current debate is whether there should be a single, dominant family style imposed on the many ways that people choose to come together and form relatively durable relationships and to perform the economic, socialization, sexual, and civil functions that families often do. Feminists, gay and lesbian activists, welfare mothers and single mothers, and organizations of various peoples of color all are seeking to extend the blessings of social legitimacy to their efforts to forge enduring, stable intimate and family relationships of many different varieties. Whatever the case, it seems clear that we will continue to have a multiplying, maybe bewildering, pantheon of family patterns and shapes. But remember, whatever form a family takes, it still is that intimate place where fragile, tiny human beings have the best chance to sprout into hardy blooms; where adults can find surcease, appreciation, and comfort, and where they can exercise and have their sexuality affirmed; and where elders can gather together the remnants of their life and stitch them into sage advice and comforting activity. That is the base from which all members can venture out into and contribute to a wider world of people, places, and institutions.

Ann Hartman and Joan Laird (1983) say that a family

consists of two or more people who have made a commitment to share living space, have developed close emotional ties, and share a variety of family roles and functions. This family may consist of

a middle-aged married couple whose children are reared; two elderly sisters, one a widow and the other a spinster, who share an apartment in a retirement community; a group of biologically related and unrelated adults and children who have formed a group or communal family in which a range of commitments exist and in which instrumental and expressive roles are shared. (p. 30)

Let us now take a look at some shapes the family may take.

Nuclear Family

The nuclear family came to prominence during the industrial era in this country (the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century), especially for the well-to-do classes. After World War II, the nuclear family was widely spread but also heartily celebrated in media (*Leave It to Beaver* [the Cleavers], *Ozzie and Harriet* [the Nelsons], *Father Knows Best* [the Andersons], among others), from the pulpit, in political discourse, and in social science.⁶ But, even at its zenith in the 1950s and 1960s, the seeds of change had already been sown. As many experts have pointed out, the nuclear family has never been the norm in most of human history (Skolnick, 1991). Even though it has been widely present and celebrated in this country, the nuclear family rose from the ashes of the Great Depression and World War II. Even though these were momentous dislocations in local and global life, in this country they eventually brought a variety of beneficial institutional and policy changes: a booming postwar economy and governmental benefits providing for education, home ownership, job training and jobs, all of which meant that it was now possible for women to stay home and take care of their children (Walsh, 1998b, pp. 27–28). Add to this mix a rapidly rising birth rate (the infamous baby boom) and the possibility and necessity for mothers (that was the norm—theoretically it could have been fathers or even other caretakers) to stay home and raise the children increased dramatically. Over time, however, for a variety of reasons not well understood, the nuclear family turned inward and turned away from community and even, to a degree, extended family connections. As it became rigid and loosened from communal and extended family ties, it also became less adaptable to social and cultural changes (May, 1988; Skolnick, 1991).

Judith Stacey argues that four crucial transformations make the nuclear

6. When I was in college, in the late 1950s, a staple of the sociology curriculum was a course on marriage and the family. My recollection was that the nuclear family was seen as the normative structure and all others—in our culture—were “aberrant” in some way.

modern family different from most other family styles and forms in history. (1) “Productive”⁷ work and family become separated so that the work of women in the home becomes invisible and not defined as employment; thus, women and children are utterly dependent on the earnings of men—the idea of “breadwinner” becomes dominant. (2) Marriage is considered voluntary, and its primary purpose defined as love, intimacy, and companionship. (3) Increasing emphasis on the privacy of family life unravels family ties to community and makes the family invisible, in some ways, to the public eye. (4) Women, after the baby boom, become increasingly involved in nurturing fewer children, and motherhood becomes a subject for serious study and professional scrutiny (1990, p. 8).

By the end of the 1950s, most productive work had left home, except for some rural communities, and the range of the full-time homemaker’s job dwindled to consumption, childrearing, and housework. Yet, those children born during the hegemony of the nuclear family were born into the idea that this was the way families ought to be; this was the gold standard of domestic life. In the 1950s, about three-fifths of all families were “up to nuclear speed.” Today, maybe 7 to 10 percent of families are of this composition. Think of what a remarkable social change that is, in just a matter of three or four decades. Amazing! But, as many have observed, what we are moving toward, if any one thing at all, is uncertain.

Social and cultural upheavals are always hard on families—families are a very sensitive barometer of certain kinds of social dislocations. The post-industrial world, with its changes in commerce and the marketplace, the rise of ideas that have challenged the status quo in every domain of life, the surfacing of the viewpoints of people too long left out of national considerations and consciousness, the deunionization and globalization of the American economy, and a variety of social movements from gay liberation to pro-choice to feminism, has seriously challenged the cherished nuclear family ideal. It was inevitable that the nuclear family would begin to erode—the social and economic pressures were too great. Some women and men have profited enormously from this change. Some women, for example, have found renewal in returning to college or finding a satisfying job or getting out of a stifling and unsatisfying marriage; many men have discovered that the quality of their lives or sense of esteem hinged principally on their work, to which they could now unabashedly devote themselves—

7. Productive means many different things depending on the social and cultural context, class, historical era, etc. Here Stacey means work done outside the home that brings home money and, in some cases, respect. And she means to contrast it with the idea that those women who work at home are not considered to be doing productive work.

regardless of the needs and structure of their own family. But many, if not most, women and many men certainly did not reap such benefits.

A NOTE ON SOCIAL CLASS AND FAMILY

Social class is a serious determinant of the patterns and benefits of life. Although the dominant culture makes us look more and more alike, infects the tastes and desires of everybody, and has a hand in shaping a wide range of behavior patterns, class differences in experience and resources make the world appear different depending upon where you stand on the class ladder (Rubin, 1994). Just as the postindustrial changes cited above laid out an array of lifestyle options for many women and men, it was mostly at the upper echelons of society where the shackles of tradition were loosened. For the majority of working class families, the postindustrial world has resulted in shrinking wages, fewer opportunities for jobs, and more stress for families and individuals trying to make it. And for most working class families and some middle class families, in order to live the nuclear ideal, both parents have to work, thus effectively denying that ideal (Ehrenreich, 1989). For many Americans, working class families and individuals are out of sight. The political discussions and governmental decisions about families are directed at middle class families or poor families; but not families headed by blue or pink collar, hourly wage workers. The move from a manufacturing to a service/information economy and the recessions of the 1970s and 1980s hit the working class hard. In the 1980s, Reaganomics filled the pockets of the well-to-do, but working class families were left out of the so-called boom. In the 1990s, corporate and industrial downsizing (read: firing workers to increase profits) and the practice of sending work overseas to cut costs led to the disappearance of hundreds of thousands of blue collar jobs. These drastic economic changes infuse the interior of working class families with various anxieties and uncertainties. Lillian Rubin says this about the plight of these families:

It's true that many of the issues of family living know no class boundaries. But what turns those issues into problems, as well as how families attend to them, is related to the resources at their disposal, which, of course, means class position. Among those problems is the recent revolution in norms and values—cultural changes that almost invariably come down to the working class from above and which, when added to their economic distress, create a whole new level of pain and bewilderment, yet another aspect of life that seems to them to have ricocheted out of control. (1994, pp. 42–43)

But whatever the case, for decades working class families have been struggling with and adjusting to the economic realities that other families are now having to adapt to (Rubin, 1994; Stacey, 1990).

Single Parent Families

Most single parent families are headed by women. These come into being usually because of divorce, desertion, death, or never being married. They are becoming increasingly common. Slightly more than one-half of all children will spend some part of their childhood and adolescence in a single parent family. Nearly 60 percent of all poor and minority children will live part of their lives in single parent homes. Single parent homes account for around 25 percent of all homes; within the African-American community, this number is as high as 50 percent (Walsh, 1998b). The bad news for these families is that poverty is often their lot. Divorced mothers, for example, can expect a dramatic decline in disposable and earned income. Unwed teenagers with children face overwhelming odds in falling into long-term poverty; as do their children (Schorr, 1997). The widely noted “feminization of poverty”—the reality that households headed by women, under a variety of circumstances, are much more likely to be poor, reflects the economic strains and scarcities faced by single parent families. It also flows from the significant but less widely recognized fact that women continue to face discrimination in the workplace—especially if they have the sole burden of raising a family. Of course, families on what used to be welfare are most often headed by women. Unfortunately, as do most people who must endure social stigma, single parents often think of themselves as deficient or defective because the general population does (Kissman, 1991).

Although they are held to the same norms and expectations of two-parent families, families headed by one parent often suffer a serious lack of resources—in terms of income, assets, housing, health, and health care (Jung, 1996). If divorce is the reason for single parenting, then many other emotional and interpersonal concerns are added to the economic burdens of a single parent with the children.⁸

Something that should not be ignored here is the inherent racism and classism in the dialogue about and policies toward single parents in this country. The welfare reforms of 1996 were driven very hard by the stereotype that welfare mothers were single African-American women who first had children when in their teens. It was assumed that their offspring were likely to become gun-toting, drug-dealing, unemployed youths hanging out on the streets of the hood or to become single moms themselves (Harding, 1999). The side of the debate championed by the conservative social critic Charles Murray and very much a part of the debate on welfare reform is that teenagers who have children out-of-wedlock (erroneously thought to

8. It should be noted here that a growing number of single parent families are headed by men. Also, there are adoptive single parent families. There are also single mothers who become parents through artificial insemination.

be the most important reason for families to be on welfare) make a rational calculation that it is better to be on welfare than to be married because benefits favor the lone mother over the two-parent family. He also laments the fact that illegitimacy has become so acceptable, especially in the underclass (along with violent crime and dropping out of the labor force), that many young women do not see the need to marry in order to have children. This leaves the men (boys) who are the fathers out in the cold and on the loose. In Murray's words:

Supporting a family is a central means for a man to prove to himself that he is a "mensch." Men who do not support families find other ways to prove that they are men. . . . Young males are essentially barbarians for whom marriage—meaning not just the wedding vows but the act of taking responsibility for a wife and children—is an indispensable civilizing force. (1990, p. 23)

The fact is that single parent families are found in all classes, are represented in every racial and ethnic group, and are the product of a variety of entangled social and economic forces as well as personal decisions and unanticipated contingencies. However, the number of single parent families is not proportionate in all social groupings because it is keenly related to disproportionate economic and social dislocations and distress and the continuing hum of discriminatory practices. Nearly half of African-American children, two-fifths of Hispanic/Latino children, and one-seventh of white children live in poverty. The majority of these households are headed by single mothers, at least for a significant period of time. As Sally Lubeck points out, this is both the feminization *and* the "minoritization" of poverty (1995, p. 60). But it is well to remember that it is still true that the majority of poor are white, and the majority of women who have children out of wedlock are white (and not necessarily poor).

In any case, there are two factors that should be acknowledged in this discussion. First, although the difficulties are enormous on all levels, single parent families often have considerable strength, flexibility, determination, and capacity, and, of course, daunting challenges. Susan Straight, whose husband of thirteen years divorced and left her and her three daughters to pick up the pieces, muses on the heavy demands of single parenthood:

Now, sometimes, I feel like a burro. A small frame, feet hard as hooves, back sagging a little. Now the edges of my life are a bit ragged, and things don't always get done as they should. The void yawns beneath me. And I understand now how life slips when you're on your own. I don't always remember that the three-year-old is supposed to dress in green for a nature walk, or that the seven-year old owes money for the field trip, or that the nine-year-

old needs new shoelaces. So we all look slightly askew. And instead of crying about it, when it seems so overwhelming and spirit crushing and *dull*, I make myself go out in the yard and touch the teepee we made out of last year's mulberry branches, covered with an old white sheet spray-painted with leftover Christmas copper, the designs of deer and snakes held together with an old bungee cord.

I know how it looks, but we like to sit in there and eat, pretend we're not here. We're not here, where the grass is too long and some fence posts are missing and we are up too late, keeping one another company. (1999, pp. 50–51)

Second, the whole national discourse about family has become so politicized that it is hard to see through the hot wind-blown clouds of rhetoric. Conservatives celebrate the traditional nuclear family; progressives assert the reality of many kinds of families. Progressives argue that the stresses that are shaking family foundations are not the result of abandoning traditional family values but the result of enormous and widely spread economic and social changes; conservatives contend that many of the ills of society are due to the failure of individuals to fulfill their roles as family members, especially parents. Conservatives regard the primary function of the family as the bearing and rearing of children and the central interest of the parents must be the needs and requirements of children. Progressives believe that the needs of both children and parents are important and must be met and taken into account if the family is to thrive. Progressives insist that the responsibility for the well-being of families is largely a public and communal one. Conservatives believe that the responsibility for children must remain in the hands of the family (Lubeck, 1995, p. 64).

Having made the discourse about the underclass, especially poor single mothers and their children, a contentious one founded on dubious assertions, it may be time for some counterclaims. Adolph Reed Jr. proposes this as one:

The behavioral tendencies supposedly characterizing the underclass exist generally throughout the society. Drug use, divorce, educational underattainment, laziness, and empty consumerism exist no less in upper status suburbs than in inner city bantustans. The difference lies not in the behavior but in the social position of those exhibiting it. (1992, p. 33)

The statistics present a confounding picture. A study just out, reported yesterday in my local paper, on the role and relationship of fathers in families and the risk of drug abuse by teenagers reveals this: in terms of the risk for drug use, adolescents who lived in a two-parent family where there was only a fair or poor relationship with the father had the highest risk factor; next

came all families headed by a single mother; then below the average risk factor came single mothers with excellent relationships with their children; and right below that families where teens have an excellent relationship with both parents in a two-parent household (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, 1999). To the extent that this reflects reality, it is a very mixed picture and suggests that although single parent families have a number of hurdles and barriers to face, they also can be wonderful, loving families. We need to know more about how they do that. Carol Anderson makes this strong and apropos assertion about single parent families:

Most single parent families provide the structure, values, and nurturance that their children need, despite the hardships they experience and bad press they receive. Their homes are not “broken,” their lives are not miserable, and both parent and children thrive while managing the added tasks required of them. Unfortunately, rather than focusing on these strengths, we consistently concentrate on the problems: the breakdown of traditional family values, the deleterious effect of divorce on children, the irresponsibility of teen parents. . . . [But] all single parent families have strengths that can be mobilized to solve the problems of family members, even the most troubled ones. (1999, pp. 399, 407)

Extended Families

Many of you who are reading these words have not lived in the bosom of an extended family—or so you think. But extended families today are probably more numerous than we think and take more different configurations than we think. A study by Johnson (1988) found, for example, that many, maybe one-third of divorced parents and their children in the sample, maintained relationships with former spouses and their relatives. Furthermore, we have probably underestimated the influence of kinship networks in families; the amount of contact between generations, along both (or more) sides of the family. Studies over the years seem to indicate that aunts and uncles, grandparents, and nieces and nephews have more contact with parents and their children than we have usually imagined (Hartman & Laird, 1983). The more traditional extended family—two or three generations under one roof—is probably less common than in an earlier time, although we may have overestimated the prevalence of such families in our country’s early history. In some ethnic and cultural groups, extensive and active kinship networks are a valued and sought-after condition. African-Americans, at all income levels, “place strong value on relationship and kinship ties,

reciprocity, fidelity to family obligations, and a strong commitment to the children” (Billingsley, 1992, p. 332). In many families living under difficult economic conditions, extended family members become an extremely important buffer and place of transition and regeneration for struggling family members and their children. Carol Stack’s wonderful and classic study of African-American families living in an economically distressed community showed the remarkable flexibility and adaptability afforded by such kinship networks. An important addition to these were nonbiological kin—neighbors and friends who took on, with great care and fidelity, the kinds of caring and support roles that blood relatives might well have assumed. The role of non-kin care was often so reliable that Stack called certain forms of it “fosterage” (1974). These have been referred to as augmented families and, more recently, as relationships of appropriation, by Andrew Billingsley (1968, 1992).

The extended family may well be a buffer against hard economic times, but for many families it may be a strong cord connecting to family roots and to cultural legacies. In a time of many cultures, dynamic social and cultural change, in a time of growing places where people exist in the borderlands between one culture and another (or two), in families where tensions between generations are sometimes fought on the ground of cultural tradition and cultural change, extended families provide a place for preservation of the past and consideration of the future. In addition, they may provide as well for the generation of a kind of spirituality, a transcendent meaning that is harder to come by in smaller family units. In particular, elders may be the focus, not just of the traditional, but a flashpoint for the marriage of the new with the old in terms of meaning (Walsh, 1998b). Many young people in different cultures struggle with this. Native Americans do not have a single over-arching culture. They represent hundreds of distinct ethnic groupings with distinct languages and cultural traditions. But in many cases, Native youth are caught between the pull of tribal traditions and the dominant culture. Gilliland had this faintly colonial caution for teachers:

Don’t make the mistake of thinking that the old tribal ways and values no longer have meaning for your students, or conversely, expecting that most of your students are well grounded in their own tribal heritage. Every native child is somewhere between the two cultures. He may be doing everything the way of the dominant culture and appear to have lost all native culture; still he may deep down feel the way he is doing things is wrong. His inner feelings may still be Indian. (1992, p. 22)

In these instances, sometimes, the elders of the household provide the perspective and the opportunity to resolve the tensions or meld the old and the

new without disrespecting the ancient traditions and without distorting the newer views (Stauss, 1993).

Dual Earner Families

The term dual earner means that both partners or parents (we'll consider primarily those families with children or dependents here) work in the labor market. We commonly find in dual worker families that one of the working partners, usually the woman, also does the unpaid and demanding work at home. Three forces seem to have contributed to the rise of this family form—the most prevalent in our society. First, early in this century, the slow decline of family work (usually on a farm or a family business that supported agriculture) coupled with the rise of industry and the frenetic expansion of the production of goods drove people outside their home to seek employment to support themselves. Second, during World War II the demand for laborers to replace those men and women who joined or were conscripted into the armed forces brought many women into the labor force. When workers turned soldiers came home after the war, the corner had been turned, and the reality of women in the labor force was no longer an oddity and soon would become the norm. Third, for reasons of economic survival and the increasing income gap between the well-off and the rest of society, it has become necessary, in the majority of families, for both parents to work in order to survive (Piotrkowski & Hughes, 1993).

*Dual career*⁹ families, in essence, are necessitated by the reality that most of us require two incomes to sustain a standard of living that once might have been managed with one income—but no longer. Many challenges face these families. One of the most daunting is the overweening influence of the job and imbalance of responsibility between the expectations and demands of the workplace compared to those of the home. For many employees, the job comes first—if you want to keep it.

Brian [who worked as a production manager in a company that was now down-sizing, which made him responsible for laying off people, many of whom were friends] had good instincts—to love his family and do good work. But right now he was having trouble handling his complex situation. At work he was rewarded for cutthroat

9. Careers offer greater economic rewards, long-term stability, more autonomy and, thus, would seem to have less stress than dual worker families (although stress can come from many sides—not just from challenges to economic well-being and job security).

behavior and punished for loyalty. He had little time or energy left for family.

Sandi worked as the personnel director of a local care facility. Her boss was a cranky person who timed Sandi when she went to the bathroom and called her at home when [she] was sick to make sure she wasn't malingering. Sandi described her job as high pressure and low pay . . . lots of responsibility and not much authority. "I come home shelled," Sandi said. "I have the least to give to the people I love the most." (Pipher, 1996, p. 51)

So, families usually have little or no power to change workplace policies or conditions in order to make a more favorable situation for their families. In the current climate of downsizing (making the corporation or business leaner and, yes, much meaner), outsourcing, and globalizing (these are all euphemisms meant in part to disguise the enormously disruptive effect they have on workers and their families), families have to oblige sometimes highly unfavorable work situations before they can meet their obligations to their family (Piotrkowski & Hughes, 1993).

There are other threats to family tranquility and stability. Normative gender roles are often compromised, challenged, or remain inflexible. For women, it continues to be true that even though they have outside employment, they still take most responsibility for home work. Although there is some evidence that men are more accepting of sharing child care responsibilities, a heavy burden still falls upon the backs of women. This is a case, not necessarily of men's intransigence but of the *failure of normative role definitions to catch up with the reality of family life and work*. Until recently, this change has not been acknowledged by policies and programs that affect family life. (The changes at the federal level in earned income tax credit, family and maternal leave, and child care support at least provide a glimmer of hope that social institutions are catching up to historical changes.) The tensions, compromises, and strategies worked out here probably vary by class.

While economic pressures have always encouraged expansionary kin work among working-class women, these have often weakened men's family ties. Men's muted family voices whisper of a masculinity crisis among blue-collar men. As their access to breadwinner status recedes, so does confidence in their masculinity. The decline of the family wage and the escalation of women's involvement in paid work seems to generate profound ambivalence about the eroding breadwinner ethic. . . .

Women strive, meanwhile, as they always have, to buttress and

reform their male kin. Responding to the extraordinary diffusion of feminist ideology as well as to sheer overwork, working class women, like middle-class women, have struggled to transfer some of their domestic burdens to men. My fieldwork leads me to believe that they have achieved more success in the daily trenches than much of the research on the “politics of housework” yet indicates—more success, I suspect, than have most middle-class women. (Stacey, 1990, p. 267)

So the division of labor—in the workplace and at home—remains a difficult question for many families. To answer the question requires reworking intimate relationships, the interior economy of the family, and revisions of one’s gender identity as well, as the quote above suggests. Again, what must not be ignored here are the ingenious adjustments that families make. Neither should we neglect the contingent factors that impede or enhance that realignment (like supportive social or corporate policies).

What to do about child care is often the most pressing issue for these families. And for some families it is not limited to concerns about their children but also worries about the care of dependent elders in the family. The demand for quality child care continues to grow. Child care may be needed throughout the workday, after school, and during school vacations. Care can be provided by a number of sources: private for-profit organizations; nonprofits like churches or local governments; neighborhood or cooperative arrangements; kinship groups; a local family, neighbor, or relative who cares for the child in their home or the parent’s home; and employers may provide child care on-site or off-site with differing cost structures. In addition, some other social and educational programs may act as child care agencies for eligible families. Obviously, the kind of care needed and the decisions that have to be made vary by the age and number of children. Families are often very clever about arranging for care of their children, but it is a continuing source of stress for many of them. The cost, the availability, and, most importantly, the quality of care are ongoing considerations (DiNitto & Gustavsson, 1999). Finally, some children have no care—these are the infamous latchkey children, left at home to their own devices until parents come home from work. Estimates about how many children are in this situation varies from less than 1 percent to 5 percent (and this also varies by the age of the child). What we still do not know is the correlation of particular child care arrangements to the development of children.

As we have discussed earlier, the elements of a rich and satisfying family experience are well known: the security and safety of all, especially the most vulnerable; gratifying and meaningful family rituals around transitions, celebrations, reunions, coming together as a family, eating, recreating, and

spiritual commemoration; recognition of the selfhood of each other and the unity of the family; provision and management of norms and rules; playfulness and fun; and establishment and nurturance of connections outside the family—to the community and social institutions and associations. The pressures and often conflicting obligations that dual earner families confront make for tears in the ligament of family relationships. Oddly enough, even though dual earner families are the most prevalent families today, we know very little about their thriving and successes. But let us suppose, like all human conditions, many dual earner families have created narratives and storylines, structures and rules, rituals and celebrations, and alternatives to ordinary functions and tasks that are inventive and, on the whole, admirable (Walsh, 1998a; Weick & Saleebey, 1995). In understanding and supporting these families (like all families), whether as neighbors and friends, relatives, professionals, or through social policies, we must realize that families often do well or better not just because of their resources individually and as family members but because of the particular configuration of social and cultural variables in their lives at any given moment: ethnicity, social class, religion, community and associational resources, support networks, the nature of work, gender roles, cultural resources and rituals and the like (Falicov, 1995).

Remarried Families

Remarried families have become increasingly common as the number of families broken up by divorce, death, and even desertion increased dramatically in the decades after World War II. Although the number of families who confront these changes may have leveled off, it still is astonishing (given our somewhat puritanical or nostalgic views of family life) that nearly two-thirds of all children will live part of their childhood in a single parent or stepfamily. Remarried families are a “household in which there is an adult couple, at least one of whom has a child from a previous relationship” (Visher & Visher, 1988, p. 9). This is a generous definition and would include married and unmarried couples, families that have custody of the children and those that do not, opposite-sex or same-sex couples, families who have become reconstituted because of divorce or death, and families where there may be one or two biological parents (Kelley, 1996). According to the census statistics, in 1990, 5.3 million households contained at least one stepchild under the age of 18, which is 20.8 percent of all households consisting of a married couple with children.

In spite of the popular research on the negative and long-standing effects of divorce on children (Wallerstein & Kelley, 1980), most of these families

survive and, after some often difficult and contentious adjustments, the children fare reasonably well and, in most ways, do not turn out so differently from their peers from families where death or divorce has not come knocking. But these families are different from biologically based families and may get themselves into trouble if they try to replicate them. This is a difficulty for all forms of family life since "our culture promotes a highly idealized version of family life and that our social structure places the full burden on parents to realize it" (Walkover, 1992). Some of the difficulties of replication of first families include drawing too tightly the boundary around the family so that former family members are excluded and so that the nuclear family ideal is realized; because the relationship between parent and child has a longer history than the new marital bond, there is sometimes a developing competition for stepparents to compete with stepchildren for the favors of their spouse; and the expectation that women are the caretakers of emotional well-being in the family can bring tension between the stepmother and stepdaughter and construct the relationship between the new wife and the ex-wife as rivals or adversaries (McGoldrick & Carter, 1999).

Remarried families (other designations for these families include blended, reconstituted, stepfamilies) form because of loss, and some of the family members are still coping with feelings of loss and grief or anger and disappointment. In addition, their efforts to copy the nuclear family are bound to fail, and the first years of transition from biological to remarried family are often difficult because of the impossibility of duplication. Developing new and satisfying family structures and rituals; understanding, defining, and then performing the roles of stepchild and stepparent; and bringing together children who have no particular reason to like each other all pose transitional challenges of considerable magnitude. Add to the mix the coming to terms with the other members of the biological or first family, and remarried families are certainly put to the test.

There are some common mistakes that remarried families make. Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick suggest three. First, the parent's preoccupation with their own experience and needs encourages them to ignore children's experience and needs. There is an inherent conflict here, too, between courtship and parenting. Second, sometimes the new family considers the remarriage as an event—a notable one, to be sure, rather than a complex and lengthy process of refashioning relationships, norms, identities, and rules. Finally, the newly united parents sometimes get children to deal with the conflicting loyalties "by cutting off one relationship to create clarity in the others" (1999, p. 432). But most stepfamilies do eventually come to terms with the fact that they are a different family from their former family. It is also true that this is an increasingly widespread family form that is slowly but surely becoming institutionalized. Social workers and others who have worked with stepfamilies recognize some of the difficulties outlined above,

but they have also learned some of the things that help families reform themselves into a new configuration with distinctive rituals, new roles, evolving narratives and stories, and adaptive patterns. Individuals who have gone “slow,” who have taken time to deal with the concerns and tensions from the first marriage before reforming, tend to make the transition more easily. Better functioning stepfamilies also realize that developing a “sense of belonging” takes a while. They also seem to understand that the continued involvement of former family members is important and must be conscientiously arranged—even to the extent of co-parenting. Stepparents may have to realize that the love between biological parent and child may never be supplanted and that mutual respect and regard may be the standard for the stepchild/stepparent relationship. Nonetheless, every stepfamily, like other family forms, faces its own unique challenges and derives its own unmistakable way of being a family.

I come from a family where divorce has been a way of life. My mother divorced my biological father when I was two, I think. His mother divorced his father soon after that and some years later remarried. My mother had one brother and one sister. Her mother was divorced when my mother was in her teens. She never remarried although my maternal grandfather did (I actually have an uncle who is 5 years my junior since my grandfather deemed having a child later in life an important part of his life). My mother remarried when I was 5. My stepfamily was a large one. My stepfather had three brothers and two sisters. He had been previously married and had a daughter from that union. My biological father remarried as well. Tragically, shortly after that he was killed in air combat in WW II. After 25 years of marriage my mother divorced my stepfather and married again. Sometime after the divorce, my stepfather remarried. So we are either the most divorced family or the most married family that I know.

But the important thing is we managed to have a terrific family life—at least from the kids’ points of view. All sides of the family remained in touch and we frequently played and ate and celebrated together—in various and sundry combinations. The only rancor that I can remember was between my mother and stepfather when she asked him for a divorce. They were at loggerheads, and nursing wounds for years after. But, remarkably enough, they have spent the last 3 Christmases at our house, remembering and reminiscing about the good years.¹⁰

10. This is a personal remembrance and I apologize for that. But it does, in retrospect, reflect the reality that with some care and patience and not a little bit of

Couples

Coming together as a couple, whether married or just living together, is a lot more complicated than it seems. In fact, it may be one of the more complex transformations that we can undergo. But here we will focus on those who come together and choose not to have children. The process of becoming a couple is probably not so different between those who will have children (earlier or later) and those who choose not to. Many couples these days live together before they marry—a few choose to live together and not get married. Although living together before marriage is more common and would on the face of it appear to make the transition to marriage less of a turning point, these marriages are more apt to end in divorce than commonly thought. More frequently each year, couples move in together, move out, and move in with someone else (McGoldrick, 1989). But forming an intimate partnership with the sole intention of remaining a couple is an increasing family configuration.

The forming of an intimate relationship, especially for younger people, almost always involves the tension between “fusion and intimacy” (McGoldrick, 1989, p. 212). Intimacy reflects the coming together of two separate people with the purpose of achieving closeness and sexual and interpersonal union, whereas fusion refers to the coming together for purposes of completion of one’s own personal development or the filling in of the holes in one’s self-esteem. This tension varies of course with age and gender and, probably, culture. Men, for example, may fear intimacy, but may use the new relationships to exert their “independence,” thus exacting a degree of distancing from the woman. Also, the process is often obscured during courtship, when the hand of romantic love is continually and gently on the shoulders of the twosome. At any rate, becoming a couple has its own rewards and stresses, but one of the most difficult transitions—true of any union—is that it is in fact, the coming together of two or more families, in reality and in symbol. It is often said that when a young couple lies together in the marriage bed, they lie with several people—usually their parents. So coming together as a couple, in companionate intimacy is, especially in a society devoted to celebrating and currying the individual, a most auspicious and difficult transition.

In this age, many of these couples will become dual earner families without, at least for a significant period, children. The basis of this companionate intimacy seems more durable and more egalitarian if both work,

luck, a very complicated form of family life can be the context for growth, fun, and transition.

maybe even have careers, and do not have to share the burdens (and, yes, the joys, of childrearing). The financial realities are reasonably clear. There seems to be an assumption as well that this form of union has distinct psychological and interpersonal advantages to the esteem and well-being of both partners, especially if their work is chosen and a part of a life-long pattern.

Men and women who are committed to their work, who understand themselves as needing stimulation and the independence that comes from working, who find the sense of accomplishment or the social life that accompanies work vital to their sense of well-being, share a great deal even when their jobs are very different. (Dizard & Gadlin, 1990, pp. 128–29)

These families also face high levels of stress. The demands of a career often supersede those of family—the workplace is frequently the dominating context of experience and claim. Also, the presumed equality and symmetry of roles in the family is really hard to pull off, given the intimate and cultural realities of the day. And, almost inevitably, one partner's work may be more demanding or be seen as more important than the other partner's. As careers advance or as work becomes more pressing, for many couples home recedes into the background as a center for activity. Meals are eaten out, housework is farmed out or hired, and devotion to the exactions and rewards of work increase (Kingston & Nock, 1987).

The decision to remain childless can be a difficult one. For dual earner/dual career couples it is a momentous decision. The demands of a career at best have to be counterposed against the demands of becoming a parent. Pressure from a variety of sources is on couples to have children. Couples who consider it in their best interest to not bear children often face varying degrees of stigma, especially women, who are seen as flouting the values of a traditional family (Gerson, 1985). Much of the political debate during the past decade about family values appears to me to be about women who stray from the conventional definitions and performance of their familial roles. "I can't believe," says one young woman, a professional musician, "how many times my friends with children act like I am some kind of freak because my husband and I do not choose to have kids. To me, one of the ironies about their judgment of us is that they are almost always complaining about the burdens that kids impose on their freedom."

Some couples do decide later in life to have children. During the past 20 years or so, the number of women in their 30s and 40s who decide to have children has increased dramatically. The bringing of a child into the world normally creates more stress than we allow. Cowan, Cowan, Heming, and Miller (1991) compared first-time parents from a nonclinical population

(meaning they seemed by casual definition because of their occupational and social status and relative absence of risk factors to be average or “normal” families) to childless couples and found that in the five domains of their concern, the couples with a first child showed change in all five; the childless couples only in some.¹¹ The levels of stress remained high for the couples with children, especially if they did not have propitious circumstances in their families of origin or had uncertain self-esteem or weak ties to community resources. But, oddly enough, one-half the childless couples had divorced at the end of the five years of the study. This suggested to the authors that, as others have pointed out, children sometimes act as a protective factor in preserving the marriage in the early years.

The evidence is less clear, but it seems that having a child later in the couple’s life together poses some additional stresses and rewards. Certainly, one of the most obvious stresses is that it is harder to get pregnant and harder to carry a fetus to full-term. Another is the fact that if a woman has a career, taking time off is *prima facie* evidence that, for women, once again, the career is secondary to family (an idea that runs counter to professional, careerist fast-track ideologies). Finally, though a new child fires a volley of transitions for a couple, it is hard for many people, after a prolonged period of being a couple, to acclimate themselves to parenthood (Dizard & Gadlin, 1990). But, as older new parents have often pointed out, given all that and more, “I am undoubtedly a better parent now than I would have been ten years ago. I have a certain degree of maturity and perspective, certainly economic security, that I didn’t have then. Plus, we really wanted children.” So says a college professor married to an interior decorator.

Once again, though, we must be aware that these discussions of family forms—this one in particular—suffers from an analysis that is strongly class-based. The experiences of the working class are largely ignored here, because, again, they seem more or less invisible to the culture as a whole (Archie Bunker and Roseanne notwithstanding) and to many social science researchers in particular. The Clinton administration, in attempting to expand the earned income tax credit program, suggested that working poor were families earning less than \$35,000 a year and the rich and almost rich were those families earning \$140,000 and above. That means that everything in between is middle class. But there is a world of difference, as Lillian Rubin (1994) points out, between a white, pink, or blue collar couple (with children or not) earning \$35,000 a year and a professional couple earning \$135,000.

11. The five domains were individual characteristics (self-esteem, depression, emotional distress); parent’s marriage; quality of relationship between parent and child; intergenerational relationships; and relationship between family and community institutions and individuals.

There is no social or economic similarity here, but one difference: If something should happen to one of the wage-earners, the working class family is in danger of being thrown into an economic abyss (Rubin, 1994).

Gay and Lesbian Families

“The lesbian or gay-male-headed family enjoys the dubious distinction of being both a very strong and resilient family form and one that in public discourse is seen as an attack on the American family.” (Laird, 1996). We have discussed the considerable complexity of the issue of sexual orientation and the extensive political and social pressures on gays and lesbians. The shape and form of the families headed by lesbians or gay men is much more variegated than the designation suggests. Not all members of these families are either gay or lesbian; there are usually straight members as well just as in straight families there may be gays and lesbians. These families are formed in many ways. Some are formed when two women or two men choose to become companions and make a home with each other. Others are formed when a married person, after a no-doubt wrenching struggle, discovers his or her innate sexual orientation and, after a divorce, decides to form a household with a same-sex partner. This new home might include children from the previous marriage. There are gay and lesbian couples who adopt or become foster parents. There are lesbian women who may choose to have a child through donor insemination or gay men who choose to have children through a surrogate mother (Laird, 1993, 1996). How many gay and lesbian families there are is uncertain. Partly because these families are invisible—not considered families—by institutional and cultural judgments and partly because they must preserve their safety and integrity against homophobic actions and heterosexist attitudes, finding out how many there are is not easy. But a 1990 Harvard Law Review report (cited in Laird, 1996) estimated that three million gay men and lesbians in the United States were parents and that between eight and ten million children were being raised in gay and lesbian families. Patterson (1992) estimates that some three million gay men are parents and that five million lesbian women are mothers. Although research and clinical work has focused intensely on gay and lesbian individuals for a variety of different reasons, we know very little about gay and lesbian families.

Joan Laird, who has written more and with more eloquence than anyone about gay and lesbian families, summarizes what we are coming to know in this way:

Family theorists would do well to heed the lesbian and gay family, for it can teach us important things about other families, about

gender relationships, about parenting, about adaptation to tensions in this society, and especially about strength and resilience. For in spite of the pervasive and profound stigmatization of gay life, gay men and lesbians are building stable and satisfying couple relationships and forming families that seem to be doing as well as other kinds of families in carrying out their . . . [socially] defined family roles and tasks. (1993, p. 284)

Proof of Laird's assertion here is provided by a study done by Green, Bettinger, and Zacks (1996). They took data from earlier studies of fifty-two lesbian couples in the Sacramento area and fifty gay male couples in the San Francisco area and reanalyzed them for the purpose of examining overall relationship quality (cohesion, flexibility, stability) and satisfaction. They then compared these to much larger national samples in two studies of the marital cohesion of heterosexual couples. The lesbian couples showed the highest degree of cohesion, but, surprisingly, gay male couples were also more cohesive than heterosexual couples. In addition, the gay and lesbian couples scored much higher on flexibility than the heterosexual couples did. Finally, the lesbian couples reported significantly more satisfaction than the heterosexual couples in one of the national studies, whereas the gay males scored at about the same level as those heterosexual couples. Given the general lack of support and sanction for such unions, these are remarkable findings.

Gay and lesbian families, like all families, show considerable variety in the ways that they live out and construct their lives and lifestyles. In many ways, gay and lesbian families bear many similarities to all families, but it is also clear they are not all alike because they are gay or lesbian. It is also probably true that lesbian families bear differences compared to gay families. One difference that has been commented on with some frequency is that lesbians tend to form extremely close relationships, possibly because of the need for protection from society's disapproving glare. Fusion is the term often applied here, hinting at something pathological—an inappropriate crossing or melding of self-boundaries. Gay couples, on the other hand, suffer under another kind of stereotype—that they are promiscuous, unfaithful, and unable to form lasting relationships. But the reality is far more complex and less demeaning. Family styles probably vary by social class, whether there are children, the age of first coming together, race and ethnicity, urban or rural orientation, and whether the couple is "out" (Granvold & Martin, 1999; Laird, 1993, 1996). But there does seem to be some credence to the fact that lesbian couples are more likely to stay faithful in long-term relationships than gay men—even though there are many long-lasting relationships among gay men. The same, by the way, is true of heterosexual men and women; that is, men are more likely to seek relationships outside of marriage than women.

One of the recent interests in gay and lesbian families is the effect on children and their developmental outcomes. The research to date, though still in its youth, suggests that

The picture of lesbian mother's children which emerges . . . is one of general engagement in social life with peers, with fathers, and with mothers' adult friends—both male and female, both heterosexual and homosexual. . . . fears about children of lesbians and gay men being sexually abused by adults, ostracized by peers, or isolated in single-sex homosexual communities are unfounded. (Patterson, 1992, p. 1034)

This is not to say there are not special difficulties. The lack of recognition, the realities of homophobia, the absence of a positive language for discussing one's place and identity in the world, and perhaps the broken ties to the family of origin may affect both children and their parents. In a sense, all gay and lesbian families, however creatively adaptive they are and however ingenious and persevering they are, must daily contend with preserving and shoring up positive sense of self and identity that has been defined by others as contaminated in some way. They must also continue to figure out how to be a family, how to be parents, how to be a couple, and how to be a child of a same-sex couple or lesbian single parent. Heterosexual unions are institutions, wrapped in normative language, far-reaching ideologies, and understood roles and rules. Homosexual unions must continue to design their psychosocial interiors themselves, with reflections from the glare of the institutionalized family, but with the spirit of self-creation as well (Laird, 1993; Slater & Mencher, 1991).

More specific special stresses can afflict the lesbian or gay family. The fact that in most states same-sex marriages are not recognized and, if they were to be recognized in a state (Vermont at this writing has given these unions all civil rights and privileges of married unions without bestowing the formal term, married, upon them),¹² remember that Congress has passed the Defense of Marriage Act, which allows states to refuse to recognize the validity of same-sex marriages contracted there—probably in contravention to the Constitution. Imagine having all the requisite emotion, motivation, history, and interpersonal attributes that we consider a part of coming together and not having the union be legally recognized. More specifically, imagine not being able to have your partner covered by your health insur-

12. The issue as some conservatives define it is that “okay, we will grant you and your partner the same right to benefits that married couples have but we cannot recognize the marriage—that is sacrosanct.”

ance plan or other personnel benefit packages or maybe not being allowed to identify your partner as your partner publicly (O'Donnell, 1999). Although some states have domestic partnership ordinances, these, as yet have had little practical effect.

Another source of significant apprehension and strain is the reality of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) in the gay and lesbian community.¹³ Although various gay and lesbian communities have done remarkable work in slowing the spread of the virus through education, social action, and changing sexual practices, many gays and lesbians have lost members of their support system to the physical, psychological, and interpersonal ravages of this disease. In addition, others have had to become caretakers, often at a very young age, for intimate partners suffering from AIDS; a role that even when done with love, caring, and perseverance, is nonetheless a very demanding, and, as the disease progresses, exhausting role. "Families in which an adult has HIV face numerous possible challenges, such as bearing the financial burden of medical treatment, role changes or reversals, permanency planning for children, and managing difficult feelings such as guilt and loss" (Granvold & Martin, 1999).

But whatever the distinctive challenges to gay and lesbian-headed households, it is important to remember that often without role models, supporting social institutions, or a history of rituals and narratives, many gay and lesbian families have been able to create family structures and processes of remarkable fluidity and stability. The fact is that we do not know enough about these families—their particular stresses and problems as well as their special strengths. The study of gay and lesbian families has been slow to develop, and gay and lesbian family life is often shrouded in secrecy due to fear. Joan Laird (1993) says this about our obligations in understanding gay and lesbian families:

This is not to argue for an idealized notion of the gay and lesbian family or to gloss over the many problems such families face, including relatively high rates of alcoholism. Nor does the model of same-sex coupleness protect these families from internal violence or from the kinds of social stresses that all families today face. But the fact that these families do have special strengths and do well in spite of a context of oppression suggests we all need to know more about their secrets to success. How do they overcome the lack of social sanctioned language and ritual, the lack of other social and

13. It is also requisite to note that HIV/AIDS affects many other populations, and in some the incidence and prevalence continue to rise.

legal sanctions, the fact that they cannot story their lives as openly as other people, that they need at times to be guarded and secretive? (p. 319)

It is important to acknowledge that many gays and lesbians believe that they are a part of at least two cultures. They were raised in the dominant culture in their families of origin and share all the marks of socialization to that culture. But because of persistent homophobia and generations of special circumstances occasioned by coming together as a same-sex couple, a gay and lesbian culture (or cultures) has surfaced. It may provide important support, critical understanding, acceptance, and distinctive knowledge, narratives, rituals, and lore (Johnson & Colucci, 1999).

FAMILY RESILIENCE

As the last quote from Joan Laird suggests, we know far too little about the sources of resilience and the capacity to rebound or competence for *all* families in meeting the extraordinary demands of contemporary life. But we are beginning to have some light thrown on this very important topic. If we discover how different kinds of families manage to make it through the melange of pressures they face, without the communal reserves once drawn upon, perhaps we can transform that understanding into policies and practices that amplify family resilience and strength. Let us now turn to some notions about the qualities, capacities, and resources that ensure more successful accommodations for families. We should remember, too, that these may vary in terms of the structure of the family and where the family is in terms of developmental transition.

David Elkind (1994), a longtime observer and scholar of child development and family life, sees in the modern family a “permeable” family. He discerns in the seeming imbalances and morbidities of postmodern families the stresses hammering at children and youth in the contemporary society and a new family form emerging, a form that is based on values and sentiments that prepare its members to cope with this stunning array of pressures. Three sentiments and their resulting practices are particularly heartening from his point of view.

Committed love is based on the realization of partners that intimate relationships require hard work and time and that long-term relationships are neither “inherently given nor contractually guaranteed” (p. 213). This kind of relationship incorporates elements of the unilateral relationships of romantic love with the consensual elements of egalitarian partnerships, depending on the task. These are subsumed under a higher order relationship in which there is most importantly a We and an Us.

Authentic parenting is an outgrowth of shared parenting but integrates unilateral and mutual authority depending on the concern at hand and the developmental stage of the child. But it is also leavened by a realization that each parent can perform their roles in ways that are true to their own temperaments, personalities, and experience.

Finally, there is an emergent relationship between community and family. How well a family does is seen as partly dependent upon the ties it has with the community and the resources and assets available in the community. Community service has become a part of the required curriculum in many schools. Other neighborhoods are reaching out to isolated families or individuals and families in trouble. Some schools have become “lighted schools”—twenty-four-hour family resource centers providing programs, services, and opportunities for connections to others. According to Elkind, *interdependence* is a central value and sentiment that underlies this emerging family form. “Interdependence is founded upon a sense of being both one and many, of being different from everyone else and like them at the same time” (p. 220).

Traces of his longing for the modern family aside, Elkind’s thesis about the new family embodies some of what we know about family resilience to this point. And it can apply in spirit to all families and caretaking relationships. It is important, as a starting point, to realize that every family, even those in the midst of gripping disorganization and bewildering turmoil, has strengths and capacities. Every angry, demanding parent has moments of caring; every confused adolescent has moments of hope and clarity; every abusive father has a twinge of doubt or regret. At some time in every family’s life there have been periods of relative calm and stability. Every family has overcome hurdles, some more successfully than others. All of these are resources to be drawn upon, by the family members themselves or by someone who would deign to be of help to them (Kaplan & Girard, 1994; Walsh, 1998b; Weick & Saleebey, 1995).

Being or becoming connected to a community is often a source of resilience. Communities, even those compromised by poverty or deterioration, are brimming with people and associations who can be vital links to human and social capital in the community (Saleebey, 1998). John McKnight has made a lot of the importance of the internal resources, tools, and capacities of communities and neighborhoods. These lie with individuals, families, and, in his view, very importantly with associations. Associations are groups of residents who have come together through consent because of common interests or common endeavors related to sustaining the community or parts of it. According to McKnight, these are the elements of association-based communities that make them functional and powerful:

Capacity. Functioning communities depend upon the capacities of each individual and each family, and these summed up are the power of the community.

Collective effort. Individuals and families have many opportunities to work together in common pursuit, by consent, and through sharing responsibility. This requires many talents, and everybody can contribute something.

Informality. The associational life of the community is an informal economy. Transactions of value take place without money, hype, or advertising. Relationships are not managed. Fallibility and capacity are both accepted and understood.

Stories. This is how individuals and families come to know, understand, connect, and share with each other.

Celebration. The constant incorporation of celebration, rituals, and parties is important to all communities. In these communities, the distinction between work and play is blurred.

Tragedy. Communities recognize the reality of tragedy, death, and suffering. To be in a community is to be a part of rituals, lamentations, and celebration of our foibles, fads, and fallibilities.

Use values versus staple values. What is produced and available in the community as a part of meeting the challenges and capitalizing on the opportunities in life is what is valued—not what you can buy to be a better person, to be more happy, or to escape pain (McKnight, 1995, pp. 168–72).

Clearly this is an ideal, but the point is that these kinds of communities do exist—some obviously, some only potentially. Families are most likely to thrive when nestled in the bosom of such a collectivity of resources, tools, and rituals.

CONCLUSION

The postmodern world has seen the remarkable procreation of family forms, styles, and processes. Although some see the richness of this as a threat to some fragile monolithic ideal of family, others see in it a comforting variety of ways to accomplish what families have always accomplished—the establishing of intimacy, the raising of children, the comforting of all members, socialization, and doing all that in a multitude of ways that reflect special circumstances, history, context, pressures and strains, and opportunities. In her foreword to *Mothers Who Think*, Anne Lamott says this about mothers (you can substitute the word family here):

[The stories here] are not by or about normal mothers, because we've finally stopped falling for the great palace lie that such a person exists. Somewhere along the way, we figured that normal is a setting on the dryer. That there is only us—mothers who think and feel and love, who do the best we can, struggling and laughing more than we thought we would, and yelling and learning and regressing and pleading, sometimes crying in frustration and then, a little later, in gratitude for the blessing of being mothers, as all the while, one day at a time, we watch our children grow. (1999, p. xi)

Dennis Miller puts it this way:

Families keep everything in perspective. You can grow up, get out in the world, become a big success. You can control fortunes, corner the market, forecast financial trends, steer your company into the twenty-first century and beyond, but you go home to your family and you know who you are? You're just the kid who got tricked by his brothers into drinking a glass of pee. (1998, p. 18)

The wonderful thing, too, is you can be two older sisters living together and be a family. You can be a young couple struggling to get heels dug in economically and be a family. You can be recent immigrants, mother and father with six children, grandmother, and grandfather and be a family. You can be two people who have adopted an adolescent and be a family. And so it goes. It is what you do, not how you are made up; it is your relationship to the larger social world, not your internal structure; it is your commitment to each other that makes you a family. Families are the site of oppression and liberation, of meaning-making, of the development of capacities, of the play of contingencies, of the intersection between body, mind, and environment. They can be wonderful or terrible or both and everything in between at one time or another. But they are us.

M and M Dialogue

MEREDITH: I took some of this personally. I was glad to understand that a single parent family is a real family and not just some sorry aberration due to bad luck, bad decision-making, or bad relationships. My mom was a single parent from the time I was eleven. I have been for several years now. I have always felt, even though I didn't often admit it, somewhat less than two-parent families. I'm not stupid. I know that single parent families have stresses that other families don't; that money is almost always a problem and that time is *always* a problem, but I will stack my parenting skills up against anybody's. I mentioned my Mom's depression before. Maybe it wasn't as much related to the divorce as it

was to the sudden change in lifestyle—the increase of responsibility, the decrease in money and time, the accumulation of stresses that can't be shared. I don't know.

MITCHELL: I wonder if some of the real burden of being a solo parent doesn't lie with the attitudes of the community and even extended family members. Somehow you have failed, you couldn't keep the marriage together, or you messed up and had a child out-of-wedlock. And even though you don't believe that, their disapproval is hard to swallow.

MEREDITH: I agree. I see this in my field placement to a degree, anyway. I am placed in a family service agency, and we see many families in the midst of a lot of stress. Sometimes I think that if it is a single parent that we almost always add that designation to our assessment—like it is another problem without really figuring out if it is or not. Maybe I am being too sensitive about this but I am sure that sometimes it is true. If you had a two-parent family with exactly the same problems and needs, somehow they would be regarded as having less of a problem.

MITCHELL: What about other nontraditional families? Is it true for them as well?

MEREDITH: I have not been there long enough to see many other kinds of families. By far the most common is where both parents are working. I do remember one family discussed at a staffing and the grandparents were raising the five children—roughly ages five to sixteen. The parents both died of AIDS. While everyone at the staffing clearly admired the grandparents for their effort and sacrifice and generosity and all that, the underlying sense was that they were going to have all kinds of trouble because of their age, especially as the kids go through adolescence. I mean that may be true, I don't know, but I don't think you should sort of assume that.

MITCHELL: So are you are saying that even though we, in this postmodern world, have many different family forms, we still use the nuclear family as the gold standard by which to judge other families?

MEREDITH: I don't know if I would go that far. But I wonder if we just don't have enough experience with other family types to really make a balanced judgment about them. I don't think we know much about those that are successful. My God, I can't imagine what a gay couple must go through. But I do have a friend who is gay, and he has been with his partner a lot longer than I was with mine. I can't imagine how they do it. And I wouldn't be surprised that if they went for help some time that their sexual orientation was—whether deliberately or not—was factored into the problem calculation. I don't want to be unfair, but I just have that feeling.

MITCHELL: It has been a while since I have practiced in an agency so I really

can't judge whether or not you are being fair. But in terms of cultural attitudes, it is not surprising. Let me ask you another question. It is related I think. When you see a family (or someone in your agency does) that is going through a difficult time or is even becoming seriously disorganized, do you find out about their strengths? And if you do, how do you do it?

MEREDITH: Well, we talk a lot about building on the strengths of families, and I think everyone believes that we do. But from my vantage point, it seems that most of the files and records of families that I read are mostly assessments, often very well done, about what is the matter with this family and/or certain members. There doesn't seem to be any consistent or programmed way to detail the strengths of a family. And I don't think we have a language to do it.

MITCHELL: Like what sort of language are you talking about?

MEREDITH: Well, I was talking with my field instructor about this last week, and she sort of agreed. We don't know how to go about looking for strengths, she said, because we don't know what they are or what we are looking for, and I guess that has to do with not having the words, too. What do you think of when we talk about strengths?

MITCHELL: I don't know if you remember our earlier discussion, but a couple of things come to mind. First, how did this family, so distraught and disconcerted with problems, manage to survive and make it to the agency for help? Second, I would want to know what specifically they have drawn upon to survive—what skills or qualities or external resources?

MEREDITH: Sure, I remember. I also remember a feeling in the back of my mind that has been reinforced by being in the field, that the problems are really overwhelming and that poking around for strengths when people are suffering is not really appropriate.

MITCHELL: But once you've explored the problems and helped families to metabolize and clarify their anguish, anger, anxiety, grief, then what?

MEREDITH: I see your point, but in my limited experience so far, it seems to me that families want to continue to talk about their problems.

MITCHELL: I'll bet they do. But how much of that is cultural conditioning and how much is related to the way we relate to them—maybe expecting them to explore their problems in ever more detail—even if it is repetitive?

MEREDITH: Well, I'm not convinced—yet. I need to get more experience; I would hate to go down a path that a family thought was irrelevant.

MITCHELL: This is important, let's talk more about it—maybe after you have had more experience with families.

MEREDITH: That'd be great.

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CHAPTER NINE

Person/Environment, Part II: Coming into Being in the Family and Community

If everything I've said up to this point hasn't made you realize how serious a commitment having a child is, maybe this will: Baby Nikes are 85 bucks a pair.

—DENNIS MILLER

Coming together as partners or a couple, perhaps intending to have children, or actually bringing children into the world are serious and intricate commitments. These are life transitions whose impact on us and the changes that they bring can be significant and telling, frightening or glorious, and most certainly opportunities for development, self-reflection, recasting one's meaning system, and discovering sources of strength. They also can be troubled passages rife with disquieting moments that challenge our capacity to adapt. In this chapter, I will discuss some of the pressures and opportunities that exist when people come together to become a family; and if they decide to have children, how the developmental requisites and needs of infants and toddlers both challenge and strengthen the relational and structural sinew of family life. In doing this, I will be mindful of how culture, social class, environmental contingency, community, and global events may affect this process. Let me begin by offering a model of family transitions within and adaptation to the social, political, cultural, and physical dynamisms of everyday life. But I do want you to hearken back to chapter 2 and our discussion of meaning-making. Although I will use "stages" of development (infancy, childhood, etc.), I am only using them as benchmarks. I believe that while it seems clear that infants have a number of developmental necessities and landmarks, *as people grow and change, the nature of the self and the interrelationships are much less fixed, much more subject to context, fabrication, and refashioning, and more like an emergent narrative than an epigenetic unfolding.*

A CONTEXTUAL MODEL OF FAMILY TRANSITION AND ADAPTATION

The contextual model of family transition and adaptation (this is a slight revision of the McGoldrick and Carter model [1999] discussed in chapter 7 under ecological theory) has essentially five parts: (1) how the individual and family are nestled in and connected to larger sociocultural environments and institutions; (2) the past and present concerns and tensions that are felt most strongly and the ways of being together that have evolved within the family; (3) the generally expected developmental transitions the family may face as well as unexpected challenges to the family's adaptive capacity; (4) the strengths and resources within the family and its environments; and (5) the assortment of meanings that guide the family. This can be a useful way to think of the families that you may see professionally or to think about families in general.

Context

The individual is nestled within an immediate family (or caretaker) that has more or less of a relationship with an extended family—the perimeter of generational roots of the family; the visible manifestation of a family legacy. These family members, in turn, carry their lives out, individually and collectively, within neighborhoods and communities. The community can be a veritable rain forest of relationships and resources or, at the other extreme, be a haphazard collection of individuals and families who have little relationship to, curiosity about, or responsibility for each other. The community also consists of organizations, institutions, and associations that may have an impact on family life. Some communities are rich in informal and formal associations that meet around hobbies, similar interests, political issues, and mandated activities and can be a source of support or involvement for family members. Organizations in the community, churches, local governments, schools, and businesses also contribute in various ways to family life. Decisions are made, for example, at the city commission that can have important consequences for the lives of families and family members, for example, permitting commercial zoning in a heretofore residential neighborhood. All of these are wrapped up in the larger political, economic, and social structures and institutions that are the blueprint for civil ideologies and actions (social policies, for example). Welfare reform, although now trumpeted as an unmitigated success (welfare rates are diminishing; poverty rates slightly so), has been a disaster for many poor children and their

families. We managed to convince ourselves that programs to reduce poverty somehow caused poverty.

Long before AFDC, everyone from Charles Dickens to Jacob Riis agreed upon three things about poverty: Slums breed rats, slums breed roaches, and slums breed crime. California . . . is almost at a point where it is spending more on prisons than it does on higher education—a fair working definition of a dead civilization. (Ivins, 1998, p. 19)

The point is that in the grand sweep of policy and program that emanates from large social institutions, the heartbeat of a family struggling against the desolation of poverty may be made fainter by the incivility, insensitivity, and ignorance of the policy. Luckily, with wisdom, caution, and the knowledge and assent of those families who know what the struggle is about, the heartbeat could just as well be made steady and unmistakably clear.

Sources of Stress from Without and Within

Many events, situations, and institutions on the borders of family life can conspire to bring challenges, some of them daunting. They worm their way into the very dynamics of family life. Racism, for example, throws the gauntlet down to African-American parents who want the best for their children yet know that racism and discrimination loom ahead for them.

Through examples as well as words, Black parents must transmit to their children the realities of living in a society that is hostile to Black aspirations. In [one] study of middle-class Black families, many parents who were aware of their own deprivation tried to prepare their children for disappointments while encouraging them to set high goals. (Staples & Johnson, 1993, p. 176)

Class provides other external stresses that affect how a family manages its daily lifeworld.

The women, exhausted from doing two days' work in one, angry at the need to assume obligations without corresponding entitlements, push their men in ways unknown before. The men, battered by economic uncertainty and by the escalating demands of their wives, feel embattled and victimized on two fronts—one outside the home, the other inside. Consequently, when their wives seem not to see the family work they do, when they don't acknowledge and credit it, when they fail to appreciate them, the men feel violated and betrayed. (Rubin, 1994, pp. 87–88)

You can see how this reality, given a sharp edge by economic uncertainty, would penetrate the membrane of family boundaries and exercise a dramatic influence on many aspects of family life. Children see and feel this as well. Other factors—poverty, consumerism (“Over and over people hear that their needs for love, security, and variety can be met with products” [Pipher, 1996, p. 93])—have an intense effect on the relationships that people within a family have with each other.

Many enduring sources of tension, often unspoken, can come from within the family, some having a half-life of two and three generations. Given enough of these, even the most modest of external stresses can throw the family into a state of disruption and disorganization. If, for example, there is a pattern of repudiating and distancing oneself from parents on the part of one of the partners in a family, the birth of the first child, under ordinary circumstances a challenging transition, may exponentially increase the tension between the husband and wife. Family secrets, intergenerational squabbles, unresolved interpersonal conflicts, emotional legacies, and uncompleted grief, for example, may all make the ordinary and expectable transitions more difficult to manage.

Expected and Unexpected (Contingency/Luck) Changes and Forces in the Family and Environment

Expectable transitions include all those shifts and changes, additions and subtractions from family life and experience that one might reasonably expect or, in some cases, have even been planned for, such as the birth of a child, older children leaving home, the retirement of a spouse or partner, and even, under some circumstances, the death of a lifelong partner. The fact that these are expected presupposes some preparation for them; some cultural, social, and spiritual supports and resources in facing them; and some internal skills and resolve in meeting them. As mentioned above, a family also burdened with unsettled emotional and interpersonal business may find that these developmental transitions have a heavy and discomfiting impact on the family.

Unexpected stresses can be nearly anything imaginable. Being laid off work, the sudden and violent death of a loved one, a serious illness or accident, a natural disaster, or a forced migration from one’s home all require any family to muster its wits, call upon its reserves, and summon resources in the environment to meet the intimate and practical challenges of such strains. Larger sociohistorical, events, shifts, and dislocations can also have a dramatic impact upon an individual family: war, political emigration,

changes in social policy or political stability, natural and human-made disasters, and economic decline. In one of the poorest districts in New York, the South Bronx, two young boys died—one by falling down an elevator shaft that was not protected, another in an apartment fire. These tragic deaths, in part, were due to the politics of the city that for years has been cutting back and hacking away at the supports and services for the poor. Mrs. Washington, interviewed by Jonathon Kozol over a period of months, is very much aware of the risks to those children and how policies of the city play a hand in the tragedies that befall poor families here. She wrote Kozol a letter about the death of Bernardo in the elevator shaft. “The city is blaming the family . . . for letting an eight-year-old go in the hallway. But they got to go *some-where*.” Going outside for youngsters is “going in the hallway . . . the real outside, where they could get some air, is just too dangerous” (1995, p. 99). She told Kozol that garbage is piled five feet high in an airshaft of the building, and in the building where Bernardo died, one woman with three children has had to have the telephone company come ten times because rats have chewed through the wall and chewed the phone lines. In another apartment, a ceiling fell on a child’s bedroom. No matter. Then-new mayor Rudolph Guliani had vowed to diminish sanitation and inspection services as well as programs for children and teenagers, so vital for poor children. Never underestimate the power of policy to work ill or good on any individual family. But for the most vulnerable families, there is often a lot more hostility than weal.

Strengths and Resources

Even in the direst of circumstances, in the midst of the most rotten luck, families and individuals often surprise us with their resolve, courage, wiles, perspective, and inventiveness. Any assessment of a family or individual that does not take into account their strengths, virtues, accomplishments, and responses to incomprehensible stress is no assessment at all. Jonathan Kozol reports this piece of wisdom from a sixteen-year-old Latina from Harlem, Maria. She is offering her theory about what people outside poor neighborhoods think of them—especially white and well-to-do people:

It’s not like, “Well, these babies just aren’t dying fast enough.” . . . “Let’s figure out a way to kill some more.” It’s not like that at all. It’s like—I don’t know how to say this (she picks up a Styrofoam cup and turns it in her hands). . . . If you weave enough bad things into the fibers of a person’s life—sickness and filth, old mattresses and other junk thrown in the streets and other ugly ruined things,

and ruined people, a prison here, a sewage there, drug dealers here, the homeless people over there, then give us the very worst schools anyone could think of, hospitals that keep you waiting for ten hours, police that don't show up when someone's dying, take a train that's underneath the street in the good neighborhoods and put it above where it shuts out the sun, you can guess that life will not be very nice and children will not have much sense of being glad who they are. (Kozol, 1995, pp. 39–40)

How many people outside her family have breathed in the wisdom, eloquence, and anguish of Maria?

Meaning-Making

Maria's take on the larger environment and other people is an example of meaning-making. Who knows where the elements of her exquisite narrative came from; what personal inventiveness, conversations, and observations coalesced into an understanding that may have life-affirming consequences for her? The meanings that families create as well as those imposed on them are, at some level, always matters of social context—the intersection of ideas, relationships, and institutions in people's lives as they dance through time. To understand how a family makes meaning or what meanings and interpretations of their world are central to them is the beginning of understanding who they are.

So, as families journey through life, tension and conflict are often greatest when unforeseen disruptions and anticipated transitions confront them, when their meaning system is challenged or compromised, or when rotten luck befalls them. But families change. They often change as a result of their adaptive struggles and successes. During times of challenge and adjustment, family roles and relationships may realign, reconfigure, or destabilize. Supports and other sources of stress in the environment—immediate and distant—affect how families respond and, if fortunate, meet the challenge. The transitions we will discuss in this and the next chapters include many of these elements in differing combinations. Also in this and the next chapter, we will look at a singular event for some families and see how some families adapt to it: being homeless.

Caveat. Although setting this and the following chapters in a framework that seems to imply a linear approach to life changes and development for families and children, the underlying theme is that the context of people's behavior—infants and adults alike—is a powerful determinant of behavior,

and people's interpretations of the context and their unfolding relationships in it are critical to understanding behavior. It is probably the case that the shifts and changes in mood, ideas, behaviors, and ostensible beliefs accompanying contextual changes have, for children and adolescents, a power to promote durable changes. The same seems less true for adults, although I think that we have always underestimated the power of the situation and the interpretations of it in changing behavior—at least for the moment.

BECOMING PARTNERS AND BEING A COUPLE

Of all the dilemmas of the life cycle, the existential dilemma of coupling is probably the greatest. Marriage is the only family relationship that we swear is forever and the only one we swear is exclusive; yet it is the one relationship that is least likely to be either exclusive or forever. (McGoldrick, 1999, p. 231)

This sobering quote (especially so if you are thinking about getting involved in a serious relationship anytime soon) speaks volumes about this process. Many factors influence how people get together in today's world. One of the most important in the dominant culture is the discrepancy between the dreamy romantic conception of coming together with the more complex, more varied, and sometimes harsher reality. Romantically, historically, and stereotypically, we have considered the notion of becoming a couple to be the melding of interests and personalities of a man—competent, strong, smart, and of the world—with a woman who, while not as bright or competent as the man, is physically attractive, subordinate, and devoted to her man. She will offer herself up as the principal support for the man so that he might pursue his professional or occupational dream. She will be constant and selfless in attending to the rearing of whatever children they might have in order to ensure their well-being. This union is forever. But this is a dream to be left unfulfilled, or should I say better left unfulfilled, since it is both impossible and reflective of a short-sighted and sexist patriarchal ideal. Just one ironic twist among many here is that many women have suffered great pain and experienced a jarring disconnection between that dream and their reality. Jessie Bernard (1982) has pointed out for years that marriage, especially the gap between the fantasy and the reality, takes a toll on the physical and mental health of women. Men, on the other hand, seem to benefit in many ways from being married in spite of the cultural imagery that depicts marriage as the “old ball and chain” for them. Women today are more aware than ever that a conventionally defined marriage is not such a good deal, an awareness that can bring great pain or opportunity for growth (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999).

Another challenge to coming together in marriage or in an intimate partnership is the presumed importance and role of love—more particularly romantic love. Unions are borne, we assert, of the bond of love and “when Love speaks, the voice of all the gods makes heaven drowsy with the harmony” (Shakespeare, *Love’s Labours Lost*). Such a chimera over the eyes of those making an alliance (or dalliance, perhaps?) obscures the real intricacies and challenges of establishing a durable and satisfying couple relationship. Clearly, a kind of love is involved in bringing and, more importantly, keeping people together. It is a love born of respect, shared beliefs, common experiences, memories, sexuality, faith, hopes, trust, and visible commitments. It slowly evolves and takes hold—or not. Perhaps, however, loyalty is the stronger ligament in the intimate relationship. “The marriage ceremony¹ itself is far more about loyalty than love, as if in implicit recognition that love alone is too frail a reed to sustain a couple for life” (Wylie, 1999, p. 28).

As we might suspect, love, no matter how mature and slow to flower, is not enough. Coming together is an emotional, developmental, economic, cultural, political, and familial process. Becoming partners has roots in each family of origin; it may be colored and given tempo by one’s culture; it flies out the heart of need and hope; it speaks with the voice of your child; it is a reflection of how you grow; and it is mightily dependent on opportunity. Anne Lamott (1999), in reflecting on her desire to connect with the “right” man and her struggle not to fit her father’s “dog suit” to any man, recalls with pain another once budding relationship beginning to wilt:

I understood to a certain extent that these men of mine were innocent bystanders in my old family drama. But this didn’t make the romantic problems hurt any less. The roar of the impending emptiness was almost dizzying. And I picked up the pace a little. We went to a lot of action movies, had another espresso, hopped back into bed, picked small fights just to get the adrenaline flowing again. . . . It’s all a way of avoiding the coming loneliness and the frightening silence inside. (p. 223)

A lot is at stake, and many things are involved in coming together. Here, Anne Lamott, among the many flutters of the past and happenstance that might influence us, is commenting on the insistent beat of unfinished business and patterns of relating learned in the family of origin and on the yearning for passion.

One of the critical processes in coming together as a couple is the tension and confusion between fusion and intimacy. Fusion refers to the idea that a person, aware of it or not, is using the relationship to fill out oneself, to

1. Some but certainly not all marriage ceremonies.

exploit one's interests and appetites, or to resolve long-standing, unresolved, and nagging internal conflicts. Intimacy, on the other hand, requires closeness and cooperation and a respect for the other partner's distinctiveness and independent and separate identity. Likewise, intimacy creates, over time, out of awareness and regard, a gentle and not tyrannical mutuality, a balance between togetherness, physical intimacy, sharing, and the need for privacy and contemplative or recreative space. Certainly, intimacy allows for the confronting of disagreements and differences in open and emotional but thoughtful communication. Of course, this is an ideal but a worthy project for any couple to engage. There are of course gender and cultural differences in the shape that fusion and intimacy take.² For example, men frequently express fusion by a postured but not real distancing from their partner or by expecting women to accede to their demands; women express fusion by suppressing their own autonomous wishes and urges to separate development, losing them in the identities and aspirations of their partner (McGoldrick, 1999).

Culture, as it always does, plays a hand here. We find meaning, we express meaning, we create meaning in intimate relationships. What those relationships stand for, how they will be, how they will become a part of our identity, and how the relationship will bind us to the larger symbolic world and the people within it are stories written, in part, by culture. In contemporary society, one of the things we must deal with is that we come together, not always as members of the same culture but as people carrying the baggage of more than one cultural and ethnic group. Culture and class and the sociopolitical realities of the moment have a vigorous effect on how and when and if people come together. Witness the following. Telling her son, James, the story of how she, a white Jewish woman came together with a black Christian man in the 1940s, Rachel recalls:

After Dennis got on his feet and got a job at my Aunt Mary's leather factory and we started going out, he brought me by there and said, "I want y'all to meet a friend of mine" and their eyes kind of popped out when I walked into the room.

This was around 1940 and black and white didn't do what me and Dennis were doing, walking around and such, or they were good-time, partying folks like Rocky's friends at Small's Paradise. But Dennis was a Christian man and a serious man and so were his friends. This was no joking matter to them.

Well, once they managed to pull their jaws from off the floor,

2. There are many societies in which love, romantic love, plays no part in the union of two people and their families.

they said, “Our house is your house. Sit down and eat.” And I didn’t have any problem with them, or with any of Dennis’s family. They took me in with open hearts and made me one of their own; the only thing was it sometimes took a minute or two for them to get over the shock of seeing a black and white together—like Aunt Candis, Dennis’s aunt. (McBride, 1996, pp. 194–95)

Attraction and desire surely played a role here. Economic necessity, too. Culture provided the comforts of a welcoming family, and the support given to new couples, even this unusual one, leavened the relationship. The realities of the era had a hand in this as well. Rachel and Dennis’s breathing of the social and racial atmosphere of the day drew them together precariously at first but strongly as the bonds of culture, family, and faith tightened. Faith *was* important. “Well, Dennis was a solid, clean Christian man. He seemed to understand me and see right through me. It wasn’t long before I fell in love with him” (McBride, 1996, pp. 195–96)

Mexican-American writer and poet Sandra Cisneros, in her collection of erotic and ironic poems, *Loose Woman*, blends the mythic universality of longing with the particularity of culture in “Dulzura”

Make love to me in Spanish
Not with that other tongue.
I want you *juntito a mi*,
tender like the language crooned to babies.
I want to be that
lullabied, *mi bien*
querido, that loved.
I want you inside
the mouth of my heart,
inside the harp of my wrists,
the sweet meat of the mango
in the gold that dangles
from my ears and neck.
Say my name. Say it.
The way it’s supposed to be said.
I want to know that I knew you
even before I knew you. (1994, p. 27)

I Love Your Genes

What about genes, our biological heritage, and coming together or mating? First, let it be said—check this out with your friends and relatives—love, romantic love (delightful ephemera that it seems to be), lust, passion,

allure, and infatuation are among the strongest emotions we feel, and the choices we make about love are among the most important we make. Though human love cannot be explained without understanding the role of culture, history, symbols, social customs and habits and the narratives, poems, songs that venerate it, and though love and infatuation are more than simply biological phenomena, they surely have their roots in our very nature. Whatever else it is, and notwithstanding that it has become a filigree of emotions, rituals, songs and stories, love is rooted in reproduction and sex.

The power of love is simple. The way humans pass on their genes is through sexual reproduction. People with genes that somehow made them incapable or disinterested in having sex never had children and therefore didn't pass on those genes. They may have been wonderful, even extraordinary people. . . . but if they didn't have sex, those genes were lost forever. People with genes that inspired sex and attracted a partner had children. The children had children of their own and so on down to us. (Hamer & Copeland, 1998, p. 161)³

But lest we wax too biological here, in the throes of passion and the throbbing release of climax, it is unlikely that most people are celebrating the triumph of genetic heritability and reproduction. Most likely, although this varies enormously by circumstance and consequences, many people are trying not to have children and still to have organismically good sex. No matter. Sex breeds. The incalculable cleverness of nature ensured that our cerebral cortex, especially our frontal lobes (the site of abstract, rational thinking—see chapter 4) would not override the animalistic urges of that bedrock of our emotions, the limbic system (also see chapter 4). To ensure just that, our sensory cortex (that part of the parietal lobe that receives, records, and transmits sensory data from our contacts with the external world) has numerous sites of various sizes for receipt of impulses from different parts of the body. It is no accident that the part of the sensory cortex linked to our genitals is the largest and, therefore, most sensitive. The flood of sensation, emotion, and delight that accompanies sexual intercourse and other sexual encounters usually mutes the insistent rationality of the frontal

3. Some homophobic individuals and groups use this as a rationalization for their hatred or fear of gay men and lesbian women: that because they cannot reproduce, their love and their sex is unnatural. Some even use it to exploit the idea that since they cannot reproduce, the fact that there are lesbians and gays suggests that it is a social phenomenon, more specifically a matter of choice.

lobes. Usually. We all know that when thinking, perhaps due to worry, guilt, or preoccupations of one sort or another, prevails, the pleasures of sex are much diminished (Buss, 1994; Hamer & Copeland, 1998).

This discussion naturally requires that we address some of the differences between men and women in this regard; differences that are rooted in biology. We cannot array them all here, but in our humor and in our libraries, for example, we note the differences. David Buss examined thirty-seven different cultures and asked the basic question: Are there differences in men and women in mating preferences that extend across cultures? The answer? Most definitely! Men, for the most part, are looking for sex, represented by youth, beauty (the standards of which may vary by culture), and firm flesh. Across these cultures, men sought women three to five years younger than themselves, and as they got older, the age discrepancy widened. Women, on the other hand, sought older men, often men with resources (land, animals, a large bank account and stock portfolio) and power. Remember that what stand as means, assets, and power varies from culture to culture, class to class (Buss, 1994). Other differences that others have found is that men prefer a variety of sexual partners; women less so. This, too, suggests some genetic basis because “it’s true across cultures and time, it’s found in other species, and it shows individual variability” (Hamer & Copeland, 1998, p. 178). *I would add, however, that it is not inconceivable that these are the historical effects of institutionalized patriarchy at least as much, if not more, than, genetic predilection. Separating these two out is at this point beyond, I think, the tools of population genetics.* (see Lewontin, Rose, & Kamin, 1984, especially chapter six, for a thoroughgoing discussion of patriarchy and biology). Just a note here: the cultures that Buss and colleagues examined included large cities (Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, Brazil; Shanghai, China; Bangalore and Ahmadabad, India; Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, Israel; Teheran, Iran) and rural areas (Indians in the state of Gujarat and Zulus in South Africa) and poor and rich countries. In all, 10,047 people were interviewed.

Another common observation about allure and mating that tempers the biological is that we tend to be attracted to those who are similar to us. Jared Diamond (1992) summarizes the results of several studies that have found very high correlations (on the order of +0.9) for social and cultural factors—race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, and political preferences. Other correlations, not as strong but still theoretically and statistically significant, turn out to be various measures of personality and intelligence: intelligence quotient, neatness, extraversion, temperament, and so forth. There are other correlations as well, including eye color, skin color, height, and weight. But others defy common sense: breadth of nose, length of ear lobe, length of middle finger, lung volume, distance between the eyes! The correlations are not as high as for the other traits mentioned above, but they are well above zero. These have been found across cultures. Social

psychologists have studied the same phenomena (similarity attracts) for years now and note that we also tend to like people whose opinions and beliefs match our own. However, researchers who study similarity and attraction note that under some limited conditions opposites do attract and that under other conditions, more widespread, birds of a feather do flock together. It probably depends on what traits and characteristics we are talking about. A relatively submissive person might well be attracted to an independent or nurturing person; a passive person to an assertive person. On the other hand, it is unlikely that a really outgoing person would be attracted, at least initially, to a very introverted person, or a very neat person to a slob (Aronson, 1999; Dryer & Horowitz, 1997).

Our search for partners is driven by our specieshood, shaped and enhanced (or muted) by culture and family experience. As always, luck and circumstance certainly play a role—the conditions (people and events) under which we meet, a surprising intellectual communion, a chance comment by a friend—who knows? Very importantly, the meaning we attach to our meeting, our budding relationship, though influenced by culture and upbringing, is still uniquely ours and may propel us toward or away from each other. In any case, forming an intimate relationship or partnership is a human activity with enormous consequences for the people involved.

Today, more couples are opting to be childless. More are at liberty to invent themselves as a couple through time because of the lessening influence of extended family, higher mobility, and changing cultural norms. Although this is a freedom, it also can be quite a burden as well. Distance bought here can also mean uncertainty purchased at the same counter. Many couples in today's world also do not have the support of and ties to a larger community. Thus, they may have to rely more on their own wiles in dealing with the demands of the day. For some couples, ethnic heritage plays an important role in how they manage their life together, often teetering between more traditional intergenerational models and more contemporary companionate models.

For immigrant Latinos, a shift toward more companionate marriage is often part of the desired or necessary change. . . . Yet a traditional model of marriage may be upheld too. Both partners may yearn for the complementarity of separate husband-wife roles, separate friendships, or contacts with the family of origin. (Falicov, 1998, p. 193)

Rather than choose one over the other, many Latino couples try to meld the conventional with the contemporary. We know less about couples with no children than we do most other forms of family. We must also acknowledge the fact that there is a strain of prejudice against couples who do not have children. However, we should be alert to the differences (in terms of

other's attitudes and self-definition) between those who have chosen to be childless and those who are infertile.

A Note on Abuse. Physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of women is more common than we think. It occurs in heterosexual and same-sex relationships. It is the dark side of intimacy. It is about peremptory power and control. It occurs within a sociocultural framework that stockpiles beliefs and practices that may increase the probability of physical violence—homophobia and heterosexism, gender oppression, patriarchal ideology and male privilege, threats to masculinity, and economic dislocation and peril for the breadwinner role (for men, in particular) (Davidovich, 1990). Abuse may take many forms—including often-ignored emotional abuse (belittling, putting down, severe and demeaning criticizing, name-calling)—and it may occur in any of the areas of our life together: sexuality, family relationships, food, money, friends, religion, work, among others. It does seem to be the case that the violence or abuse that occurs in courtship is likely to reoccur in the marriage relationship. Even what seem to be small or inconsequential threats or menacing behavior can be harbingers of trouble to come.

It was on the Fourth of July. Ed, who worked long hours as a supervisor at a local factory, was looking forward to going to the town fireworks display. Sharon, who worked nights and weekends as a nurse at a community hospital wanted to spend the day relaxing at home. This led to an argument in which Ed accused Sharon of not appreciating all the work he did and caring about his feelings. He pushed Sharon against the wall and threatened her with his fist. (McGoldrick, Broken Nose & Potenza, 1999, p. 478)

Whether or not this becomes a pattern of behavior depends on all manner of contingencies and circumstances, from extended family supports, to mutually crafted agreements about the boundaries of the relationship to participation in couples or group counseling and education. When Ed gets angry, however, there may always be in Sharon's mind the looming possibility of a dangerous eruption.

A NEW HUMAN BEING JOINS THE FAMILY

In chapter 8 we discussed how the astonishing potential for neural, intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal (or social) growth can be fostered or frustrated by families and the neighborhoods and communities they live in. Although there has been much research and thinking about what those factors are, the reality is that, in any given case, we cannot predict, except

most crudely, how an individual child will fare in his or her particular intimate and more distant environment. But the appearance of an infant into the lives of an individual or a couple can be occasion for the most joyous and most demanding of human experiences.

I cried when my daughter was born. My husband cradled the capsule of her body, compact and pink as a new piglet, against his chest before he laid her on my still-rubbery stomach. Eyes closed, her tiny fists clenched, she mewled and rooted against my breast, already instinctively searching for reconnection. Exhausted, I was overwhelmed by the force of her perfection and individuality: a tiny being, separate from and yet still so intimately tied to me.

My world shrunk to the size of her body. Immersed in her smell, her feedings, her needs, I couldn't imagine doing anything without her, that didn't involve her. I remembered my life before she was born as if it were a dream, as if it belonged to some other person I knew only vaguely. . . .

[But some months later] slowly, groggily, I became conscious of wanting to pull away. She started to feel too heavy. When I lay down with her at night, trapped in the nursery by a nipple, I listened not to her contented murmurs but to the noises outside of the dim room: the clattering of dinner dishes, the static of television, the hum of conversation I could not quite hear. (Keller, 1999, p. 114, 115)

Both burden and bliss, having and caring for an infant can be an always unfolding tapestry of trial and error, demand and devotion. For many women, it may require forestalling a career, doing two jobs if a working mother, and relating only to babies, especially if the extended family or neighbors are not a resource. For both parents, especially if both work, the major concerns revolve around how the domestic chores and obligations will be divided (as I said before, it is still unequal—women may do as much as two-thirds of the childrearing and labor at home even if they have a job); the increasing hours devoted to the workplace for both men and women (American workers work more hours than any other western society, and this continues to increase); and the obstinacy of the workplace with respect to engaging and assuring parent-friendly practices (Rubin, 1994; Schor, 1992). Jim Hightower, the populist iconoclast, says that the *work ethic* has gotten out of control; that it has precious little to do with *work*, “nothing to do with *ethics*, and everything to do with the corporation maintaining a tight chokehold on working people” (1997, p. 58).

The increasing time strain is especially tough on parents who have young kids. With wages tumbling, both Mom and Dad are compelled to be in the workplace nowadays, just trying to make ends

meet, and both of them have noses-to-the-grindstone more hours than the average worker does. Their younger children are in day school, the older ones are latchkey kids. Mom and Dad are half-dead by the time they get home and dinner is a quick run to McDonald's or some such before packing the kids off to bed and getting ready for another day. (pp. 60–61)

Hyperbole aside, Hightower is reminding us how the external world, in this case corporations and industries, as well as culture can burrow into the interior of family life.

The emotional and interpersonal innards of the family undergo other changes, too. Any couple and their extended family must make emotional room, must engage in shifts in the affective calculus of relationships, must recast the meaning of the self and the family, and must alter the definition and economy of roles in the family. This is a singular human and symbolic event. How well it is done seems to depend on several factors. Class and culture, of course, always play a role.

White middle-class families . . . are less the innovators than the propagandists and principal beneficiaries of contemporary family change. African-American women and white, working-class women have been the genuine postmodern family pioneers, even though they also suffer most from its negative effects. Long denied the mixed benefits that the modern family order offered middle class-women, less privileged women quietly forged alternative models of femininity to that of full-time domesticity and mother-intensive child rearing. Struggling creatively, often heroically, to sustain oppressed families and to escape the most oppressive ones, they drew on “traditional” premodern kinship resources and crafted untraditional ones, lurching backward and forward into the postmodern family. (Stacey, 1990, p. 252)

In this example, the stresses borne by economic dislocations and distresses related to class and the pains of ethnic and racial discrimination led many of these families, prodded by their women, to create and recreate a family life that could sustain love, support, care for, and nourish the growth of human beings.

Ties to community and neighborhood resources, to extended family, and to institutions that support child development are often critical for helping a family introduce a new member into their fold. Perhaps the most important thing we can do for families is to connect them to others in their community (Pipher, 1996). There should be means, whether through the church or school or volunteer associations, to link them, for example, to the older couple on the block, eager to help out struggling parents, or to connect them with the experienced mother who has much wisdom to offer about

how to raise children and maintain a relationship as a couple or sanity as a single parent. Part of the importance of a community—a vibrant, interactive communal life—is the sharing and passing on of stories and narratives that celebrate the past, instruct the present, and shape the future. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985), from their study of our common life together, say this:

In order not to forget [its] past, a community is involved in retelling its story, its constitutive narrative, and in so doing, it offers examples of men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community. These stories . . . are an important part of the tradition that is so central to a community of memory. . . . families can be communities, remembering their past, telling children the stories of their parents' and grandparents' lives, and sustaining hope for the future—*though without the context of a larger community that sense of family is hard to maintain.* [emphasis added] (p. 154)

The importance of a functioning community to families with infants is that it can help bring order, stability, coherence, and resources to the lives of often harried parents and can provide loyal and dependable alternative nurturers and educators for infants and children. In communities without strong interpersonal ligaments, these possibilities are much harder to realize. Add to that mix wrenching poverty and racial discrimination and in some neighborhoods the suffering becomes palpable.

Culture: Afrocentric Childrearing

Although some views of the African-American community egregiously depict it as dysfunctional and dangerous, it, like other communities, has a rich tradition and history that uplifts the hurt, comforts the struggling, and celebrates the soul. Patricia Raybon, in a letter to *Newsweek* decrying the portrayal of black America in the media, asserted:

I want America to know us—all of us—for who we really are. To see us in all of our complexity, our subtleness, our artfulness, our enterprise, our specialness, our liveliness, our American-ness. This is the real portrait of black Americans—that we are strong people, surviving people, capable people. That may be the best kept secret in America. (cited in Billingsley, 1992, p. 70)

And part of that specialness is the community and the relationships between family and community. African-Americans are often a geographical community. They are also a community that shares common values and appreciations. They are a community because they identify with a common

heritage. They are a community because they may be surrounded by institutions that arose out of their history and heritage, identify with it, and thus serve African-American interests—churches, businesses, schools, and voluntary associations. And they are a community because they have a collective history and present peppered with oppression, discrimination, cultural disruption, and denigration, but, most importantly, with survival.

An Afrocentric approach to understanding the experience of African-Americans is meant to offset the overweening influence of Eurocentric social science and institutional ideology. Enough of traditional African cultures have survived to render African-Americans a distinct cultural group; a group that cannot be fully or clearly seen through Eurocentric lenses. According to Jerome Schiele (1996), the Afrocentric paradigm asserts three basic assumptions about the human condition. First, human beings cannot be understood except as a part of a collectivity. Individual identity in many ways reflects collective identity and the perspective “reject[s] the idea that the individual can be understood separately from others in his or her social group” (p. 287). This is not a denial of individual uniqueness but an affirmation of the importance of a group ethos and imagination. Second, African-Americans appreciate the nonmaterial aspects of being human. They consider the soul and the spirit critical sources of knowledge and awareness, comfort and guidance. The spiritual nature of human beings is thought to be at the core of human nature and is a legitimate focus of inquiry and source of insight. Third, feelings and emotions are respected as sources of knowledge, as legitimate as intellectual, sensory, and cognitive sources of knowledge. This does not mean that Afrocentric knowledge is irrational and anti-intellectual. Rather, it affirms that the understanding of the world must proceed from the unity and interaction of feelings and thoughts (pp. 287–88).

In those communities where life is not disrupted or devastated by rapid physical deterioration, high mobility, the disappearance of jobs, and the ugly intrusion of violence, the past and the present come together, generations converge, and the meaning and transcendence rooted in both the African past and the contemporary African-American present are ritually asserted. These themes appear in what some have called Afrocentric childrearing and reflect some of the core ideas and assumptions of Afrocentricity.

These ideal child-rearing traditions, traceable in varying degrees to African cultures, are becoming, in some quarters, practices and approaches designed to help families survive and thrive in often very difficult circumstances. The following discussion borrows from C. S. Carter (1997), Schiele (1996), Billingsley (1992), Hurd, Moore and Rogers (1995).

Family Pride, Tradition, and Connectedness. Blood ties reign over other kinds of relationships. Children are highly valued. Elders are revered,

respected, and considered keepers of the culture. The extended family is often involved in child-rearing and family life and provides networks of emotional and economic support—especially valuable in times of distress. The structure of families can be augmented with godparents, neighbors, aunts and uncles, even fictive kin. These are regarded as natural helping systems. The world of kinship and care involves service to others and actions taken in the interest of the common good. Relatives—grandparents and parents, especially—serve as role models for youngsters teaching by example or word lessons in bearing difficulty with dignity, in extending a helping hand to a struggling family member, on rising above the adversities of the past and present.

Veneration of Ancestors. Many African-Americans believe that spirits of their ancestors watch over the affairs of the earthly world, punish offenders, and reward those who conform to the standards and mores of the society and family. *Roots* does not just refer to the book and TV show, but intimates the palpable presence of ancestors in the minds and hearts of the living.

Religion and Spirituality. Church leaders rise to significance in the daily moral life of families and communities. Individuals, families, and neighborhoods seek their counsel and support, guidance and inspiration. Ministers and elders of churches often play important social and political roles in the community. The church is also a fulcrum of much of the social life in the community and exists as a staging area for political and social activism. The idea of belief in a deity, the importance of praying and transcendent activity beyond self-interest is cultivated, not only in church but also within the family.

The Community as Resource and as Haven. Community refers to geography and place, to a shared set of values, to a range of common institutions and associations, and to traditionally African-American (local) businesses. The collective beat of a neighborhood, the central role of the church, cooperatives of various kinds, the practice of fosterage (others taking in children when the family is under economic distress), bartering, sharing, communal child care, the joys of assembly, coming together in celebration, and other phenomena pronounce the importance of the community and the need for community.

Belief in Education. In spite of the deplorable state of educational institutions in many African-American communities, especially those that are poor, a strong faith in education abides, including a very strong belief in the importance of education about African-American culture and history (usually totally ignored by the school system but often passed down in families and

churches). In many communities, families have taken over the schools and made them centers for community involvement and participation. In any event, families encourage their children to work hard and to strive for satisfying careers.

Identification with One's Heritage. No matter how far removed, how distant in time, most African-Americans express pride in both their heritage and their racial/ethnic distinctiveness. Roger Wilkins wrote this after the release of Nelson Mandela from twenty-seven years of imprisonment in South Africa:

When the son of an African noble house goes defiantly to prison to continue his struggle for freedom, part of us goes with him. And when we get reports of his growth, stubborn dignity, calm, commanding presence and wisdom, we swell again and think of our ancient heritage and bonds of blood.

There was a surge of pride when the world for the first time gave a black man his regal due in his lifetime. So when the day finally came, we clapped, cheered, and cried at the sight of a king—our cousin the king—walking in the sunshine. (cited in Billingsley, 1992, pp. 72–73)

Acceptance of the Reality of Life's Pain and the Need to Surmount It. Every African-American parent faces two roles as parent: the first is simply (well, it's not so simple) being a parent. The second is to be parents who must realistically prepare their children to face the realities of racism and discrimination, perhaps poverty, and not to be undone by them—to recognize the face of harsh reality and to confront it with dignity and pride in one's heritage. This also involves teaching children coping skills for facing racial taunts, official slights, human-made barriers, artless hostility, and obnoxious confrontation. The idea is not to avoid these, but to meet them head on with aplomb and success.

The Early Processes That Make Us Human

“No computer is likely ever to have anything like a uniquely human ‘operating system’ composed of feelings and reactions that would enable it to ‘think’ like a person” (Greenspan, 1997, p. 39). Stanley Greenspan here reminds us, as we discussed in chapter 4, that thinking requires the sensations and stimuli of experience “filtered by an emotional structure that allows us to understand both what comes through the senses and what we feel and

think about it as well as what we might do about it.” This is to say that we should never ignore the importance of children’s emotions in the first years of life, and that we would do well to recognize that emotions are nurtured, coddled, and shaped by steadfast and caring relationships with adults, usually parents.

Many researchers, clinicians, physicians, and skilled parents have built for us latticeworks of observation, data, theory, and instruction about what infants and toddlers need and how parents and caretaking adults can meet these needs and foster maturation. In this section, the prolific and thoughtful work of Stanley Greenspan will provide the conceptual and empirical structure for our discussion. Before we begin, a few cautionary notes are in order. Many children have other influential adults in their lives in addition to their parents. Child care centers, relatives (grandparents; fathers, mostly in the case of working mothers; siblings), in-home babysitters, or family day care providers provide some hours of care for many children in this country. Such caretakers are particularly important for single parents and poor families (especially relatives). As I said earlier, social policies, social institutions, and happenings in the immediate environment have a persistent and unappreciated impact on families raising children. Accidents, contingencies, luck—good and bad—in the lifeworld of a family can have a profound effect on their fate. Our culture, as it does with romance, sometimes creates unrealistic expectations about the joys of parenthood (and it downplays the demands and challenges), and many of our social institutions and policies do not recognize the realities of single parenting, two parents working, same-sex adoption, and other family structures and values. Becoming a parent is taxing, is disruptive to the couple relationship, can be expensive, and requires a deft juggling of time, concern, and emotional energy. For many new parents, this is a transition unmitigated by community and family resources and support (Carter, 1999). Also, as a society, we do not do much in the way of educating people to become parents, relying instead on the vagaries of memory (how I was treated by my parents) or the whimsy of advice from peers, professionals, and persons of dubious credential. (Go to any large bookstore and I’ll bet that you will find that, with the exception of self-help and fiction, one of the largest sections contains books about parenting and family life.) Finally, our theories of child development, our ideas about the importance of early relationships, particularly the mother-child relationship, are beset with certain assumptions that, as we discussed in chapter 5, may not hold (see discussion on attachment below). Nonetheless, stresses and misconceptions aside, the responsibility for raising another human being is enormous and, in many ways, enormously gratifying. Sure, being a parent requires hard work, sacrifice, and devotion, but it can yield dividends of surprise, joy, gratification, recognition, growth, mutual love, and accomplishment.

Stanley Greenspan⁴ has, through his research and that done by colleagues, constructed a model of early development that began with his earlier studies of autistic children. A child psychoanalyst and clinical professor of psychiatry, behavioral science, and pediatrics at George Washington University Medical School, he comes from a psychoanalytic background. His work is ripened not only by his ongoing research, of course, but by insights from other theorists, researchers, and practitioners. On the basis of research and clinical work, his understanding of infancy and toddlerhood (the first three to four years of life) is constructed around six increasingly complex levels of the development of the mind. His framework also provides an understanding of the experiences that foster or frustrate these deeply embedded components, components that provide the essential superstructure for all later development.

The *first level* of the development of the mind (see chapter 8 for comments on the development of the brain) involves making beginning sense of the antic and unorganized (to the infant) rush of sensations and stimuli that come from within and from without. The ideal is to help the infant achieve some degree of control over her body, its movement and internal sensations. At the same time, the infant must begin to direct and control her own attention. To sustain a degree of calm while developing a crude awareness of and focus on the relevant and interesting stimuli in her environment is the most desirable outcome. Parents or caretakers are the most interesting source of stimulation for an infant. "Every minute you spend helping your child maintain a sense of calm interest in the world is critically important, because all of [her] emerging skills will rest on this ability" (Greenspan, 1999, p. 37). So as a parent, you want to find out and play to the way your child's senses work. What sights, sounds, touches, and smells bring pleasure and delight; which stimuli attract attention and interest and have a calming effect? You also want to know the level of stimulation that she requires and enjoys and which senses seem more keen and a source of pleasure than others (some babies are more in touch with sound than they are sight, for example). Face-to-face games, cooing comments as you look at and touch her face, rocking and soothing and talking gently, or gently moving each little finger or toe can help maintain calm and heighten focus (Greenspan, 1999). Here, sensation and cognition (perceptual apprehension) are bound by a positive emotional experience, crudely brought together.

At the *second level*, the infant is focused increasingly on the parent/

4. I selected Greenspan because his research and the theory that was built on it encompass a variety of perspectives, because his work is current and evolving, and because his work has implications for those who parent. But like all theories, his research and theories are bound by culture and therefore inherently limited by its very narrative structure.

caretaker, other people, and external stimuli. This stage lasts approximately from first smiles to crawling. Greenspan (1999) points out that major accomplishments of this period come from the fact that your baby is “falling in love” with you. This means that she takes obvious pleasure in your presence and company and that she responds to you with an emotional reaction of her own. With obvious delight she may look intently for short periods of time into your eyes; or coo when you hold or rock her; or respond to your smiles with smiles of her own; or be palpably relaxed when you hold or soothe her. The famed developmental theorist Erik Erikson talked of the importance of the development of *trust* based on mutuality between parent and child, a mutuality based on soothing and tender attention and care given in the earliest stage of development (1950). He might very well have been talking about this love. Without this affection, any infant will struggle—some will make a remarkable recovery from its absence but will nonetheless labor. This affection provides an essential emotional basis for the further articulation of cognitive, motor, and language skills and helps to organize information and internal and external stimuli in a meaningful manner and, thus, the responses to them.

As your love magnetically pulls her into your world, your baby becomes more excited about the sights, sounds, touches, and tastes that surround her crib. You’ll literally be enticing her into an awareness of things outside her own body. Obviously, the more sensations your baby can tune in to, the richer her understanding of the world. (Greenspan, 1999, p. 56)

At this stage, if things go well enough, the infant is not only “reaching out” to the small world of her interest, but, thanks to this quality of care and regard, is becoming human, a member of the family and of the species. The phenomena that we call consciousness and self-consciousness probably arises from the emotional templates laid down at this level.

Nonverbal dialogues and the beginning of serious two-way communication mark the *third level* of development. Facial expressions of all kinds (smiles and frowns, for example), motor activities (reaching out for things or throwing them), sounds (coos of delight or grunts of displeasure), gestures (lifting his arms up as a parent approaches) are all a part of this rudimentary two-way conversation. As a parent, you know that the dialogue has been engaged when your child responds to your gestures with gestures of his own, rather than merely aping yours (Greenspan, 1999). This is also the time when the separation and boundaries between “me” (the infant) and “you” (the caretaker) begin to emerge. The young child is now establishing the sense that there is a world separate from self. If he is lucky when he responds to those out there, they acknowledge his presence. The infant now (he is in the second half of his first year) initiates the dialogue with you: as you dress

him, he reaches out for your nose and gurgles happily at your mock surprise. Clearly, these are acts of will: the infant is making gestures and noises on purpose. These elicit a response from the parent, and that response tickles another one from the infant. So, at this stage, we have the well-planted seeds of language and the ability to communicate as well as the germ of purposefulness. These may seem far removed from the glorious complexities and confusions we've talked about in earlier chapters on the human condition, but herein lies the framework for anxiety or optimism, for the heroic or the demonic, for meaning or its absence. Of course, it is all built on the foundation laid by one's genetic inheritance, a frame warped or strengthened by circumstance and painted with the hues of culture.

The *fourth level* of development (roughly the first half of the second year) is a time of extraordinary growth; the promise of language, walking, and socialization is beginning to bloom. Burton White (1995) believes that these are the most critical months (from 8 to 14 months) for the fullest possible maturation of children, a time when the possible growth in the areas of language, curiosity, sociability, and intelligence is extraordinary.⁵ Erikson (1950) sees the second year, thanks to locomotion and language development, as the beginning of the development of will and autonomy, leading to many battles with parents and caretakers over having one's way. He claims that if the environment cannot support or if it undermines by unpredictable or harsh reactions these excursions into experimentation in the widening world, the result is a lifelong burden of shame about who one is and doubt about one's capacity to be comfortable in the universe. Greenspan and colleagues see this a little more ordinarily (see Greenspan, 1999, p. 133). This level of development finds the toddler becoming a tiny problem-solver (figuring out how to get what she wants and needs, usually through gestures, noises, and, as it develops, motoric activity—typically walking, which begins sometime during this period). She is beginning to recognize patterns—how things fit together, how her activity can make certain things happen (turning a knob makes the clown face smile or frown). And there is a like development in getting a firmer grip on spatial relations—how far or near things are to her, how accessible they are. Tensions now develop between being secure (near her caretakers) and wanting to explore the world (checking out where that dog's bark came from, or climbing up on a chair to see out the window). But security becomes a kind of sensory blanket. Even though she moves

5. Let it be said again here: there are those theorists and clinicians who do not believe in the inevitability of stages or levels in the growth of children beyond the most obvious motoric and cognitive ones (walking, talking). Most of the content of these stages as hypothesized by the creators of stage theories is socially, culturally, and historically constructed and certainly not universal (see Kenneth Gergen, 1994).

away from the parents or caretakers, their voices and images can still be apprehended. She also is able to carry images of parents or caretakers in her head, even when they cannot be seen. In this stage, the constrictions and shapes of the intimate environment become more critical. Exploration may be met with disapproval or careful encouragement; the trials and tribulations of the adults may be faced with laughing and joking, loud argument, or quiet resolve; dinner time may be a time of rich interaction and pleasure or a quiet, quick, and joyless meeting of a need. And, of course, the tools and artifacts of culture, filtered through the family ritual and lore, provide a range of experiences and gaps in experience (“Don’t talk to strangers” but “Be kind to old people.”) The self, not yet stitched together with much language, begins coming together, in part through the genius of imitation. Such imitation requires enormous advances in the brain and the resulting capacity to see patterns in the world of one’s experience. This speeds up learning to an amazing degree. Patterns and the emotions that are attached to the perception and apprehension of them plant the seedlings of meaning (Greenspan, 1997). She, imitating Grandma cooking, takes a spoon or a stick and stirs an imaginary pot of stew, but, as she does so, assumes the stern visage and serious intent of Grandma. And because she has an appreciative, steadfast audience for her variety of antics, she comes to understand that she is the one who can make an anxious, stressed-out mom laugh. Or she might come to know to avoid daddy when he has a frown face. The toddler can take the tools of the household, a cushion and a block, say, and reverse their function and know what she has done. She, in essence, is saying, in her mostly motoric, gestural, and occasionally verbal language: I am clever and the world is malleable. These seedlings of meaning-making sprout vigorously at the next levels of development (Greenspan, 1997, 1999).

The *next stages* of development firmly establish the roots of that central human capacity—meaning-making. First, the experience of the self is no longer just a matter of sensations, emotions, and actions. Experience now includes vivid, though not necessarily well organized at first, internal images (symbols, images, and rough-hewn ideas) and the beginnings of categorizing the world. Instead of grabbing the parent’s hand and pulling her over to the refrigerator, on the basis of images and memories of past events, the toddler can say, “Want juice!” Moving from the action to the symbolic *modus operandi* is a major and remarkable shift for a child. Satisfaction lies in the image of an action or event and not just its performance. This enriched and unfolding symbolic world is dependent on the maturing brain and nervous system, the abundance of positive emotional experiences and ties within the family and, for some children, the extended family and neighborhood. Children don’t lose, of course, their interest and capacities to act in the world (cruising over to the couch to pet the cat), to experience organismic

satisfaction (having a bath and playing with toys in the tub), and to enjoy manipulative accomplishment (hammering the heck out of the piece of wood), but the symbolic world dramatically enlarges the scope of communication (now including language) and the richness and variety of interaction with the world (Greenspan, 1997, 1999).

The growth of her nervous system, and, if she is lucky, her expanding world of experiences, allow her to accumulate and articulate images, words, and ideas with amazing speed. These are categorized, filed, clumped together, and reclustered (this is the essence of creativity) and are enriched by emotions, intentions, and desires. The toddler is no lexicon or dictionary, bereft of feeling and color. These capacities are most evident in the growing expanse of memory which, as Ernest Becker once said, is like an internal movie theater full of drama, spirit, emotion, intrigue, and conflict (1973). "With the ability to create ideas, the child has arrived at the threshold of awareness and consciousness. Here she has crossed into the world of human culture" (Greenspan, 1997, p. 81). In a very loose sense, this is as much a break with the past as the great leap forward to culture was in our evolutionary past (see chapter 4). The child has also begun to experience himself internally, as an object of consciousness and representation. The images of self, of others, of the world of his experience, are what we mean when we refer to a sense of self. Due to experience with others, neural organization, genetic background, and sheer contingency, the emergent sense of self for one child might be expansive and flexible and, for another, constricted and rigid. Perhaps these remain, although more elaborated, into adulthood. One person is almost always very close to acting out emotions, and the emotions are very narrowly experienced as either good or bad. Another person might well reflect on the complex internal responses she has to a particular experience—emotional, cognitive, visceral—and decide that action on that experience, like similar experiences in the past, is probably not worth it.

The luxuriousness of a child's inner life relates in ways that are not fully understood to the variety of experiences, preferences, themes, and personalities of the people in her immediate life—parents, caretakers, other family members. Luckily for us, if the symbolic materials and tools of our early life were limited by the shortcomings and preoccupations of our caretakers, we may find in siblings, in school, and in adult attachments a relationship or set of relationships, opportunities that can expand, embellish, and cultivate a finer sense of self, a sturdier self image, and a more compelling narrative line.

The *last level* of development in the first three to four years involves putting together these islands of imagery, ideas, symbols, and thought—seeing connections between outer experience and internal feelings and

thoughts. The connection between the self and its interests and between thoughts and emotions with those of caretakers is much more elaborate here. We can play games, make up stories, engage in some repartee (“Can I go outside?” “It’s raining but what do you want to do outside?” “I want to touch the rain”), and, of course, continue the age-old struggle for having one’s way (“Why do I have to go to bed?”)—these all are possible because of not only linking perceptions, ideas, and emotions together, but also of making abstractions. That shaky feeling in the hands, the felt-fast heartbeat, and the change in breathing become known as fear for the young child, thanks in part to parents’ responses over the months. Many things might cause fear; it might appear in different situations (hearing a noise in bed at night; a dog barking ferociously), but it is her being “afraid” that is a complex concept. Perhaps mother, in the past, was able to verbalize for the child the idea of fear, but also the idea that fear was manageable and not strange. The child also has the capacity to do a little reality-testing—learning, through interactions with those who care, something about consequences of behavior and words and the effects on those in relationship with the child, and gradually taking those into consideration. Finally, dealing with why, who, what, where, and when questions—as well as asking them—is a sign of real maturity. The ability to do this is sequential (answering what and where questions first before why ones) and related to the parent’s or caretaker’s persistence in asking them (“What did you do at Sally’s today?” “Why do you want to stay up?”).

Your child’s ability to answer your “Why do you want to go outside?” question with “Because I want to play” is a far more sophisticated response than you might think at first. Her words reveal that she must clearly have a sense of “I,” or independent self, as well as an awareness that she has an inner desire, or “want,” plus an idea for action that will satisfy that desire in the near future, “to play.” The fact that she can combine these ideas and concepts and build off your [the parents] own ideas is an exciting indication that her thinking is growing increasingly complex. (Greenspan, 1999, pp. 263–64)

Greenspan has captured well the unfolding development of a child. He is alert to its dependence on a variety of parental or caretaker behaviors, emotions, and the quality of the parent/child relationship. He captures the intricate interplay between emotion, behavior, cognition, and relationship; the play of neural development and contingency; and the amazing pliability—given a reasonably salubrious environment—of the child’s mind. He also gives us a peek into the child’s soul and at the seeds of humanity and

morality in the life of the child. Jean Piaget (1952), a Swiss child development theorist and researcher of considerable invention, many years ago developed a theory of the development of the mind that became (and still is, in some circles) very influential. But Piaget, by definition and exclusion, saw the mind as primarily a physiological, perceptual, and cognitive phenomenon developed as it encounters the world of objects and tries to make sense of and control them. Greenspan and his associates have given us a richer, more fully human account of this most remarkable development—the human mind and soul. But there is a problem here, which is that Greenspan assumes the greatest importance for the relationship of mother to child. The fact is that it is the rare child who only has a relationship with the mother. Most infants are embedded in a elaborate network of relationships and meanings involving family, extended family, siblings, caretakers of all kinds, neighbors, physicians, and so forth. In some cultures, the mother is not necessarily the most significant relationship for the infant. Attachment theory and the notion of organismic development has reigned for a long time. Let's take a quick look at it.

A Note on Attachment. Attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Walls, 1978; Bowlby, 1969) is the premier example of development theory based on some ideas that have only recently been challenged: the idea that the earliest experiences, particularly those with mother (or surrogate), are fateful for the subsequent development of personality traits in children who have now become adults. The failures of attachment (to bond, to form a secure emotional relationship with mother/caretaker) lead to replication of those failures in, say, romantic or intimate relationships in adulthood. Or they may lead to the outbreak of serious psychopathology later on; the symptoms of schizophrenia can be traced backward to faultlines in the relationship between infant and mother or caretaker. Attachment theory, like many developmental theories, supposes a relatively fixed sequence of development and unfolding. Certain things must happen in this relationship at certain times to optimize development and maturity. The mother-infant relationship becomes something of a boilerplate that puts its stamp on all subsequent relationships—with father, siblings, other relatives, teachers, and so on. Bowlby asserted that “attachment behavior is regarded as a class of social behavior, of an importance equivalent to that of mating behavior and parental behavior” (1969, p. 179). But there is less evidence for this idea (that the past predicts the future, in essence) than you might think; other perspectives exist. Some, like Michael Lewis, make the argument that

How people act currently is determined [not by their past so much but] by their attempt to adapt to situations and problems as they

find them. . . . Because we cannot predict what will occur in the future, we have only the current to focus on. It means that our caring must be based on our values rather than on what occurred or what will occur. This can be accomplished through a commitment to care for each other now and with an understanding that because we are meaning-seeking creatures, conscious of our existence, we can give up our former quest and accept that unavoidable accidents and chance encounters, discontinuity and chaos, are a part of the nature of human life. (Lewis, 1997, pp. 203–4)

Culture, Again

As I have suggested elsewhere, much of the knowledge about various aspects of the human condition is skewed by unexamined assumptions that reflect a distinctive slant on the world. These suppositions are often derived from our particular social, cultural, and political allegiances. It is important to understand these. On the other hand, we would be foolish not to try and understand those human experiences and capacities that are universal and reflect the nature of our species. But let us examine a little more closely a difference between two cultures in the character of their childrearing—remembering that cultures are continually intersecting and, thus, in some ways becoming hybrids.

A study done by Harwood, Miller, and Irizarry (1995) compared the qualities that middle- and low-income Anglo-American and Puerto Rican mothers associated with the security of infants and those that fostered optimal growth. Anglo-American mothers were very much focused on autonomy and self-maximization as desirable developmental outcomes. They seemed to understand that in raising their children they would likely face tensions between autonomy and relatedness and struggles around, on the one hand, lack of confidence and, on the other hand, egocentrism. Puerto Rican mothers, on the other hand, were hopeful that their children would develop appropriate interpersonal behavior and would show “proper demeanor.” The child must be *bien educado* (well brought up and educated) and taught to be respectful and obedient. The tension here would be around shame (*vergüenza*) related to the failure to live up to one’s obligations to family and friends. So Anglo-American mothers focused on self-esteem and the specter of insecurity; Puerto Rican mothers accentuated respect for others and the shame that comes from letting others down. The same behavior in infants from different cultures may bring two very different interpretations. In one, the active curiosity and self-engrossment of the 4-year-old may

be applauded as unfolding maximization of the self; in another, it may be interpreted as a rude disregard of others that needs to be reined in.

Latino families, generally speaking,⁶ approach the first years of a child's life with a nurturing and tolerant demeanor. The baby is especially close to mother and other women in the extended family circle. There is a more relaxed attitude toward the on-time mastery of certain development tasks and the achievement of developmental milestones than, say, among many Anglo-American middle-class families. Much of the tempo of development (weaning and toilet-training) is a family matter, but the culture commonly provides a more relaxed timetable. "At these early stages, a 'good' Latina mother socially constructs her role as gratifying the child's needs rather than stimulating autonomy" (Falicov, 1998, p. 218).

But we must be careful in interpreting the shadings and strictures of culture. No culture is static or monolithic. Renato Rosaldo, writing about changing Chicano narratives, here about the work of Sandra Cisneros (see her poem above), hits this particular nail on the head.

Yet what the concept of culture loses in purity and authenticity, it gains in range and engagement. As embodied in Cisneros's short-story cycle, Chicano culture moves toward the borderlands, the spaces that readily include blacks, Anglos, mundane happenings of everyday life, and heterogeneous changing neighborhoods. Certain border crossings involve literal immigration, in which a number of people move in and out of the neighborhood, or a "wetback" with no last name dies anonymously in an accident, or a fat woman who speaks no English sits by the window and plays homesick songs. (1989, p. 165)

The borderlands include those areas of similarity and difference experienced between and within cultures. Some lives at the edges of culture are more formal,

Such as being an Argentine, a Jew, and a U.S. Citizen. Other borderlands occur at less formal intersections—being raised a traditional girl (gender) in a family of poor immigrants (class and migration) of limited schooling (education) encountering a different

6. We must always exercise care when generalizing about culturally prescribed behavior—every culture carries a range and variety that we sometimes overlook. Latino families and communities represent an astonishing and rich array of different family forms, community associations, and social institutions. Cultural competence and respect require an openness to learning these distinctive ways of being human and being Latino/a.

world (and values) through advanced education, and acquiring higher social status through marriage. (Falicov, 1998, p. 15)

Where's Dad?

Many fathers are becoming more remote and distant from their children under a variety of circumstances (or maybe a lot of fathers have always been somewhat distant). As we constantly lament, about 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce. In the large majority of those marriages, mothers end up with custody. They also usually end up on the short end of the economic stick as well. Furthermore only about one-sixth of the children in these families will see dad as often as once a week; about half will not see him at all. Ten years post-divorce, almost two-thirds of these children will not see dad at all. Beyond that, there seem to be institutionalized or inadvertent expectations (in schools, health care facilities, workplaces) that are dismally low for dads, implying that they really don't or shouldn't do much in the way of serious parenting (Weissbourd, 1999, p. 32). For example—and other dad friends of mine have confirmed this—until I took my kids to the pediatrician alone, the doctor almost always addressed my wife and not me when it came to asking questions or laying out prescriptive actions that needed to be taken. Many fathers are no doubt extremely comfortable with such meager expectations, but for others it reinforces an already precarious set of norms and practices that excludes or exempts a vibrant and involved male presence in a child's life.

Thousands of studies show the importance of the mother-child relationship; very few demonstrate the character and importance of the father's relationship to the child. Because of recent concerns about the influence of fathers or, more correctly, the absence of influence of fathers in far too many children's lives, there has been a recent spate of research on this relationship. In the continuation of the Sears, Maccoby, and Levin (1957) (remember Maccoby from chapter 5 and the nature versus nurture discussion?) *Patterns of Childrearing* study begun thirty years or so ago when this sample of boys and girls was 6 years old, the outcomes for them at age 31 in terms of educational attainment and the development of empathy were correlated with a variety of factors relating to parent-child, parent-parent relationships, and parental roles. A number of factors were found to be important, but the single most influential factor (statistically, anyway) was whether the father was involved in child care (Koestner, Franz & Weinberger, 1990). Part of this was an effect of the fact that mothers were usually more involved than the fathers in this study, so that when father was involved it might have had a bigger impact on children.

The relationship between fathers and their sons is especially crucial, and

in our society it is especially difficult and, too often, characterized by emotional distance and/or physical absence. Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson (1999), who have done therapy with boys for many years, say this about the critical and often troubled relationship between fathers and sons:

There is little that can move a man to tears. He can talk about a failed marriage, disturbing children, career disappointments, ruinous business decisions, and physical suffering with dry eyes. When a grown man cries in therapy, it is almost always about his father. The man may be hated or revered, alive or dead. The story may be one of a father's absence, his painful presence, or his limitations of spirit and feeling. The word *love* [authors' emphasis] rarely comes up in the stories men tell, but that is what these stories are all about. Fathers and sons are players in a tale of unrequited love—a story told in yearning, anger, sadness, and shame. (p. 94)

There is no telling how the aggression and even cruelty of some young men, the suppressed emotion of others, and the lack of connection of still others is related to this often distorted or deformed relationship. Less dramatically, for men there is no clear mandate or expectation of how to be more fully involved in the family or how to be an equal partner in domestic chores and in childrearing. It would make the lives of many women easier if their husbands or partners took on more responsibility in parenting and maintaining the household (Coltrane, 1996). It would also benefit children of both genders, “widening their sense of their own possible roles and identities, reinforcing their notions of equity and fairness—to see their parents sharing the parenting burden” (Weissbourd, 1999, p. 33).

WHEN THINGS GO AWRY

Too many children in this world live under siege conditions of one devastating kind or another: wrenching poverty, the scourge of war and armed conflict, the depredations of disease, the pain of abuse, the death of parents, the wasting away of malnutrition, the disorientation of forced migration. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) uses the under-five mortality rate as a global indicator of the well-being of children in 193 countries of the world. This measure is the reflection of many factors in the lives of young children and their families: nutritional health and the health knowledge of parents; the prevalence and availability of immunization; the availability of maternal and child health services; sufficient income and food for the family; effective sanitation and clean water; and the

general safety and security of the family's social and physical environment.⁷ This measure is a more accurate reflection of the state of the lives of children in a given country than, say, the per capita gross national product, which can skew results because of the effect of a few rich families on the average of all (UNICEF, 2000).

UNICEF has set an arbitrary level of 70 deaths per 1,000 live births as a desirable and achievable goal over the next ten years. As of 1998, about one-third of all countries had a higher mortality rate than that. Most of these countries are developing countries or countries torn by war and ravaged by persistent poverty and natural and human-made calamities. The United States under-five mortality rate in 1998 was 8 deaths per 1000 live births. This is above the average rate for the industrialized world, which is 6 per 1,000 (UNICEF, 2000). So, in our world, today millions of children are at risk not just for illness or poverty but for premature and largely preventable death. Eleven million children die every year before they reach their fifth birthday. Six million of them will die, in part, because of malnutrition, more specifically, vitamin A deficiency. Giving these children at risk for premature death vitamin A through supplements, for example, would probably decrease the death rate by 25 percent (UNICEF).

In the United States, things are not as stark as, say, in Sierra Leone, which has an under-five mortality rate of 316 or Angola with 292 deaths per 1000 live births (this means that about one of three young children—infants, toddlers, and preschool kids—will die). Nonetheless, there is much room for improvement. In this land of plenty and relative prosperity, far too many children go to bed hungry, do not have medical care, are abused by someone close to them or are poor, with dismal family economic prospects. In 1995, 39 million people in the United States were poor; 14 million of these were children. About one-fifth of all children in this country live in poverty. Many of these children were in homes with single parents, usually women, and most of these women were working at one time or another (World Almanac, 1997). Let us now turn to a form of formidable stress for some poor children and their families.

Being Homeless

Homelessness emerged (or the term was coined) in the 1980s and, like most designations of this sort, it came to being freighted with heavily

7. In sub-Saharan Africa and some parts of the Far East, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome is a major factor in the viability of children.

ideological, political, and social meaning, which varied depending on one's standpoint and values.

Conditions become social problems, enter political language, not because they suddenly materialize or change in character; usually they have always been present. Rather, conditions become social problems for ideological purposes. Social problems are constructed. They serve the interests of those who define them. The distinction between "deserving" poor and the "undeserving" poor is a moral issue; it affirms the values of the dominant society by stigmatizing the outcasts. (Handler & Hasenfeld, 1991, pp. 15–16)

For example, there are those who think that being homeless is a result of disaffiliation from families or work, non-normative behavior, or the result of failure to adjust to normative demands based on physical and mental health problems, usually untreated. This is an individualistic construction, and it obscures what role local, national, and even international institutions, forces, and policies play in homelessness. On the other hand, more liberal observers point to the market economy and some of its dislocations and scarcities—the need for more affordable housing stock, job training, and vocational rehabilitation. A more radical analysis emphasizes the astonishing gaps between rich and poor and how income and property are distributed in this society. In this sense, homelessness is an official designation meant to create political distinctions between the poor and the undeserving poor and to protect the well-to-do from having to confront the structural injustices that produce and protect their great wealth while feeding poverty and its kin, homelessness.

In housing markets that privilege luxury condos and subminimum wages, liberals call for special programs to fund a miserly scattering of low-income units and employment training for those whose career paths will most likely lead them into dead-end jobs. The larger structural issues of inequality are not and . . . will not be addressed because large segments of the privileged classes benefit from the existence of inequality. (Wright, 1997, p. 14)

How we actually define homelessness is a critical issue, too. Defined narrowly, it may only include those individuals on the streets on a given night. More generously defined, it might include those on the street, those living with friends and relatives, those living in cheap hotels, those in homeless shelters, those in treatment centers or battered women's shelters, and so forth. Nonetheless, one of the largest growing segments of the homeless population (more generously defined) is families with children. In 1996, it was estimated that these families constituted 40 percent of all people who became homeless (Shinn & Weitzmann, 1996). A survey of thirty cities,

sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Mayors in 1998, found that children were 25 percent of the homeless population and that requests for shelter by families with children in these cities increased, on average, 15 percent from 1997 to 1998 (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1999).

What happens that puts a family on the streets, in a shelter, in a cheap hotel, in an abandoned bus, or crowded in Uncle Ralph and Aunt Helen's spare bedroom? Ideology aside, the immediate taproots of homelessness are poverty and lack of affordable housing. It should also be noted that maybe 25 to 40 percent of these families are women and their children who are trying to escape domestic violence and abuse (Kaplan & Girard, 1994). With respect to poverty, before welfare reform the average benefit for a family receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), adjusted for inflation, had decreased 47 percent between 1970 and 1994. The reform of welfare ("We are ending welfare as we know it," President Clinton proudly declared when signing the bill—right before the 1996 election) in the form of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act ended AFDC and replaced it with a program of block grants to individual states called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Since the passage of this legislation, welfare rolls have dropped dramatically, poverty only slightly, and, according to the Children's Defense Fund (1998), poverty among children has hardly decreased at all. For many families, even though they may be counted as employed, the situation they face now is loss of benefits (such as health insurance, child care payments), low wages (most of the new jobs pay below the poverty line), and unstable, transient employment (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1999). The gap between affordable housing units and the number needing them in 1998 was 4.4 million units (Daskal, 1998). The importance of these numbers, even though there might be legitimate disputes about some of them, is that an unconscionable number of children and their families are on the streets, dirt poor even though the parent(s) may be working, and susceptible to everything from mugging to pneumonia. Given the political temper of our time, the outlook for them does not seem encouraging.

But our concern here is, What is life like for these children? What about infants and toddlers and preschoolers on the street, in the rundown hotel, or in the shelter? Is their development compromised in any critical way? There have not been many studies of younger children and homelessness; most have focused on school-age children, adolescents, and their families. So let us stitch together some of these findings with some common sense and see what we can surmise about the life of, say, a preschool child in poverty and without a home.

Long-term poverty is no friend of children. Some studies have examined the differences between poor children who do live in homes and those who are homeless. In a word, the sum of many of these findings is that poverty

can wreak damage on the developmental structures and supports that the family can provide. A recent study compared homeless elementary school children with poor children who were mobile but living in homes on several measures of health, behavior, and school performance. The investigators came to the general conclusion that, although homelessness is a devastating experience that may produce serious consequences for kids (especially health-related), poverty itself is *the* major challenge to the developmental health and organismic resilience of children (Zeisemer, Marcoux & Marwell, 1994). But add to poverty the special and biting burdens of homelessness and you have a recipe for intimidating challenges for children and their families.

It is estimated that almost half of the children in shelters (this does not include those on the street)⁸ are under the age of 5. Think of the charges to parents implicit in Greenspan's scheme for the optimal development of children and how difficult it would be to attend to them while trying to keep your children warm and safe on a wet, cold afternoon and night in a doorway on Sutter Street in San Francisco. The fact that thousands of mothers do this daily for some period of time is a miracle of sorts and a tender mercy for their children. But when raw winds, the hostility of strangers, and the gnawing of hunger pangs are your immediate lot, the niceties of "The Director Game" (Stanley Greenspan's suggestion for one way to encourage the thinking of your toddler by encouraging plot shifts and new story lines by your child as you play make believe games together) are probably a remove or two away from your doorway hostel.

We don't really know what children are learning, what supports there may be in their lives, or what skills they are developing. Five-year-old Jonathan and his 3-year-old sister Karla live in a temporary shelter with their mother. The biological fathers of Jonathan and Karla have never been a part of their lives. Jonathan was described by an interviewer as very pleasant, enjoying play, articulate, and probably above grade level. He played well with others and had befriended a 2-and-a-half-year-old, Eddie. He would push Eddie on various toy vehicles; take him by the hand from one place to another. He was very protective and loving with Eddie. He would rush to greet him with hugs when he came to the shelter. Karla, on the other hand, was described as unhappy and unkempt. She had many disputes with other children, clung to her mother, and would cry and rock while sucking her finger for long periods of time (Shane, 1996, p. 100). The difference between the two? Age? The relationship with mom? Difference in the available interest of other adults besides mother or peers? Innate resilience factors? Temperament? Abuse?

And consider Jamaica.

8. Actually, many homeless families spend time in a variety of places—none of which are home.

When I first met Jamaica she was 8 years old. She was a skinny, tired, raggedy child with fire-rimmed, pitch-black eyes that glared out from angry slits. Jamaica had been at Mercy Hospital in Brooklyn just short of the thirty days the hospital could legally hold a child without a diagnostic evaluation and a disposition conference to plan for future care. Jamaica had no place to go and no one on record to care for her. She had come to Mercy Hospital for the first time the year before I met her. Picked up living in subway tunnels with homeless crack addicts and alcoholics, Jamaica arrived with no identification, no known relatives no verifiable history. Once in a while, when off guard, Jamaica spoke of living with her mother in an abandoned apartment near the West Side Highway. Sometimes, she recalled her mother would wheel her in a grocery cart; at other times she would wheel her mother home in the same cart, dump her out, carry her upstairs, and put her to bed. "I'd sing to her," Jamaica told me, "rock her. She'd always fall asleep then I would curl up in her legs and fall asleep too." If asked directly about her mother, Jamaica flatly refused to speak. "I ain't saying nuthin', I told those nosy ladies a million times ago." (Atkins, 1998, p. 3).

Jamaica's story is of a child and her mother probably without a home for most of their life together. The spirit and spunk (behavior often defined by professionals as "badness" of one kind or another) of Jamaica documented in this appreciation by her "friend" for a while, Linda Atkins, is testimony to the vitality and tenacity that can drive and persevere even in a small human being's life. Not all are so lucky; and gumption doesn't always steer you clear of disaster; mettle in a child or adolescent is not always appreciated by the assorted professionals who may enter into such a child's life. In the end of her story, Linda does not know of the fate of Jamaica and her grandmother Miss Pope who re-entered her life and adopted her.

In the years I knew Jamaica, we had a moment together. What happened in that moment gave Jamaica her only shot. She knew it, I knew it, Miss Pope [her grandmother] knew it. And although the alignment was never perfect, and it was not, in the end, the way I would have had us go, a strange alchemy brought all of us to line up together toward an imperfect and shaky target. I only hope that Jamaica has been able to stand upright through the buffeting of her own chaos, and that the prevailing winds of her misfortunes have not been powerful enough to once again blow blinding sand back in her face. (Atkins, 1998, pp. 187-88)

Once again, chance encounters, luck, and perhaps innate buoyancy come into a child's life in a way no one could have predicted. We don't know, but can only hope, with Linda, that her life is better.

But, regrettably and sadly, compared to children with a home, many of those without homes have more health problems—problems rare these days, such as tuberculosis and a range of diseases related to malnutrition. Children without a home have a higher incidence of developmental delays, anxiety, and depression. More of these children will experience problems when they begin school. Drugs will brush many of their lives time and time again—from alcohol use by their pregnant mothers to the cocaine they were encouraged to snort when they were 5 years old. For most families, the paths out of homelessness will be few, and those that exist will be rocky. There are many reasons for homelessness, and many versions of it. Disabilities, unemployment, mental illness, abuse of all kinds, poverty, and lack of available housing can start the spiral that ends up in the shelter, the hospital, or the streets. But like all families we cannot know how any individual family will do simply because they are without shelter.

CONCLUSION

The idea of family transitions is less about the ages and stages in the development of children and more about the shifting winds of the social moment, unbidden fortune, innate capacities, crafted understandings, sudden or creeping challenges, and emerging awareness and knowledge in the individual, in the individual's family, in the family's neighborhood, in the neighborhood's community, and in the community's world. Clearly, whether one is a devotee of stage theory or a more contextual theory, there are good things that need to be done for growing and vulnerable human beings, individually and collectively. Michael Lewis puts it this way:

What children need is transparent in its simplicity:

- We should be as kind to children as we wish others to be to us.
- We should give children love as we expect to receive it. We should excite their senses and stimulate their minds as we wish it for ourselves.
- We should reduce their fears and sadness and increase their interests and joys.
- We should make them care for others as we show them that we care for them. (1997, p. 204)

And we should do this out of moral imperative and humane concern, not because we think it will make them smarter or more successful as adults.

M and M Dialogue

MEREDITH: I am a little confused here. You have made quite a point about trying to understand families and individuals in the context of their

lives—all those people, social institutions, various happenings and events that impinge upon them. And then, like you always do, you talked about what they make of these things, how the meaning they attach to them is important to take into account, too.

MITCHELL: Guilty as charged. So what is troubling you?

MEREDITH: Then you talked a lot about Greenspan and his ideas about how children develop. I liked his ideas by the way, but aren't they an example of the individualizing trends; the idea that things are predictable and that stuff that happens to a child early will be somehow related to how she turns out later?

MITCHELL: I suppose you could fairly draw that conclusion. But I think the idea is that we are not doing all these things in our relationship with infants because they assure a good future or some kind of later outcome for children. Rather, we do them because they are good now for children. The behaviors that Greenspan talks about—whether done by father, mother, aunt, uncle, older sibling, caretaker—are organically good, morally befitting those responsible for the care of children. I must admit that Greenspan thinks that these are related to future outcomes, but I don't think he would disagree that these are good in and of themselves.

MEREDITH: Well, that helps. But I guess I still am pretty much stuck with the idea that somehow parental behaviors early have a predictable effect on kids as they grow up.

MITCHELL: Lots of folks are. And there are some relationships. A longitudinal study (I'm sure you've discussed those in your research class) done at the University of Kansas. . . .

MEREDITH: Rock Chalk, Jayhawk!!

MITCHELL: Amen. Anyway, this was an intense study of a child from forty-two families done by Betty Hart and Todd Risley. It involved monthly observations for an hour of families and their children for two and one-half years. The families were essentially functional and ranged from thirteen families in the upper middle class (professional), twenty-three from the middle and working class, and six families on welfare. This was a study of language development spurred by the researchers' prior experience that by the time children were 4 there seemed to be intractable differences in vocabulary growth. To do an injustice to the elegance of the study, how the parents talked with their children, and about what and when they talked with them, made a difference in how fast the vocabulary grew, and how well they used vocabulary. These two, in turn, were correlated with measures of general intelligence, and all three (use, growth, and IQ) were correlated with socioeconomic status. Communication factors between parents and children, like the richness of modifiers used, the proportions of affirmative statements and

imperatives, seemed to vary in terms of socioeconomic status. At any rate, here is some fine documentation of certain factors that do make a difference in one area of children's development—vocabulary use and growth.

MEREDITH: Surely you don't mean to say that kids on welfare are dumber than other kids.

MITCHELL: No. All we are talking about here are five elements of language use in a family that seem related to language use and capacity in children at the age of 3. These are related—maybe—at least statistically—to the economic status of the family, but these were good kids when tested later in the third grade (another study), doing all right in school, but how they were with respect to language was pretty well predicted by their vocabulary scores at age 3. But again, the idea here is, here are some ways that we found are related to an enriched facility with language, and we could help parents increase the frequency of the five factors that the researchers found so important in the fostering of vocabulary and usage.

MEREDITH: I'll have to chew on that one for a while. The predicament of homeless families with young children really touched me. I thought about how the boys and I would survive on the streets or in a shelter. I really can't imagine. The other thing that occurred to me is I'll bet we are seeing more homeless families than we think at my field agency. A lot of the families are single-parent, usually mom, and if they report that they live on the street, we try to get them to a shelter. But we have a lot of families who live with relatives, in hotels, or even move from dwelling to dwelling fairly frequently, and we don't think of them as homeless, mainly, I guess because it doesn't occur to us.

MITCHELL: Do you think it would make a difference if you did see them as homeless?

MEREDITH: Well, I think it might. After all having a place of one's own is really important for families and having families who are on the move constantly seeking shelter is a serious problem and, in a way, a community problem. To do "clinical" stuff with them seems somehow not right. Maybe we know that they are homeless but don't want to actually confront that because it means that we would have to take a long, hard look at the community resources for them and maybe become more activist. And I'm not sure that a shelter is the best place to be—they usually have a lot of rules and constraints and there isn't much to do there.

MITCHELL: Good point. Some observers have indicated that a shelter is one way of containing the homeless and of assuring their status as deviant. I think they, too, are a part of the way we individualize or psychologize

problems because we don't want to open a can of worms. Anyway, we'll explore this some more if you want.

MEREDITH: I think I really do.

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CHAPTER TEN

Person/Environment, Part III: Growing Up in Family and Community

I think I already understand about life: pretty good, some problems.

—SAM, AGE 7

In this chapter, we look at middle childhood in the context of family, community, and culture. As a society we have shoved the years of middle childhood somewhere to the hinterlands of our collective consciousness. With community support, family interest, and captivating schools, children in this time of expansive development lay the groundwork of citizenship and adulthood in ways we do not fully understand. We also probably do not completely grasp the other influences that help propel these children in one direction or another—their peers and siblings, the culture, the marketplace, and sociohistorical happenings of the moment. Let us begin by looking at some of these forces, and some of the waystations that young children pass through.

MIDDLE CHILDHOOD: THE FORGOTTEN YEARS

A father informs me that his 8-year-old son, when asked for the fourth time to turn off the computer game and straighten his room, snarls, “Leave me alone, butthead!” A 10-year-old girl, told by her mother to finish homework, barely glances up, utters under her breath, “What an asshole,” and continues to play. (Taffel, 1999, p. 26)

Ron Taffel, a family therapist, is reporting what he and others seem to think is a puzzling and frightening upsurge in anger and disrespect toward adults—parents and teachers, principally. Taffel believes that the roots of this lie in the fact that families may be near each other physically, but children yearn for undivided attention and not attention dependent on outside activities or performance at school. Where parents fail to connect meaningfully with their school-aged children (even preschool 5-year-olds sometimes), the celebrity and consumer culture rushes in to fill the void. Many kids want to be near

a celebrity or be a celebrity because in the absence of a caring and consistent connection with parents (or any adult), the desire to be seen, the desire to be seen simply as “cool,” or perhaps even the desire to ally oneself in the meanings of celebrity seem more relevant and reliable than the uncertain meanings of parents or caretakers.

Parents have been beset by the extraordinary demands of the workplace and often their own sense of uncertainty about how best to raise their children. Childrearing fads come and go; many are based on unexamined assumptions and authoritarian assertions. Many of them suppose that all children who are 10, say, are basically alike. These models or prescriptions often differ from each other dramatically. Parents are often isolated and have few or no guides and mentors to give them a hand. Psychotherapists, for example, are frequently poised to examine the parental and marital roots of family trouble and not the actual needs and desires, hopes and fears, skills and deficits, and interpersonal connections of the children—the sources of their uniqueness and distinctive struggles (Pipher, 1996; Taffel, 1999). Finally, many parents find the solution to the disconnected but intimate existence with their children in activities—sports, clubs, and other after-school pastimes. John Rosemond, a family psychologist, recently asked an audience of 200 parents or so the following:

“I can virtually guarantee that by making one simple decision, you can reduce parenting stress by more than half, create a more relaxed, harmonious family environment, and provide your children with more carefree childhoods. Raise your hand if that sounds good to you.” . . . nearly everyone raised a hand. I said, “Great! All you have to do is take your child out of all after-school activities—sports, gymnastics, martial arts, and so on. Do I have any takers?”

No one raised a hand. There was total silence, in fact, as 450 pairs of eyes just stared at me. (2000, p. D1)

The idea, even if it seems extreme and obviously directed at middle-class parents, is that the needs of the family unit are more important than the needs of children. Furthermore, to recognize and nourish the distinctive talents, attributes, and capacities of children requires time together, doing things together, and being relaxed together. Nonetheless, it is clear that for many families who have school-aged children, opportunities for guidance, caring, instruction, and gratifying relationships are slipping away. As I said earlier, this is an extraordinary time for the development of a variety of values, ideas, skills, and capacities in children, but it requires diligence on the part of parents, caretakers, neighborhoods, schools, and social institutions. This is a time of life that, in some ways, we do not pay much attention to. But it is critical to providing a scaffolding from which we, as parents, as

neighbors, as communities, and as a society can help launch a citizen. From the eyes of children, this is also an important time of transition, and the transition is not the pristine, crisp one of theorists. Sandra Cisneros, writing of being 11 and being Mexican-American (“teachers thought if you were poor and Mexican you didn’t have anything to say”) recalls

What they don’t understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you are eleven, you’re also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don’t. . . . You still feel like you’re still ten. . . . Like some days you might say something stupid, and that’s the part of you that is still ten. Or maybe some days you might need to sit on your mama’s lap because you’re scared, and that’s the part of you that’s five. And maybe one day when you’re all grown up you will need to cry like you are three, and that’s okay. That’s what I tell Mama when she’s sad and needs to cry.

Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one. (Cisneros, 1993, cited in López, 1993, p. 156).

The age of 11, the era of middle childhood is, like all others, a social construction to a degree. Figuring out how old you are, what it means, and how it fits in with your family’s and culture’s ideas is always a big deal. Sandra Cisneros also talks, as do many others, of the effect of being invisible to larger social institutions like schools; looking for models and stories that speak to your heritage and the devastation of not finding them. Tiffany Ana López says: “When I was growing up Chicana, I never read anything in school by anyone who had a z in their last name. No González, no Jiménez, no López. And I grew to accept this and eventually to stop looking, since no one showed me that indeed such writers existed” (1993, p. 17).

Let us now turn to some of the challenges for and developments in children in this time of their lives.

Moral Development

The development of the capacity to understand and make moral choices on the basis of the distinctions between good and bad and right and wrong is a long road. It probably begins early in life. It is a part of cognitive and emotional development and socialization (see chapter 5). Without succumbing to the philosophical debates about what constitutes good and bad, what

is the supreme good, and the like, let me make some observations about children and moral development. Jean Piaget (1932), Lawrence Kohlberg (1969), and Carol Gilligan (1982, 1993) are among those who have written about the cognitive and moral development of children. The first two theories, those of Piaget and Kohlberg, who built on Piaget's ideas, were, in the eyes of feminist theorists such as Gilligan and Nancy Goldberger, Jill Tarule, Blythe Clinchy, and Mary Belenky (1996), in the reflections on and reactions to their earlier work, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, seriously flawed by their male centeredness. Some recent authors (Damasio, 1994; Kagan, 1994) argue that these theories were also limited because they detached emotion from cognition and moral development from basic temperament, thus ignoring the idea that there may be a biological or structural foundation to and emotional component of moral reasoning. I think they are flawed by the simple fact that—given the situation, the relationship, the possibility, the emotions of the moment—one can traverse back and forth between the stages of moral reasoning they describe as inevitably linear and progressive.

Coming to be a moral person in childhood requires, among other things, a growing awareness of self; some capacity to develop identifications with others (particularly those who might be models); an operating and developing cognitive ability to categorize and distinguish between classes of events, objects, and processes; connections to others and to a larger circle beyond family (social bonds and cultural attachments); the capacity to experience emotions, including empathy, guilt, and shame; and a sense of will—acting on what one thinks is good and right or on one's emerging values (Gardner, 1991; Gilligan, 1993; Kohlberg, 1969; Kagan, 1994; Pipher 1996). For kids who live under siege conditions, it requires a kind of grittiness, awareness, courage, and hope that is beyond understanding and maybe even telling. Jonathan Kozol tells of his conversation with Tunisia, a third grader in Anacostia (near Washington, D.C.), about what she would do to make the school, now with ramshackle buildings and dispirited children and teachers, better.

"I'd buy some curtains for my teachers. . . . Blue curtains." [Why blue curtains? Kozol asks]. "It's like this. . . . The school is dirty. There isn't any playground. There's a hole in the wall behind the principal's desk. What we need to do is first rebuild the school. Another color. Build a playground. Plant a lot of flowers. Paint the classrooms. Blue and white. Fix the hole in the principal's office. Buy doors for the toilet stalls in the girl's bathroom. Fix the ceiling in this room. It looks like somebody went up and peed over our heads. Make it a beautiful, clean building. Make it *pretty*. Way it is, I feel ashamed." (1991, p. 181)

Clearly, Tunisia has a sense of moral proportion and propriety that many of her elders who could do something about the school lack. The fact that beauty remains in the hearts of some of these children in spite of the reality that we are frittering away the possibilities of their childhood (you only get one, you know) is astonishing and ought to make *us* ashamed.

Much of the theorizing about the development of a moral self is evolutionary. The usual scheme is that we pass through stages, each succeeding stage more complex and integrated than the last. In each stage, tasks must be met and conflicts resolved on a path to some supposed highest level of moral thinking and reasoning. Lawrence Kohlberg's theory has been standard-bearer in this regard. He proposes three levels of moral development, each with two stages. No stage can be skipped. How high one climbs up the ladder of moral development depends on family and cultural resources and the quality of social interactions one has. Children progress from an obedience and punishment orientation (you do the right thing or do what you are told to avoid punishment) to a more instrumental stage in which you follow the rules in order to get the rewards of doing so. These early stages are egocentric. Getting rewards is almost always self-referential, to achieve some sort of advantage, or meet a need. These two stages are most common in children up to the age of 9 or 10. From this point, to about the age of 15 or so, children conform or engage in appropriate or normative behaviors because they want to achieve the approbation of others—peers and adults—and avoid their disapproval. Following on the heels of this stage, children and adolescents become more aware of and more rigid in their conformity to the prevailing social ethic, laws, and standards. They are rule-bound and believe in the fair application of laws to all. If things go well, the next level (and its two stages) will be reached. First, actions are engaged in and decisions are made on the basis of institutionalized social covenants and agreed-upon mutual obligations. Rather than simply assuming the fairness of all institutional rules and norms and allocations of resources and obligations, there is always the possibility of rational negotiating around what is just and fair. The ultimate stage is that of a truly autonomous morality, the development of an overarching, expansive set of moral principles, centered on justice and cultivated from one's experience through reasoning as well as from the evaluation of existing social/interactional contracts (Kohlberg, 1969). I cannot help but wonder if Kohlberg's theory could explain the marvel of children like Tunisia.

As years have passed, other views of moral development have taken hold. In the following paragraphs, I want to examine some ideas that provide some interesting perspectives when the development of a moral self is the concern.

THE FAMILY AS A MORAL COMMUNITY

Ann Fleck-Henderson (1998) reminds us that, however we may think of morality, one of the things it means is moving toward purposes and concerns beyond the self and becoming concerned about, responsible to, and respectful of the collective. The family is the first collective and the first to challenge the inevitable egoism of the children under its care. In this regard, we should be as concerned about the moral health of a family as its mental health, and we should be concerned about its ability to provide moral support and instruction as much as ensuring social support and guidance for its members. Fleck-Henderson, drawing upon one model¹ of moral reasoning, suggests there are four components to becoming a morally vibrant being, including the development of *moral sensitivity*, the beginnings of the sense that there are concerns beyond one's self based on the felt experience of care and fairness within the family; *moral reasoning*, learning how to think about and act upon what is right and wrong to do with respect to other members of the family and awareness of the consequences of one's actions in this regard; *moral motivation*, developing a set of moral values that supersede personal or simply popular ones—being predisposed to act morally; and developing *moral character*, having the heart and pluck to follow through on one's own moral commitments, even though the costs may be high. It must be said here that the moral health and vitality of the surrounding community is of particular importance, too. Morally healthy families need such communities to sustain and encourage them.

MORALITY, RELATIONSHIPS, AND SOCIAL DOMAINS

Children and adults live in qualitatively different social worlds simultaneously. They have sets of relationships with clusters of individuals in different social settings and circumstances daily. Judith Smetana observes that “children’s thinking about and actions in the social world are characterized by heterogeneity and the coexistence of different social orientations, motivations and goals” (2000, p. 2). Although parents are important to the moral development of their children, it is clear from recent research that parents are not the sole source of morality. “Moral transgressions and conflicts are seen as originating primarily in interactions with peers and siblings. . . . Parents underscore and amplify the lessons that are constructed from these interactions” (p. 8). Akin to this idea of this social domain is the social constructionist (or meaning-making) point of view, which suggests that you cannot disengage the developing sense of morality from the web of relationships in which children (and adults) are engaged. This also means that

1. This is the model proposed by M. Bebeau, J. Rest, and D. Narvaez (1995).

you cannot assume the authority of a supreme or final moral vantage point. That is, moral stances and perspectives are the product of negotiation, dialogue, and interaction between individuals—they are relational phenomena, constructed like other meanings out of the twists and turns of contact. But because they are relational, they harbor some assumptions: that in order to interact, negotiate, discourse, and resolve moral conflict, one must have an operative level of caring, respect, empathy, and openness. No perspective is necessarily valid unless it is understood within (or as coming from) a particular community of understanding and meaning (Gergen, 1991). The importance of peers in the moral development of children becomes, in these two perspectives, immediately obvious—if not necessarily welcomed (by adults). Watch 8- to 10-year-olds playing games. Much of the time they spend is arguing about, revising, making up, and negotiating the rules and terms of the game.

BOYS AND GIRLS AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Carol Gilligan (1982, 1993) was among the first (Nancy Chodorow [1978] was an important earlier influence) to challenge the stiff, hierarchical, stage-based nature of moral and personality development that reproduced male perspectives and experiences. She argued that the terms of analysis of such theories suffer from serious gender bias and, therefore, are limited and skewed. She has contrasted the prevailing (and male) morality of autonomy, separation, and independence with what she defines as women's sense of the importance of connection, context, narrative, and caring as the grounds for moral judgment and for resolving and understanding moral dilemmas. But it isn't just theory where male detachment and autonomy is played out. Gilligan claimed that in much of social discourse and relationships men leave out women from their consideration and decision-making. Ironically enough, she saw that, as they approached adolescence and young adulthood, women were leaving out themselves as well—dissociating, experiencing a kind of "psychic split" in those parts of the self that were thought not to be relevant to public discourse or safe for display (1993, p. xiii).

Girls' initiation or passage into adulthood in a world psychologically rooted and historically anchored in the experience of powerful men marks the beginning of self-doubt and the dawning of the realization, no matter how fleeting, that womanhood will require a dissociative split between experience and what is generally taken to be reality. (pp. xx–xxi)

Preadolescent girls (Mary Pipher has also remarked upon this) seem much more alive to the world, curious, bold, and aware of their androgynous voice than their teen counterparts. Come adolescence, "having a voice and being

in relationship—had now become extraordinary, something to be experienced only in the safest and most private of relationships” (Gilligan, 1993, p. xxii). Mary Pipher recounts a story a horticulturist friend told her:

She led a tour of junior high school girls who were attending a math and science fair on her campus. She showed them side oats grama, bluestem, Indian grass and tress—redbud, maple, walnut and willow. The younger girls interrupted each other with their questions and tumbled forward to see, touch and smell everything. The older girls, the ninth-graders, were different. They hung back. They didn’t touch plants or shout out questions. They stood primly to the side, looking bored and even a little disgusted by the enthusiasm of their younger classmates. My friend asked herself, What’s happened to these girls? What’s gone wrong? She told me, “I wanted to shake them, to say, ‘Wake up, come back. Is anybody home in your house?’” (1994, pp. 18–19)

What Gilligan and others have called for in the development and moral maturation of girls and women would be liberating for males as well. The awesome separation of males from emotion and from others—especially women—may lead in its most noble form to “knowing thyself.” But unleavened by connection, caring, and the willingness to engage in full and humane interchange, that exalted dictum is hollow and ghost-like.

THE BIOLOGY OF MORALITY

In chapter 4, we discussed the biology of morality somewhat. Let me reiterate some of the ideas here. Most developmental theorists, including those who theorize about moral development, see such development at least as partially biological, or, more correctly, epigenetic—having a potential for unfolding, given good enough circumstances, in a preprogrammed way. All well and good, but here we want to return to the very important idea that although the heart may have reasons of its own, reason must have heart in order to work. That is to say, emotion and cognition are inextricably tied together as we make our decisions to act or not, to speak or not, to stray from our values or not (Damasio, 1994). Recall that there is a neurological site in which emotion and reason come together—the ventromedial prefrontal region (that region underneath and in the middle of the prefrontal cortex). When trauma or lesions damage that area and no other area is affected, a person may appear to be just as smart as before and just as rational in considering all the consequences of particular actions. But when it comes to actual decision-making and action in the social and personal areas of life, the person makes tragic, often harmful or self-destructive, choices. The heart cannot inform the intellect, cannot send up a red flag and say, this might be

disastrous, or this could hurt your friend, or this might lose you your life savings. Cold-bloodedness makes it difficult to value, to emotionally anticipate the consequences of various possible decisions or courses of action. Such “heartless” reasoning may also speed up the time in which one considers and then chooses—there is no time to say “uh-oh” (Damasio). We cannot consider the metaphors that stand for justice and fairness (like achieving moral *credit* for a good deed for which one does not expect reciprocation) because a metaphor’s power is in its ability to evoke emotion (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Finally, this neurological lack can be caused, or so it is thought, by a society that does not enhance the biological development of those moral, rational, and emotional links; thus, a society can put its members at risk for disastrous or harmful, though rational and calculated, behavior. An 11-year-old takes his gun and points it at a young stranger’s head some distance away, pulls the trigger, and watches, without emotion, as the young boy falls dead; how can we comprehend it? His lawyers contend that the 11-year-old did not mean to shoot at the boy but, rather, at a nearby tree. His lawyers also claim that he does not understand what he did, not that he feels no remorse. Is this a case of a socially induced shriveled ventromedial prefrontal cortex; a case of thinking so detached from emotion that it seems coolly psychopathic? I don’t know, but there has been an eerie replication of such stories in our society in the past few years. (See the discussion in the chapter 11 on violence.)

Peers and Groups

In-group and out-group, them and us, are divisions that have been a staple of the human community, for young and old members both, for most of our time on earth. I claimed in chapter 4, citing people who supposedly know these things, that 50 percent or so of the variation in the *personalities* of individuals is genetic: identical twins separated at birth are very much alike, biological siblings are more alike than adopted siblings, and identical twins separated at birth are about as similar as identical twins reared together. The remaining difference is usually attributed to the parents’ influence but, in effect, when it comes to understanding variation in key personality characteristics (extroversion or introversion, conscientiousness or impulsivity, for example), parental behaviors seem to account for very little. This does not mean that all those parental behaviors that nurture and provide safety, caring and love, and instruction are unimportant. It means only that in terms of certain personality characteristics of persons—whether they are aggressive and assertive or shy and withdrawn—are accounted for by other factors (Bouchard, 1994). So what are these other factors? No one

knows for sure. Could it be just the mixture of chance, unique, defining events and happenings (contingencies) upon the forming personality? Could it be that each parent responds differently to each child, giving a distinctive nonshared environment to each offspring? Possibly so. But another likely suspect here is peers. Steven Pinker observes:

Children's cultural heritage—the rules of Ringolevio, the melody and lyrics of the nyah-nyah song, the belief that if you kill someone you have to legally pay for his gravestone—is passed from child to child, sometimes for thousands of years. As children grow up they graduate from group to group and eventually join adult groups. Prestige at one level gives one a leg up at the next; most significantly, the leaders of young adolescent cliques are the first to date. At all ages children are driven to figure out what it takes to succeed among their peers and to give these strategies precedence over anything their parents foist on them. . . . [Eventually] the child will have to compete for mates, and before that for the status necessary to find and keep them, in other arenas, which play by different rules. The child had better master them. (1997, pp. 449–50)

Although there is a decidedly masculine cast to this interpretation, the lessons of the peers are extremely important ones—even early on. Infants and toddlers are very much interested in each other, and later as they begin parallel play (not really playing together but alongside of each other), each is aware of the reactions of the other. The lessons drawn from peers for boys and for girls may be different; nonetheless, they become increasingly important lessons as they grow up.

A classic study done in Oklahoma in 1954 by social psychologist Muzafer Sherif and colleagues stands as a remarkable testament to intergroup competition and hostility (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood & Sherif, 1961). The “Robber’s Cave” experiment began with the selection of 22 11-year-old boys, white Protestants and Oklahomans all, each from different Oklahoma City schools so that no one knew anyone else. It was intended that they all be astonishingly alike. All were average to above average in intelligence quotient. Their grades were also in that range. They were not troublemakers. Physically, they were alike in that none were obese, exceptionally short or tall, and none wore glasses. In other words, they were about as much alike as you can be. Unbeknownst to the boys, they were divided by the researchers into two groups of eleven. Each group was given the deception² that

2. Deception has been a staple of many social psychological experiments over the years, leading many critics to object to such research on moral grounds and on the ground that deception and one-way communication implicit in these experiments produce behavior that is atypical and not applicable to real life.

they were going on a three-week summer camp excursion to the Boy Scout camp at Robber's Cave state park in the Sans Bois Mountains of southeastern Oklahoma. Each was unaware, at the outset, that the other group was also in the park. They ate at the same mess hall but at different hours, they were in different parts of the camp, and they came in separate buses at different times. For all intents and purposes, this was a typical summer camp—except that it was an experiment, and the counselors were researchers in disguise.

The experiment was conceived to have three stages each related to three hypotheses about intergroup conflict and cooperation. The first was a focus on intragroup activity and evolving group dynamics; the second was intended to reveal the groups to each other and to examine how controlled and “reciprocally frustrating” between-group competition would affect the groups (a tournament involving baseball games, tug-of-wars, and tent-pitching over four days); and the third was meant to reunite the two groups into one peaceful and harmonious group engaged in a superordinate set of tasks that would require both groups to complete. The idea was that for about a week, each group would have the impression that they were alone. After a week (stage 1), the experiment called for each group being told about the existence of the other and bringing the two together in a variety of competitive activities. The boys were way ahead of the researchers. Each had heard the other group, become aware of the fact that other people were around, and quickly became anxious to get rid of them. By the time stage 2 rolled around, each group was more than ready to compete and had already developed a sense of “us versus them.” The competitions—the baseball games, treasure hunts, tugs-of-war, and tent-pitching—were for prizes. By the way, it should be noted, too, that each group had a name—the Rattlers and the Eagles.

In no time at all, the competitive games got out of hand; each group was determined to exert their will (and their symbol—the Rattler flag was hung on the backstop of the baseball diamond at the very first game). Name-calling and fistfights erupted. Soon, it became nasty. For example, after the Eagles won at the second tug-of-war (they decisively lost the first and tore down the Rattlers' flag on the ball yard pole and burned it), the Rattlers raided and trashed their cabin; the Eagles retaliated the next day. Each group began to make weapons in anticipation of future raids and outgroup incursions. Stage 3 (I imagine the researchers were glad to see it roll around) called for bringing the two groups together in cooperative endeavors. Bringing them together in noncompetitive situations only brought more conflict, such as food fights in the cafeteria. So the researchers, as part of their hypotheses, created activities with superordinate goals (fixing a “broken” water main, securing a movie), and when those possibilities were exhausted, created problem situations (a truck got stuck taking them to another camp site and

they had to figure out how it could be pulled out of the rut it was in) that, in effect became “common enemies” because they prevented the groups from enjoying desirable activities. They also hinted that certain problems being experienced at the camp were the result of vandals from the outside. Finally, they made it to another camp to finish the experience. Generally speaking, the superordinate goals phase of stage 3 had been successful in reducing conflict and increasing reciprocally helpful and cooperative intergroup interactions. Members of each group, once demonizing the outgroup, now found members of the outgroup pretty much okay.

Each of us probably can recount in our school years being a member of a group (or being thought to be a member of a group) and not being a member of other groups. Intergroup teasing and taunting is often a staple of school experience in the hallways, in the restrooms, on the playground, in the cafeteria. Sometimes lighthearted, but often mean-spirited and hostile, some children really suffer because of it. The peer group is an influence in at least two ways. First, it becomes a place where you can find approval, where you can begin to work out what sort of person you will be, where you can discover the existence of worlds beyond your family. The peer group may be as small as another person, or it may be as well-formed as a club or a gang. Groups form early in the school life of children, and they are subject to change as kids grow, change physically, move, or develop different interests. Second, peer groups can also be a place where maturity and growth are stymied by ridicule and censure; where a child learns that he or she does not measure up or fit in. This can happen in groups where one is an ostensible member, or the disdain can be cast by a group outside one’s own peers. As one moves into adolescence and the stakes of not working out a hospitable self-image rise, the attitudes, behaviors, opinions, and views of peers become even more weighty.

Even though younger children can be stung by the insensitivity or derision of peers, these relationships can be opportunities to learn about cooperation, leadership, role-playing, being part of a collective, and the robust relationship between the self and the opinions and views of peers. Games and teams, of course, are the most visible example of these phenomena, but they occur in all groups. Hand in hand with peers, individuals may do things that would be unthinkable alone. Kee Yazzie, a Navajo, recalls this story of his childhood and his reaction about being sent to boarding school.³ He didn’t like it and wanted to return home, even though he knew his parents thought the school was the best thing for him. So, after suffering some weeks

3. For many Native Americans, boarding schools were places where their cultural identity was stripped away and where racism and its sidekick oppression roamed the hallways and classrooms.

there, when he was in the third grade he and some friends ran away from the school to return home. They were chased a good while by staff from the school, but the staff soon lost heart and fell back.

The snow on Black Mesa was probably four feet high. . . . We started walking up the mountain and got lost, so we kept running around trying to find the trail. We finally found a trail. As we started heading up the sun was getting real low in the sky. We had to hurry because it was getting very cold and the snow was deep. Our shoes were just regular school shoes and our feet were getting cold. We were running and we lost two of the guys. I guess they got tired and just stopped or something. They were my age and the other two that were still going were older than me. We stopped and looked back, and they were gone. We started yelling, but we didn't hear anything. We had to make a decision—shall we go back and look for them or shall we continue? Somebody said maybe they had headed back to the boarding school. Somehow we just felt they were going to make it back. (White, 1995, p. 172)

There is a lot to see in Kee Yazzie's story (which is part of his larger life narrative): the courage (and foolhardiness, perhaps) of numbers, mutual support, making sense of an ambiguous situation, leadership, group decision-making (although one might not agree with the decision, it is clear that a decision was made not to go back), and a culturally driven crisis—to stay or not in the white man's boarding school. In any case, this was an action that would not have been as likely to be taken by an individual. In this story also lie the seeds of another element of peer group behavior—conformity. Although there are many motives for conformity, such as being accepted or liked, or avoiding exclusion, one of the motives to conform is that when reality is unclear and emotion runs high, other people become an important source of information. And for many of us, those other people are often our peers (Aronson, 1999).

Siblings

Relationships between brothers and sisters are distinctive, are often precious, and can have a life-long beneficial outcome. But often, they are contentious; siblings are competing for a scarce resource: the attention, affection, physical resources, and care of their parent or parents. Ordinarily, sibling relationships are about inequality: older sibs usually have the upper hand over younger, especially much younger ones (although as we'll see shortly this varies by culture). And though it might seem logical—I would think

so—there actually is not much of a relationship between how a child acts in sibling relationships and what that child might be like in peer relationships. Lucy was the youngest of five, born two years after her next oldest sibling. Picked on and taunted by her older brothers and sisters, Lucy fought for recognition, respect, and relief at home, but eventually seemed to despair of ever getting it from her sibs. At home, she would have seemed, to a casual observer and certainly to her family, to have become whiny, given to temper outbursts, and younger than her years at the age of 8. But outside the home in school and in situations where her older sibs were not involved, she became a leader in playground activities, and she was admired by some peers and certainly by teachers for her humor and cleverness. Two researchers reported in a British journal that “few significant associations were found between measures of children’s sibling relationships and characteristics of their peer relationships” (Stocker & Dunn, 1990, p. 239), meaning that if an older child is controlling and hostile with his younger brothers and sisters, he is as likely as not to have friendly, positive peer relationships. Children learn in sibling relationships, to be sure; the give and take, the scramble for affection and resources, or the need to survive together in a hostile or uncaring environment all provide lessons and some skills; they may leave emotional scars, fond memories, or a bittersweet mix of the two. Certainly, sibling relationships (or their memories) survive into adulthood, for good or ill, but it seems to be true that how one is with siblings in the interior of the family has little carryover to other contemporary or subsequent social relationships and environments.

A popular subject is the affects of birth order on personality. The personality of all children, according to this research and speculation, is shaped by the particularity of the interpersonal environment that each child, in turn, experiences. It is nearly a commonplace that the first child is likely to be more controlling, less open, more conservative, more conscientious, less agreeable, and more neurotic (anxious and tense). First-borns come to know how to use power in the family, are often bossy with their siblings, and though many grow up to be leaders, they almost always are champions of the status quo. The youngest child, on the other hand, is portrayed as more carefree, rebellious, flexible, and responsive to change. This varies depending on the number of siblings in between and the years separating the siblings (Ernst & Angst, 1983; Sulloway, 1996). Other researchers who have examined and reanalyzed data from major birth order studies are less convinced about these consequences. Problems with the research designs and analysis and with the interpretation of the data makes the conclusions suspect (Dunn & Plomin, 1990; Harris, 1998). The view of these investigators is that yes, in the home you can see, sometimes quite clearly, birth order effects. But these are homebound, context-specific effects. If, however, a youngest brother, for

example, is browbeaten by his older brother at home and experiences the same kind of treatment in school *and* among peers, then that fearful or cowering follower behavior may persist.

The remarkable thing about siblings is how different they are from each other, even though they may grow up in the same family (something that fewer children can say these days). Clearly (or not so clearly), other factors are at work here, parents *do* react to their children differently (and vice versa), *and* each child has a different relationship with sibs. The end result? A distinctive intimate environment for each child. My guess is that parents would say (I certainly did) that the environment was pretty stable and enduring. This does not even consider the extramural forces that shape the self.

In many traditional societies in the past and in some indigenous societies in the present, siblings become caretakers of each other. After they leave the intense physical care of mother and, perhaps, grandmother, older siblings care for and introduce younger siblings to the play group and to a wider world of peers. Brooke Medicine Eagle, a Crow, says this:

It is also very special that children themselves are taught to take care of each other. Anyone who's born after you, whether it's two minutes or two years or ten years, is in your charge—you're responsible for taking care of them. Around many of the native families you'll see stair stacking of children all taking care of each other. The older children are there watching out for the younger ones, down and down until you see a little two year old packing around a tiny one year old. This creates a chain of loving responsibility and caring, a natural connection. A group of children out playing is much more innocent and safe, much more cared for. (1989, p. 39)⁴

Sibling relationships are as various as other relationships. In some African-American families, the tradition of close relationships between siblings is an effect of both the remnants of some African cultures and the need for solidarity in the face of racial discrimination and oppression. In Greek and Jewish cultures, the tension between the need for children to succeed and family loyalty creates many ambiguous and difficult situations (McGoldrick, Watson & Benton, 1999). In any case, siblings are an important part of our lives through the life cycle. My father's three brothers, all in their 80s and second-generation Lebanese, are still very close, even though they lead separate lives. As people live longer, sibling relationships may assume a degree of importance in terms of support, help, and socializing than ever before.

4. It is important to remember that not all indigenous and native cultures are the same or have the same relationships between parents and children or between siblings.

School and Family; Play and Work

Community, school, and family interact on a variety of different levels. That is to say, the quality of schooling is related to the socioeconomic viability of the community (for example, the size of the tax base), its racial and ethnic composition, its physical environment (the quality of housing stock or the availability of green areas, for example), and its power base relative to other local communities (e.g., the interest, concern, and decisions of local politicians, the school board, etc.). Schools in economically distressed and politically “dissed” areas suffer. The inequities between schools in such communities and those in more affluent communities are astonishing and, in too many cases, absolutely disgraceful. Jonathan Kozol (1991) has chronicled these debilitating effects on children, teachers, and families of many schools in inner cities, schools that have large populations of children of color and children of poor and working poor families, schools that go without, and schools that struggle for even the most meager resources. Irl Solomon, a history teacher at East St. Louis⁵ High, has taught for thirty years in the midst of the neediness of so many children and in the face of tremendous odds. He hates to miss a day, he says, because the students rely upon him, and he knows that if he were ill, there wouldn’t be a substitute to take his place. Physically, the school is crumbling: the football field at the school doesn’t have goal posts, just two jerry-rigged poles and no crossbar. The coach mows and tends to the grass on the field himself and often buys footballs and other equipment with his own money. The students in one of Mr. Solomon’s classes lay it out with the straightforwardness (and hope) that children and teens who live under these conditions often muster:

[A girl says], “I don’t go to physics class, because my lab has no equipment. . . . The typewriters in my typing class don’t work. The women’s toilets. . . . I’ll be honest I just don’t use the toilets. If I do, I come back into class and I feel dirty.” [Another girl asks], “Do you think the children of this school are getting what we’d get in a nice section of St. Louis?”

[Kozol notes] that we are in a different state and city.

“Are we citizens of East St. Louis or America?” . . .

A boy named Luther speaks about the chemical pollution. “It’s like this. . . . On one side of us you have two chemical corporations. One is Pfizer—that’s out there. They make paint and pigments.

5. East St. Louis, Illinois, is one of the poorest cities, in terms of income and resources, in the United States; someone said it is the only U.S. city that is all inner city.

The other is Monsanto. On the other side are companies incinerating toxic waste. So the trash is comin' at us this direction. The chemicals is comin' from the other. We right in the middle." (Kozel, 1991, pp. 30–31)

In spite of this, maybe inexplicably, certainly remarkably, these young people believe in the dream and salvation of racial integration. Luther claims, "Going to a school with all the races is more important than a modern school." Mr. Solomon says wistfully, "They still believe in that dream. They have no reason to do so. That is what I find so wonderful and . . . ah, so moving. . . . These kids are the only reason I get up each day" (Kozol, 1991, p. 31).

For school-aged children, the school and the community are places where the demands of work, diligence, and success or failure or just becoming "fair-to-middlin'" are learned and experienced. These are counterbalanced by opportunities for play and release. This is a time of life, as I said earlier, when the tools of citizenship, the portfolio of eventual maturity, can be amply packed or only scantily stocked. You can see from the example above that these children have made the most out of social and physical surroundings that are literally toxic and certainly bereft of critical resources. Mastery is a major task of this part of childhood: gaining jurisdiction of one's body, thinking, acquiring intellectual tools, securing oneself in the community and family, and establishing supportive peer relationships. Schools and communities can do much to ensure this development. They can undermine it as well. Recall from chapter 3 that Bonnie Benard (1997), on the basis of her work with children and youth in difficult, often violent and disorganized environments, said that there are things that a community or school can do to ensure the maximum development of intellectual, interpersonal, and physical efficacy. Schools, for example, can be protective shields for children growing up in difficult and economically compromised neighborhoods if they meet three challenges. The first is caring for the children, providing visible supports and positive relationships with adults. Recall, too, that James Coleman said this sort of caring means that by

Providing the attention, personal interest, and intensity of involvement, some persistence and continuity over time, and a certain degree of intimacy—children would develop the necessary attitudes, effort, and conception of self that they need to succeed in schools and as adults. (1987, p. 33)

Clearly, Mr. Solomon, in the example above, is such a caring individual. In this way, the school becomes an extension of the family. The second factor requires that schools have high expectations; the belief that children will

succeed and, in support of that, the provision of the tools and environments that ensure achievement. There is some evidence, for instance, that engaging students who are in academic difficulty in school in a challenging, speeded-up curriculum has positive benefits in terms of their subsequent performance. Low expectations appear to help no one. As a matter of fact, they can be disheartening and sap the very marrow of one's motivation. Very few are immune to the power of unyielding high, positive expectations. Tracy Kidder describes the powers that teachers have to motivate children with these words:

For children who are used to thinking of themselves as stupid or not worth talking to or deserving rape and beatings, a good teacher can be an astonishing revelation. A good teacher can give a child at least a chance to realize, "She thinks I'm worth something; maybe I am." (1990, p. 3)

Finally, genuine participation in the moral, civic, and cultural life of the community and school offers children the opportunity to have an impact on their environment, to enrich relationships with peers and adults, to engage in problem-solving, and to have some fun. Some years ago, Michael Rutter, on the basis of his research into the critical elements that make for successful schools, declared that children in successful schools were given serious responsibility and the opportunity to make decisions about their education and were active participants in almost every phase of school life. They were expected to be responsible and mature and, for the most part, they were (Benard, 1997).

The relationship between the family and the school is also critical. Many schools do not invite the participation and involvement of parents; often, these schools are in poorer neighborhoods. Schools also can represent the worst impulses in society, being repositories of sexism, classism, and racism. In Oakland, California, stories have recently come to light that the discipline meted out to African-American students (who constitute almost two-thirds of all students), by predominantly white faculty, is more frequent and harsher. One little African-American girl reportedly was forced to wipe the blackboard with her tongue because of making a mistake. A local activist says that this kind of humiliation and exorbitant punishment is the rule, not the exception (*Lawrence Journal-World*, 2000). In many schools, as Tiffany Ana López attested above, works by authors, artists, scientists, and politicians of color are missing from the curriculum. The voices of women, of gays and lesbians, and of those with physical disabilities are silent and silenced too often. In a remarkable study, psychiatrist Francis Ianni looked at several communities, urban and rural, white, African-American, Latino, integrated, and small and large, and found that two of the strongest indicators of the

achievement of children and the avoidance of serious trouble were (1) the similarity of values between school and family (and community) and (2) the invitation of parents to participate, even minimally, in the life of the school (Ianni, 1989).

Today, some schools are turning themselves into family resource centers or twenty-four-hour schools. This development has many motivations, but important among them is the idea that the ties between family, school, and community must be strengthened; the developmental infrastructure for children must be augmented. Programs developed by parents and their children; the provision of places of respite, recreation, and celebration; and the establishment of the presence of representatives of local health, legal, and social service agencies, among others, capitalize on the fact that besides the church, schools are often the most durable, visible, and accessible presence in the community.

Meaning and Community

We have addressed, in chapter 2 principally, the importance of meaning-making. How is it that children, even young children, enter into the world of meaning? Do they, as Chomsky (1965) suggested (see chapter 8), have some inborn ability to recognize and express language? Is it simply a matter of rewarding appropriate speech as the vessel of canonical meaning? Although I am not sure that anyone knows fully how this happens, it is, however it happens, an incredible feat for a young human being to come to recognize and express the interpretations and renditions of life typical of culture, class, context, and kin; meanings that tell of the ordinary and expected in their lives. These meanings also become the backdrop from which children (and adults, of course) can begin to understand and make sense of the out-of-the-ordinary infringements, the deviations from the expectable and commonplace. The coming of age of understanding is an evolving process wrought through interactions with others and delivered usually through the medium of storytelling and narrative. This amazing human achievement of negotiating and renegotiating meanings is “enormously aided . . . by a community’s stored narrative resources and its equally precious tool kit of interpretive techniques: its myths, its typology of human plights, but also its traditions for locating and solving divergent narratives” (Bruner, 1990, pp. 67–68). Resolving divergent and competing or fugitive and strange narratives, of course, is essential for those who live in the borderlands of culture, ethnicity, and class (most of us). But by the time they go to school, children already have a capacity, however immature, for expressing and sharing their own narratives, understanding others, and trying to accommodate the

deviant and aberrant situation or scenario. How they come to do this is a complex and disputed process beyond the ken of this book, but some things seem reasonably clear.

Children's capacity for language is facilitated and heightened by interaction with others, by talking while doing, by learning how actions and words go together by observing others, or by having others comment on what the child is doing. Regarding how children respond and behave before they have much language, it is probably the case that certain communicative functions are already operative—labeling, requesting, illustrating, and indicating. All of this is embedded in context; children “get” the significance of the story, plotline, or narrative, if they have some awareness of context—the people and situations in which interaction and communication takes place (Bruner, 1990). For us, the importance of all this is the role of relationships, a definitive and compelling context, and the long arm of culture in any human community. Very early on, children learn how to use narrative not only as a form of recounting, but also of persuading, cajoling, deceiving, flattering, comforting, and, in the family, getting what you want without losing your position or the love of those who care (Bruner, 1990; Miller, 1982). James McBride describes how he struggled to find narratives that would comfort him and explain who he actually was. Race was a recurrent and central theme.

One afternoon I came home from school and cornered Mommy while she was cooking dinner. “Ma, what’s a tragic mulatto?” I asked.

Anger flashed across her face like lightning and her nose, which tends to redden and swell in anger, blew up like a balloon. “Where’d you hear that?” she asked.

“I read it in a book.”

“For God’s sake, you’re no tragic mul—What book is this?”

“Just a book I read.”

“Don’t read that book anymore.” She sucked her teeth. “Tragic mulatto. What a stupid thing to call somebody! Somebody called you that?”

“No.”

“Don’t ever use that term.”

“Am I black or white?”

“You’re a human being,” she snapped. “Educate yourself or you’ll be a nobody!”

“Will I be a black nobody or just a nobody?”

“If you’re a nobody,” she said dryly, “it doesn’t matter what color you are.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” I said.

She sighed and sat down. “I bet you never heard the joke about the teacher and the beans,” she said. I shook my head. “The teacher says to the class, ‘Tell us about different kinds of beans.’”

The first little boy says, “There’s pinto beans.”

‘Correct,’ says the teacher.

Another boy raises his hand. “There’s lima beans.”

‘Very good,’ says the teacher.

Then a little girl in the back raises her hand and says. ‘We’re all *human* beans!’”

She laughed. “That’s what you are, a *human* bean! And a *fart-buster* to boot!” She got up and went back to cooking, while I wandered away bewildered. (1996, pp. 92–93)

This is a story unfolding; a plotline that will eventually weave into the fabric of more and more of his world. Until it is worked out, “the question of race [will be] like the power of the moon in my house. It’s what made the river flow, the ocean swell, and the tide rise, but it was a silent power, intractable, indomitable, indisputable, and thus completely ignorable” (p. 94). In a recent interview on public radio, James says that he is now more interested in the common humanity that we all share. The question of race, he argues, is much too narrowly proscribed, especially since most everyone in this society is of mixed race heritage (McBride, 2000).

A NOTE ON ATTENTION DEFICIT/HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER

Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), formerly known as attention deficit disorder and originally called minimal brain dysfunction, is probably the most frequently diagnosed behavioral disorder in children and adolescents. The number of children diagnosed with this disorder has risen from 900,000 in 1990 to around 5 million currently. The diagnosis is usually applied to males, and most of the children and adolescents who bear the diagnosis are white, suburban, and middle class (Diller, 1999). The disorder is manifest by difficulty in sustaining attention and focusing on the task at hand, coupled with overactivity and impulsive behavior—behavior not constrained by consideration or the interposition of thought. In my experience, and in the experience of many of the students in my classes, this diagnosis is often given without a sufficient and painstaking biopsychosocial assessment. Nonetheless, the children who are given the diagnosis are very likely to end up with a prescription of Ritalin (methylphenidate). Ritalin, although somewhat different chemically, is essentially a form of amphetamine—speed. And the rise in the number of children with the diagnosis is more

than matched by the increase in the production and prescription of Ritalin (Diller, 1999). This relationship between the increase in the diagnosis of certain disorders and the production of chemicals that work to alleviate them is an interesting one. For example, mania was not diagnosed much in this country until the availability of lithium (an effective salt compound that controls some of the symptoms). The increase in the diagnosis of depression seems in part related to the availability of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs—Prozac, Zoloft, and Paxil, principally). The politics of this, although not our concern here, should not be lost on us. The pharmaceutical industry has a huge stake in the increase in the number of diagnoses available as well as their application. ADHD is no different—a 700 percent increase in the production of Ritalin in the 1990s is testament to that (Diller, 1999; Kutchins & Kirk, 1997; Walker, 1996).

The fate of children with the ADHD label is varied, but some are put into special classes (learning disordered [LD] or behavior disordered [BD], as they are called); others are defined as at-risk for more serious disorders such as conduct disorder that, in adulthood, is thought to transmute into antisocial personality disorder (one of the more hopeless designations conferred upon people). By the way, the number of children of color and from low-income families increases in the case of the latter two diagnoses (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995).

Although in the eyes of many critics it is wildly overdiagnosed, there seems to be a neurological and temperament anomaly that we could name ADHD (Barkley, 1997; Kovel, 1981; Walker, 1996). There is evidence of a genetic component (Amen, 1997); there is frequently a history of uterine trauma in the mothers; and perinatal distress, such as premature birth, anoxia, and low Apgar⁶ scores, is more common among these children. There is also some emerging evidence of specific brain abnormalities, such as a thinness in parts of the basal ganglia (remember from chapter 4 that these are partly responsible for controlling voluntary muscle movement). Under certain conditions, these children also exhibit lower levels of blood flow to the left prefrontal cortex (evidence of lessening of attention, concentration, and ordering of stimuli). As many as two-thirds of the children with what genuinely appears to be ADHD also have neurological soft signs (that is, they score outside normal limits on an office neurological exam but exhibit

6. Apgar (named for the physician who invented it, Virginia Apgar) scores are applied immediately after the birth of a infant to roughly assess his or her state of health. Infants are given scores of 0, 1, or 2 on five measures: respiration, skin color, heart rate, muscle tone, and reflex response. The higher the score, the better the condition of the infant.

no signs of hard-core neurological pathology) (Gitlin, 1996). Nonetheless, it seems clear that the likelihood of a child, a boy most usually, being diagnosed with ADHD is related to a number of factors. Many school classrooms, for a variety of reasons, have little tolerance of activity. Having to sit in a classroom without much opportunity to move and be active is, for many boys and some girls, a duration vile. In the context of the enormous demands on schools to not just educate but raise children and effectively deal with difficult children, those who are not just active but energetic, creative, rebellious, curious, and interested in many things at once may be harder to abide. Many of these children are living in shadowland of hyperactivity; all they need is a zealous teacher, parent, or counselor to push them over the border (Kovel, 1981). As we saw in chapter 3, we live in a culture wont to define many human traits and habits as disorders to be checked or medicated. Kids who cannot control themselves sufficiently, who are loud, who ask questions, who wonder if things could be different, or who wriggle and wiggle a lot can easily be given a diagnosis. The pace, change, rapidly shifting external environments, and the fragmentation of family life can play havoc here. If communities do not have resources and respite for parents and children alike, the hectic pace of life may be mirrored in the level of anxiety, urgency, and some disconnection between thought, emotion, and action in children and adults. Finally, other physical illnesses may mimic ADHD, including pinworms, sleep apnea, hyperthyroidism, caffeinism (the amount of caffeine that some children drink—usually in the form of soft drinks—is astonishing), allergies, and temporal lobe seizures.

Consider two boys. Breck, age 10, is a dynamo. His parents say that from the earliest they can remember, he has been a perpetual motion machine, a whirling dervish, seemingly without ever losing fuel: a pickup truck with no brakes and an inexhaustible supply of gas. He is disruptive of others' activities; he runs from one activity to the next, leaving a trail of broken toys or incredible messes behind him. He is clumsy; he has had many minor accidents and is a gallery of scrapes and bruises. Breck seems unaware of the risk and dangers of much of his behavior. He is verbally overactive, too; talking whenever he feels like it, interrupting others, blurting out answers and questions in class. He cannot sit still in school or at home and cannot concentrate for more than a few minutes at best. He forgets things he is told and that often gets him in trouble with the teacher (he forgets to take notes home to his parents or forgets homework assignments). On the playground, however, he is something of a leader, a really good kickball and soccer player. But the fact that he overreacts to things makes his peers somewhat leery of his friendship. Breck is aware that he gets into trouble and that he does have difficulty with schoolwork. His parents are at their wits' end. His dad says that the only thing that Breck can attend to is commercials on television. A

thorough biopsychosocial assessment indicates that Breck truly does have ADHD. He is prescribed Ritalin. In addition, a social worker works closely and collaboratively with the parents and the teacher to structure the physical environment and the balance of rewards and punishments contingent on his behavior.

Danny has been labeled hyperactive because of his fidgeting and disruptive classroom behavior. He has a mischievous, sort of Huck Finn personality. He is a leader on the playground and a first-rate class clown. In spite of this, he has very few close friends. When it comes to schoolwork, Danny is pretty much a failure. He has been placed in a special education class. The teachers have noticed that he reverses letters like *b* and *d* and sometimes begins reading or writing from the wrong side of the page. He was eventually thought to suffer from dyslexia and ADHD,⁷ and his parents, at the recommendation of the school counselor, were seeking a prescription of Ritalin from a doctor. To his credit, the doctor insisted on a complete physical. In the process, he discovered that the whorl (that little spiral of hair on one side or the other of the back of the head) in his hair was on the crown of his head and not opposite his dominant side. The doctor also discovered that Danny used his right hand for writing and kicked a football with his left foot. He ate with his left hand, too. After further examination and ruling out other diagnoses, the doctor suggested that Danny suffered from mixed dominance, a situation in which neither side of the brain is dominant. This can cause reading and writing problems as well as irritability and frustration as the child attempts to compensate. Danny was referred to a reading clinic where, by the eighth week, he had progressed enough to return to his regular classroom (Walker, 1996).

The reactions of other people to the behavior of each of these boys, if these are representative of others' experiences, undoubtedly delivered blows to their self-esteem. People close to children with apparent ADHD (parents, siblings, peers) and people critical to their well-being (teachers, counselors, ministers) often construct narratives that will affect the unfolding of the children's storied self. Danny's story is likely to be more favorable than Breck's, although each appear to have received conscientious, competent help. Nonetheless, children with hyperactivity have a very difficult road to travel. As they move into adolescence and adulthood, without help and understanding, too many of them will find acceptance from and turn to walk the paths of the exiled and the outcast, the damaged and the branded. Here is what an 11-year-old, hospitalized in a psychiatric hospital for "out-of-

7. It is estimated that about 25 percent of the children who truly have ADHD also have a co-occurring learning disorder that will not respond to the treatment for ADHD and must be dealt with separately.

control” behavior and diagnosed with ADHD (not necessarily correctly), wrote to his mother.

Dear Mom

I am your son who came out as a monster.

I wonder sometimes if you love me or not but I know you do.

I hear imaginary screams in my mind.

I see us as a happy family.

I am your son who came out as a monster.

I pretend to hate you sometimes but I love you very much.

I feel a lot of pain when we get into fights but I pretend not to.

I touch God and ask him how to work this out but I get no answer.

I cry after every argument and think about you.

I am your son who came out as a monster.

I understand why you get so mad and I try to fix it but it’s hard.

I dream of running away but I cry when I’m away.

I hope I live with my Dad but I really want to live with you.

I am your son who came out as a monster. (Katz, 1997, p. 15)

The frustration and anguish, the longing for something better, is palpable. Will anyone be able to rewrite the tragic narrative that he is writing: “I am your son who came out as a monster?” Could you?

CONCLUSION

Economic pressures and work demands and changes in the way that people become and remain (or not) partners make it difficult for us, as a society, to expect that the fate of children can be wholly understood as a family responsibility. The community, in the form of schools, churches, associations, neighbors, and local governmental agencies have to build stronger ligaments to families and create sources of support and guidance for the future citizens of their community and the larger society. Middle childhood, in its own way, is a time of enormous possibility in the formation of the intellectual capacity, physical development, moral sensibility, social connection, the readiness for closeness and friendship, and a sense of perspective on family, peers, authority figures, and self. For our part as parents, teachers, social workers, coaches, and neighbors, this is the time to act on the view that children are, in fact, “a social good, not . . . the private luxury or burden of their own parents” alone (Coontz, 1997, p. 119). In this regard, Stephanie Coontz, who has written critical essays on the fact that the reality of the family is far different than the mythology of the family that forms the basis for much of our thinking and acting, reminds us, instructively, of the now-waning Hawaiian custom of *hanai*.

Among traditional Hawaiians, offering a child to a friend or relative was not a sign of abandonment or parental disinterest or inability to care for a child. Rather, *hanai* (which means “to feed”) was intended to expand the circle of ties between adults and children. This was to ensure the nurturance, protection, education, and socialization of children as well as to involve adults in investment in future generations. I am not suggesting adoption of this traditional Hawaiian practice, but rather suggesting that, in our complex society, with all the burdens and demands it imposes on parents and caretakers, when it comes to children, we must expand the circle of responsibility and fortify the developmental infrastructure for our children, so that they might really become citizens with a full portfolio.

M and M Dialogue

MEREDITH: Wow, the Robber’s Cave experiment really brought some things home. Like I said before, Benjie, my 12-year-old, has just entered junior high school. Already there are cliques and gangs, and some of them came with him from elementary school. Remember I said that Benjie’s not a joiner, he’s a little standoffish and he has kind of gravitated to a group of guys who, if I had my guess, might be considered by some of the bigger guys, the tough-acting groups, as nerds. Nothing really bad has happened yet, but Benjie has talked about a couple of guys who kind of scared him. One kid, a ninth grader, grabbed Benjie by the arm and demanded some money for lunch. Then Benjie didn’t have enough for his own lunch—he eats in the cafeteria. When he told me about it, I was so mad and I almost broke into tears. He told me it was no big deal, but I could tell that it was. I shudder to think what could happen down the road.

MITCHELL: I surely can understand your concern. The Robber’s Cave experiment, which some people think is outdated (I don’t, by the way) simply replicates what a lot of us observe in the world of kids—that, in groups, sometimes alone, they can be really cruel. No doubt there will be some children who are seriously emotionally or even physically hurt, at least temporarily, by the actions of peers. And peers do things in groups that they wouldn’t do alone. I think it is incumbent in adults, in the school, in the neighborhood, to ensure that these kinds of things do not happen. Sure, peer rivalries, in-group and out-group competition, in many cultures is okay. But not cruelty and malicious taunting. On the other hand, however, this is where kids learn to negotiate a world that sometimes seems oblivious to their needs and wishes. I think it was Steven Pinker who said that at all ages children are driven to figure out what it takes to make it among their peers and, by implication, the world.

MEREDITH: I suppose. But it sure doesn't lessen a mom's concern about not just the physical safety but the emotional well-being of a sensitive young man.

MITCHELL: Agreed. I can actually attest to this myself because I was something of a nerd in junior high and high school. There were embarrassing moments, hurtful ones to be sure, but one of the ways I got through it was that I was also part of a group. We called ourselves "the Finks" and, in the privacy of our circle, we made fun of the jocks and "goons." We even used to imitate them (behind their backs), engaging in gorilla-like behavior on dates and other social events. Anyway, though it was painful at times, I learned a lot about irony, group solidarity, and who I wanted to be.

MEREDITH: I would like to talk about something we have talked about before, in one way or another. It seems to me that you often suggest or at least hint that the family is not enough in terms of raising children. In one way, I get this. In my field placement, some of the families we see, especially those in serious trouble, are really isolated. They seem not to have anyone to rely on—no extended family, neighbors, no church. My field instructor said that one reason may be that families where there is emotional or even physical abuse don't want anyone to know what they are doing. Or one of the family members may have a serious mental disorder like paranoid schizophrenia that keeps them suspicious and thus isolated from others. But I wonder if what you say is true, if that isn't getting it backwards. That when families are isolated for whatever reason that then they may begin to engage in behaviors that get out of control because there is no one to put on the brakes or simply because of the stress and embarrassment of being isolated. I know kids feel that deeply. My youngest, Scott has a friend, Howie, who every once in a blue moon comes over to our house. He seems nervous and anxious and he never stays very long, saying he has got to get home. Scott, by the way, has never been to his house. I happened to mention this in my practicum, and a couple of people said they would bet that Howie has a parent (maybe two) who has mental illness or a serious drinking problem and Howie has to protect and take care of them. I have to agree—sort of. But if a family has no ties to the outside world (school would seem to be it and that's just Howie not his parents) for other reasons, couldn't that just feed on itself?

MITCHELL: I think so. There is some evidence that in socially neglected and economically distressed neighborhoods, where there is a lot of change and transience, families tend to isolate themselves from one another and from social institutions. Violence in the neighborhood, being different than one's neighbors, having to work long hours to keep one's head above water can mean fewer or no connections to others.

- MEREDITH: But you don't have to be poor for this to be true do you? I mean Howie's family is not poor—I don't think, anyway.
- MITCHELL: No. I think it was Robert Coles who did a study of "rich kids" and their narratives revealed an incredible amount of loneliness and isolation.
- MEREDITH: One more thing. The information on ADHD really hits home. At my field placement we get an incredible number of kids with that diagnosis. Usually a teacher or school counselor starts the ball rolling, and a family doctor may officially confer the diagnosis. And I know at school, there are an awful lot of kids taking pills for it. Could so many people be wrong about this?
- MITCHELL: Yes. So many people have been wrong about a lot of disorders over the years. Homosexuality was once thought to be a mental disorder. Those who were given the diagnosis (they already knew they were gay or lesbian) were encouraged to undergo what is now known as reparative therapy. This is therapy—often quite lengthy—designed to eliminate homosexual desires and to return a person to so-called normal sexuality. It has been subsequently denounced by most professional groups, and being gay or lesbian or bisexual for that matter is not now seen as a mental disorder. But it wasn't so long ago that the psychiatric establishment thought it was a kind of psychopathology and offered therapy to cure it. About that time, I was a social worker in an Air Force hospital (psychiatric inpatient and outpatient), and we got referrals all the time of young men thought to be "sick" with homosexual desires.
- MEREDITH: Well, the number of kids with this diagnosis of ADHD is alarming to me. I will work to educate myself about it because I don't see 6-, 7-, 8-, 9-year-old kids on uppers as generally a good thing—especially if they don't have to be.
- MITCHELL: Agreed. I have to go. Let's talk later.
- MEREDITH: Good idea.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Person/Environment, Part IV: Coming of Age in Family and Community

My mom hasn't really told me she's proud of me, but I think in the future, maybe, she will be more proud of me for what I will accomplish.

—DARA, AGE 19

STURM UND DRANG OR THE ROMANCE OF RISK?

A mother says, “Frankly, my teenage son scares hell out of me.” A school district hires an “expert” in profiling adolescents, that is, providing the school with an array of explicit and detailed behavioral, physical, and emotional criteria that he assures will clearly identify an adolescent who has a propensity to violence. (Following its better instincts, the school district cancels the contract.) Some school districts agree to a “zero tolerance” policy (that is, basically, one strike, one violation, and you are out—of school—at least temporarily). Representations of adolescents in the media fairly burst with unflattering portrayals and powerful but negative stereotypes (sex, drugs, and rock and roll; or as some wise guy recently put it, STDs, ATMs, and PCP). Even more sedate and academic characterizations and explanations are enough to convince one to assume a stance of extreme caution and circumspection when in the presence of an adolescent. *The Encyclopedia of Social Work* contains three chapters on adolescence: an overview (de Anda, 1995), a chapter on adolescent pregnancy (Williams, 1995), and a chapter on direct practice with adolescents (Singer & Hussey, 1995). Most notable in each is the heavy emphasis on problems and the tendency to turn to earlier turbulence-based (see below) theories to describe the “normal” tasks of adolescence. The point here is not that adolescents do not have problems, do not struggle with the task of becoming a full-fledged and certified adult, do not waver between experimentation and safety or balance tenuously between the dynamics of hormonal propulsion and celibate retreat but that our ideas about them reflect some trepidation, some envy, and certainly some ambivalence. On the other hand, who of us as an adult has not felt a pang of envy or flutter of embarrassment about the longing for youth and

its budding sexuality as it is portrayed in the media and the marketplace. Adolescents are a huge force in the marketplace. Whether we talk of entertainment, clothes, cosmetics, self-indulgences, and self-image enhancers of all kinds, the market reaches out for the billions of dollars that adolescents have to spend. We may wink at the merciless and mercenary exploitation of the desires and fears of youth, because youth and sexual attractiveness are what the cultural bazaar promises all of us.

Nonetheless, when the subject of adolescence comes up, notice the language used and the stories told about them. The plots and characterizations are monotonously negative. Teens are sloppy. They are moody. They toy with danger—drugs, alcohol, sex. They are self-conscious and totally self-absorbed, preoccupied with their physical appearance. They are superficial. They are rebellious. They are dangerous. All of this is true of some adolescents, some of the time, in some contexts, in one way or another. But for every adolescent who takes a flier and engages a serious risk, there are two who simply experiment with other possibilities less dangerous, perhaps more promising for maturation. We need to attain some balance in our thinking here. For example, the rates of teenage drug use are about the same as the rates for all adult groups. This includes alcohol use. Most teenagers and most adults do not abuse, though they may use, alcohol and drugs. But the rates of both use and abuse continue to rise. The rates of suicide for adolescents are lower than any other age group except preteens; nonetheless, it is the third leading cause of death of teenagers. This does not mean that we can ignore the reality of suicide—for any group—nor does it suggest that we can ignore the reality of the growth in the rate of suicide among teenagers (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1995). But it does suggest that we must, as professionals, assume a sense of proportion about adolescents that would cultivate a genuine understanding of this period of life in this sociohistorical moment.

The problem is that our culture has come to believe that adolescence is naturally a tumultuous time and thus has blurred the lines between normal, exploratory behavior and behavior that is dangerous. Compounding this myth are others, including the idea that self-injurious behavior is normal rather than pathological; the notion of the “generation gap,” whereby parents and teenagers are destined never to understand each other; and the perception of adolescents as fearsome creatures who don’t want to be guided. All of these myths compound and validate parents’ fears around their adolescent children. (Ponton, 1997, p. 3)¹

1. The last half of the title of this section, *The Romance of Risk*, comes from the title of a book by Lynn Ponton.

Identity Formation: Gender and Culture

The celebration of adolescence as a period of wanton instability, struggle, torment, and turmoil began in the early years of this century. G. Stanley Hall was a psychologist who, in 1904, wrote a book on adolescence and coined the phrase *Sturm und Drang* as a kind of shorthand for the tumult of adolescent development. *Sturm und Drang* conjures up the tempestuousness and restless craving and desire of the stage. Hall also was a fan of Sigmund Freud and was instrumental as president of Clark University in encouraging Freud to visit the United States and to deliver some lectures at Clark. The psychoanalytic movement and developmental theory, in general, continued the portrayal of adolescence as a time of instability, yearning, experimentation, and danger. In 1950, Erik Erikson, a psychoanalytic theorist and child psychotherapist, published *Childhood and Society*. In this classic treatise, he laid out his theory of the universality of child and adult development (the famous eight stages of man). Though he continued the tradition of painting the adolescent era somewhat wild, he also added another concern that has become a staple of thinking about adolescence: the struggle to form an identity that is personally palatable and has currency within the social and cultural environs of one's life. Erikson also extended the interest of developmental theory into adulthood, thus nestling adolescence in a larger process of development rather than suggesting that adolescence is essentially the last vital stage before a monolithic adulthood. Further, and I think most important, he conceptually interlaced the psychological and physical preoccupations of adolescence with the prescriptions and demands of institutions and instruments of society, culture, and history. The following lengthy quote from a later book reflects these appreciations, and you can see in them some of the ideas about adolescence that endure today.

If . . . we speak of the community's response to the young individual's need to be "recognized" by those around him [sic], we mean something beyond a mere recognition of achievement; for it is of great relevance to the young individual's identity formation that he be responded to and be given function and status as a person whose gradual growth and transformation makes sense to those who begin to make sense to him. . . . such recognition provides an entirely indispensable support to the ego in the specific tasks of adolescence, which are: to maintain the most important ego defenses against the vastly growing intensity of impulses . . . ; to learn to consolidate the most important "conflict-free" achievements in line with work opportunities; and to *resynthesize all childhood identifications in some unique way and yet in concordance with the roles offered by some wider*

section of society—be that section the neighborhood block, an anticipated occupational field, an association of kindred minds, or perhaps . . . “the mighty dead.” [emphasis added] (Erikson, 1968, p. 156)

Although his attention is clearly on the male experience, Erikson did set the table for those who wanted to get a clearer picture of adolescence as more than just a neuroendocrinal rush or as a psychological tempest. He encouraged the conception of adolescence as a psychological construction tightly wound with the strings of culture and society.

More currently, Daniel Offer has continued the exploration and understanding of adolescence as a sociohistorical phenomenon as well as a physical and psychological one. In his works, he makes the argument that for most adolescents, life is not shot through with agony and the mad and often failed search for existential grounding. Extrapolating from various research reports and clinical case studies carefully, Offer and colleagues even argue that changes in primary sexual characteristics (those changes related to the reproductive system and external genitalia) and secondary sexual characteristics (those built on the changing hormonal system; enlarged breasts and hips for girls, facial hair and deepening voices for males, for example) are not by any means always disturbing and negative experiences for teenagers (Offer & Schonert-Reichl, 1992).

Whatever the case, our understanding of adolescence is a fabrication woven of the strands of research, theory, and educational and clinical work, to be sure, but also of current economic, social, cultural, and political conditions and considerations and of personal experience. For example, the fact that many poor teens have to go to work at a young age to help support the family truncates the experience of adolescence for them. The fact that 150 years ago most children and youth worked at home, on the farm, or in factories obviated the symbolic and social need for a stage of life known as adolescence. The fact that many middle class adolescents can afford an extended education to “make it” in the world and that the job market that they would pursue for a career does not need them when they are younger makes for an extended period of adolescence.² Perhaps the fact that some of us went through a literal hell in adolescence colors our perception.

Adolescence is a beguiling and bewildering mixture of sensation, sedition, and sincerity. For many, adolescence means the taking of gambles. Although risk-taking is often seen as a bad thing, some experts in the field

2. A developmental psychologist, I cannot remember who, said that adolescence for middle class youth is usually not over until age 30, and the key markers for the end of youth are being financially independent and coming to see your parents as real people.

see it as an important part of coming to find out who one is and who one wants to be (or doesn't want to be), the thrusting of the self into uncharted social and interpersonal territories, a part of the process of distinguishing oneself from one's parents or caretakers, and coming to understand that one can make decisions about life. Risk-taking, in this view, can be an adaptive, healthy, potentially growth-producing part of life. Consequences, of course, make the choice either a part of the journey toward maturation or a walk down the path of danger and degeneration (however temporary). To focus only on unfortunate consequences and on those teenagers who make ill-fated decisions encourages us to think of all risk-taking as injurious (Jessor, 1990; Ponton, 1997). But risk-taking and the confrontation of challenges that end with a satisfying, pleasurable, or growth-promoting outcome are opportunities to develop self-confidence and a keener sense of the elements that affect decisions and actions and to encourage the integration of thinking, emotion, behavior, and morality as one dips into uncharted waters. They also may place an adolescent in social environments and relationships unimagined. Richard Irwin (cited in Ponton, 1997) observed that sexual activity, for example, can promote a healthy capacity for intimacy as well as genuine physical and interpersonal pleasure, or it can end up with an unplanned pregnancy, self-loathing and guilt, or a sexually transmitted disease.

Clearly, many adolescents face expectable challenges. The changes in one's physical appearance and capacities; the eruption, slow or swift, of sexual feelings, sexual characteristics, and sexual orientation; the anxieties of self-consciousness and who one appears to be in the eyes of others; the elevation of pressures to belong and be liked; the demands to conform to gender roles and stereotypes ("Be a stud!" "Be pretty and alluring but not smart"); the constant coercion of the marketplace and media to affect a particular image of oneself; and, for many adolescents, the estrangement from parents—some self-imposed, some due to the rise of fear and uncertainty of the parents themselves. The following stories cast some light upon the joys of adolescence as well as its disappointments and frustrations.

Gay and lesbian adolescents face the same challenges as well as possibilities that heterosexual adolescents do. But they also have special struggles: how to reveal to family members that one is gay or lesbian; dealing with often strong and negative, occasionally violent family reactions to coming out; figuring out how to live life as a gay or lesbian; finding a place to belong once having revealed that one is gay/lesbian; dealing with the animosities and fears of others; and finding models and mentors to take one's hand on the path to maturity. As we discussed in chapter 5, one of the tragic effects of this enormous struggle for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth is thinking about and attempting suicide at a rate that, were it almost any other social

group, would be regarded as a national emergency. A study done by Curtis Proctor and Victor Groze (1994) of 221 gay, lesbian, and bisexual youths found that a startling 89 (40 percent) had attempted suicide, and another 57 (26 percent) had seriously thought about it. Sorrel, age sixteen, has recently come out to her mother, Fay:

I have known I was different for a long time, but I couldn't say exactly how. When I was in sixth grade, I imagined kissing cheerleaders and pretty teachers. But I didn't know any lesbians and I'd heard the word only as a put-down. So even though I was attracted to girls, I refused to label myself lesbian. . . . I found some old books written by psychologists about homosexuality but they didn't help at all. I wanted stories about girls like me that were okay. There was nothing like that. I was happy when k.d. lang announced she was a lesbian. She was talented and pretty, someone I wouldn't mind knowing. . . . I didn't have many friends [in elementary school] unless you count imaginary ones. I preferred boys to girls. Girls were catty and superficial. . . . Junior high was the pits. I felt like I was on a different planet from the other kids. I was the untouchable of my school. . . . Mom doesn't like to hear this. But I thought some about killing myself. I didn't fit anywhere. I didn't dare admit even to myself why I was different. (Pipher, 1994, pp. 110-11)

In part, Sorrel made it through this period because of the unstinting support of her mother. She also survived because she withdrew to a place of her own, created by imagining different worlds and extending comforting fantasies through the gift of her drawing. Early on, she feels different and she is treated differently—not so much because she is lesbian, at that point, but because she doesn't fit in. Part of her struggle was making sense of her budding sexual orientation, reflecting the view that

Sexuality's biological base is always experienced culturally, through a translation. The bare biological facts of sexuality do not speak for themselves; they must be expressed socially. Sex feels individual, or at least private, but those feelings always incorporate the roles, definitions, symbols and meanings of the worlds in which they are constructed. (Ross & Rapp, 1981; cited in Laird, 1993)

Of course, then, the extensive homophobia built into social institutions and individual psyches may come to be part of that social and personal construction making life hellish for a gay or lesbian youth struggling to find acceptance and an agreeable identity. Mary Pipher, who was counseling Sorrel and her mother Fay through this period, helped place Sorrel in a context

more favorable to the continuing formation of a comfortable identity and sexual orientation by suggesting she visit the local Women's Resource Center, a women's bookstore, and a local gay/lesbian youth support group.

Asians and Pacific Islanders are a growing part of immigration to the United States and the population of the United States. There are three general groups among Asian and Pacific Islanders (they are, like Latino/as, a tremendously varied group): Pacific Islanders, mostly Hawaiians, Samoans, and Guamanians; Southeast Asians, largely IndoChinese from Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos and people from Myanmar (Burma) and the Philippines; and East Asians, including Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese. These groups differ from each other, and they differ within their groups as well (Trueba, Cheng & Ima, 1993). No matter how different these groups are, the prevailing cultural stereotype is that Asian-Americans are high achievers and, simply, good citizens—the model minority. So, as with all cultural and ethnic groups, even more tempered generalizations about them should be tentative. Of course, understanding and respecting cultural differences are essential when they are relevant. Belief systems often provide the keenest point of difference between cultures. After the vicious killing of five Cambodian children by a gunman in Stockton, California, in 1989, concerned and anxious school personnel supposed that the greatest fear of the Cambodian community would be the recurrence of such a tragedy. But the real concern of the community was the haunting of the spirits of the dead. In their native religion, it is writ that people cannot resume normal activities and routines until the spirits are comforted and until they settle in their final destination (Huang, 1994).

Maxine Hong Kingston recalls these tensions stemming from her desire, as a second-generation Chinese female, to succeed on American terms and her family's conception of what females can and must do:

MY AMERICAN LIFE HAS BEEN SUCH A DISAPPOINTMENT.

“I got straight A's Mama.”

“Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village.”

I could not figure out what was my village. And it was important that I do something big and fine, or else my parents would sell me when we made our way back to China. In China there were solutions for what to do with little girls who ate up food and threw tantrums. You can't eat straight A's.

When one of my parents or the emigrant villagers said, “Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds,” I would thrash on the floor and scream so hard I couldn't talk.

“What's the matter with her?”

“I don’t know. Bad, I guess. You know how girls are.” “There’s no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls.”

[and later]

I went away to college—Berkeley in the sixties and I studied and I marched to change the world, but I did not turn into a boy. I would have liked to bring myself back as a boy for my parents to welcome with chickens and pigs. . . . If I went to Vietnam, I would not come back; females desert families. It was said, “there is an outward tendency in females,” which meant I was getting straight A’s for my future husband’s family, not my own. I did not plan ever to have a husband. I would show my mother and father and the nosey emigrant villagers that girls have no outward tendency. I stopped getting straight A’s. (Hong Kingston 1993, pp. 319–21)

This generational (and cultural) conflict that so vexed young Maxine Hong stems, in part, from the immigrant remains of a traditional Chinese custom as well as the historic struggles of the Chinese who immigrated here earlier. When women marry and move into their husband’s family, their names disappear from the family tree in the next generation, leaving only the males as permanent members of the family. During the early part of the twentieth century, Chinese women were literally banned from the United States (at one point there was a ratio of twenty-seven men to one woman—the idea was to prevent the Chinese from reproducing). A social worker dealing with young Maxine and her frustration and anger, if she was culturally astute and sensitive, might see here the hand of culture and history rather than just the touch of rebelliousness or psychopathology. She would also see that culture varies across time and place and that Maxine, like all individuals—regardless of culture—will make and remake her life out of cultural tools, contextual processes, chance factors, and opportunities and challenges. Maxine will inevitably be different than her parents, but the tradition of filial piety (loyalty to parents) may ensure the continuance of a strong bond, however contentious the relationship. “Compared with European-Americans, Asian-Americans, in general, tend to live closer to, feel more obligated to, provide for financial aid to, and interact more frequently with their parents” (Ishii-Kuntz, 2000, p. 281).

Gender and Identity

The discussion of identity brings us immediately to an issue first discussed in chapter 2—the nature of the self and the difference between modern and interpretive views of the self. The most common view of identity

formation is that the adolescent—confronted with new role expectations and demands, spurred by bodily changes, spanned between the urge to be independent and experiment and the need for security and safety, driven by the need to maintain some continuity between the inner experience and the external appearance of self, and immersed in the meanings of family and culture—incorporates a variety of role expectations and definitions (from peers, family, social institutions, and culture). Somehow, out of these, the individual weaves a palatable and integrated sense of self. Failure to do this leads to a variety of miseries, confusions, inner and outer revolts, and/or the inability to “take hold.” But in this more modernist view, the seeds of a more interpretive view are present. All humans, even tiny ones, and certainly those who are trying to find a social and existential place, work to make meaning out of the business of living. How individuals interpret their past, imagine their future, and confront their present,

what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience—all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or one-self) about one’s life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned. (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992, p. 1)

In essence, identities are “characters” in emerging self-narratives that reflect and maybe generate a sense of congruity and direction in life. Some forms are broadly shared with the culture, others are more specific to a given community or family, and still others are idiosyncratic to the individual. Most commonly, those intense and broad narratives that are the symbolic material of identity contain all three, but are usually built on larger, even stereotypic cultural narratives.

Kenneth Gergen suggests that there are three rudimentary forms of narrative. The *stability* narrative puts together events and interpretations so that the individual’s life and identity are intact and unchanging: the trajectory of life goes on fairly predictably. The *progressive* narrative requires stories that reflect that life is moving incrementally toward some desirable outcome (this is a narrative form that is embedded in many of our social institutions—success stories of various kinds). *Regressive* narratives recount and foretell of a downward slide in the course of life (Gergen, 1994). These exhaust all the forms but do provide the basis for any number of variants. Gergen maintains that the dominant culture currently has four widely employed narrative forms: the tragic (an unrelenting downward spiral), the comedy/romance (life events become increasingly problematic until some critical moment when happiness and “progress” is restored), the happily-ever-after story (life

just gets better and better), and the heroic story line (a saga of continuing rises and falls; moments of grace, redemption, and triumph; and times of mortification and defeat). Some of these are more probable than others, and though they may not “command identity” always (Gergen, 1994, p. 200), they do invite certain interpretations and actions and discourage others.

Gergen and his wife and colleague Mary (Gergen & Gergen, 1988) examined the way that twenty-nine youths between the ages of 19 and 21 storied their lives, and Mary, in her doctoral dissertation, looked at the narratives of seventy-two people aged 63 to 93 (Gergen, 1980). The telling narrative for the younger group clearly was the comedy/romance narrative: happy in the early years of childhood, swamped with difficulties and troubles during adolescence, and now, out of the wilds of adolescence, moving happily toward a better life. The older individuals depicted a progressive narrative line for childhood through adolescence and adulthood, with the “golden years” being roughly from age 50 to 60. From that point, most recounted a regressive narrative of decline, mostly physical. But, it must be pointed out, for example, these are supported by cultural conventions (again, at least the dominant culture) and are not inevitable. It could be constructed otherwise. Two examples. Adolescents in difficult circumstances—environments where poverty, social disorganization, deterioration of the physical environment, and violence are part of the daily cafeteria of experiences—may tell, in a variety of ways, heroic narratives (as we have seen in previous chapters, some manage to keep the dream alive against the odds). Likewise, an emerging cultural narrative (although it has elements of beating the devil or cheating death) about aging is that of a progressive and sustained maintenance of health and vitality until the very late years of life. (The fact that the richest segment of our population are those 55 and older doesn’t hurt either.)

It is, I am sure, obvious to you that the above discussion does not mirror the wide array of other cultural and ethnic narratives that exist in the generously mingled interactions of daily life. Likewise, these do not necessarily reflect the experiences and narratives of each gender. Let us take a glimpse at some of the differences in experience and orientation that comprise the social and political structure of gender identity. First, two caveats. One, gender and culture notwithstanding, all human beings face certain common challenges and have certain common experiences: the need to formulate a viable sense of meaning about which one can have conviction, for example. Although we must understand differences, especially where they are critical to understanding and engaging those who are unlike us, our empathy and understanding is also strengthened by recognizing our common humanity. Two, identity is not likely so fixed as we think, particularly in a dynamic society with the pedal on the floorboard. Again, identity and other elements

of development are only in the most limited sense a property of the individual and his or her intentions and biological urges. They are, rather, embedded and can be regarded in some way as outcomes of the patterns and crisscrossing of relationships that connect the adolescent to family, friends, media, marketplace, political processes and structures, the economy, and social institutions. Even though our discussion of family and life transitions makes it seem so, the contexts of involvement and participation, whether peer group outing or family reunion, produce different performances, feelings, and plots (Gergen, 1994).

MALE IDENTITY AND EXPERIENCE

Only recently have we begun to take a closer, more sympathetic look at the male experience and male development. One thing seems clear: too many boys have real difficulty in experiencing and expressing emotions. The affective range of their encounters with the world seems restricted. If this is the case, it becomes infinitely more difficult for boys to make connections and devise empathic bonds to others. Whereas students of female experience have legitimately worried about how the effusive minds and hearts of little girls retract with alarming force in adolescence, it is only now that similar alarms are being sounded regarding the “emotional illiteracy” of so many young males (Kindlon & Thompson, 1999, p. 5), and the fact is, as boys mature, they express (and possibly experience) less emotion.

Observers correlate this emotional constriction with a more intense expression of violent and angry behavior in males. We have probed the organism, family, culture, and social institutions for secrets to understanding this phenomenon. In terms of biology, elevated levels of testosterone have been identified as one of the culprits here. Perhaps, under some circumstances, testosterone plays a supporting role, but the fact is that there is precious little research that shows a strong correlation between testosterone levels (which are, by the way, quite unstable—blood levels wax and wane) and violence and aggression. It may even be that levels rise following aggressive behavior. Boys also show aggressive behavior early in life when the levels of testosterone are not much different than those of girls. In societies where aggression is extremely rare there is still ample testosterone to go around. Boys are clearly physically more active than girls, and this high level of activity has a great effect on how others—parents, teachers, and siblings—react to them and how they, in turn, respond. So the evidence seems to suggest that aggression in males is hardly a destiny born in DNA, although it is a factor. More evident is the fact that boys, at an early age, are physically more active than girls (Kindlon & Thompson, 1999; Maccoby, 1998).

More important than testosterone is what Frank Pittman calls the “male

chorus”—that steady hum of voices that tells boys and men to do everything we must to ensure that we are not girls. We depend on (and deeply need) our mothers, but we don't want to appear to be female and thus—sings the chorus—weak. We overdo our masculinity in all manner of crazy and dangerous ways, sometimes stealing stuff, drinking four cans of beer in thirty minutes, picking fights, playing sports, driving recklessly, and making “obligatory but often unsuccessful sexual forays with young women.” These behaviors are often more extreme if we do not have a man, a father, in our lives (Pittman, 1990).

The ethos of toughness, hardness, and cool for males is hard to escape. The media as well as the male chorus exalt toughness and sometimes violence as well as emotional indifference for men. From professional wrestling to pickup truck ads, from beer commercials to sports, from movies to the elevation of bellicose male cultural icons, the message is be tough, don't reveal your emotions, and use alcohol to smooth out the rough spots or to have fun and bond with your buddies (who might turn out to be rivals one day) (Coontz, 1997; Kindlon & Thompson, 1999). So, males are encouraged to be tough and independent and to distance themselves from intimacy and confining empathic bonds, especially with females.

Even in the intimate confines of family, the education and socialization of males often differs from that of girls. They receive much less instruction on the recognizing and expression of emotion, and their physical excesses or emotional stoicism are defined as being “all boy,” although paradoxically their level of physical activity often brings not praise but punishment—especially in school.

When boys express ordinary levels of anger or aggression, or they turn surly and silent, their behavior is accepted as normal. If, however, they express normal levels of fear, anxiety, or sadness—emotions most often seen as feminine—the adults around them typically treat them in ways that suggest that such emotions aren't normal for a boy. (Kindlon & Thompson, 1999, p. 18)

The taunting and teasing, the cruelty of peers, of boys against boys can be devastating as well. To show fear or hurt under these circumstances only makes things worse.

Critical to understanding the formation of male identity is the role of fathers with their sons. Many fathers compete with their sons or see their role as disciplinarian, expert, and operate out of the need to maintain control. Other fathers are just not emotionally available; others are simply gone. In the first instance, when control and implicit or direct competition is the rule, missing are the understanding and flexibility as well as the authoritative (not authoritarian) maintenance of some order and rules that are more likely to

produce a richer relationship with a son. In the second instance, many people have noted that, for example, many boys in trouble with the law, boys who are truant or dropping out in school, and some gang members are from homes where there is no father or where the father is only minimally involved in the day-to-day life of the family (Fremon, 1999; Kindlon & Thompson, 1999). Scott Coltrane, in his study of male participation in housework and the future of gender equity, interviewed men about their fathers. One said, typically:

He wasn't a compulsive worker, so he would be home in the afternoons and on the weekends, and he did play ball with us and he did take us camping. So he was present as a father in ways that were probably supportive of my doing it. It was just as a household domesticator that he didn't get involved. . . . Nor was he emotional. He was pretty private and shy, and as a result a cool and distant person. He never, for instance, got involved in discipline negotiations or in making difficult choices. He would either not make them or make them in isolation, he would not talk about them. So, it was hard for him to share emotionally. For instance, I don't think I ever saw him cry. (1996, p. 122)

Frank Pittman, commenting on the importance of fathers, says that today fathers wield their influence not by their presence but by their absence—physically and emotionally. If fathers have run out on mothers in all the ways that men do that, then boys cannot imagine that they are masculine enough until they run away from women, too. He is alarmed, as others are, that many boys are being raised by mothers alone who, although they may be able to offer them a solid basis for self-esteem, cannot teach their sons how to be men, let alone how to be with women (Pittman, 1990).

Mothers often have a greater emotional and physical connection to their sons than fathers do, but if they haven't had brothers themselves or if they have had bad or few positive experiences with men in their lives, relationships with sons can be difficult. As their sons become teens, the physical and emotional connections can become problematic or difficult as well. For teen-aged boys, the signs of emotion and affection can bring reminders of the dependence of an earlier time, causing discomfort and embarrassment. Nonetheless, boys need the emotional depth, caring, connection, and understanding that mothers may bring.

As a boy moves through the emotional turbulence of adolescence and the culture of cruelty, a mother uses this connection wisely when she helps her son feel loved and respected and when she can expand his understanding—help him see farther, deeper, or in a

new way—so that he can make more informed choices. (Kindlon & Thompson, 1999, p. 133)

Make no mistake about it—no matter how good the relationship with parents, peers become the benchmark or beacon for the behavior of adolescents in a very serious fashion. A small and instructive example but one for which there are a lot of data: children are more likely to smoke if that is a norm of their peer group. Whether their parents smoke seems to have less influence on this likelihood. Genes play a role, too. An adolescent born with a temperament for impulsivity and thrill-seeking is more likely to be drawn to a group that has norms that flout convention or adult norms. One of the ways that peers thumb their nose at convention is to smoke and drink. And, if the individual also has the genetic predisposition for smoking he or she will probably end up addicted to tobacco (Harris, 1998).

All of these factors together make the forging of an identity for young males a difficult proposition. The relative absence of role models who present the range of human expression, coupled with our cultural confusion about maleness, make even more remarkable the flowering of identities that are confident, expressive, and encompass a wide range of human possibility. But once again, the fact is that not all boys succumb to an identity that has sparse emotional terrain or exudes toughness and, as usual, we do not fully understand how. Witness this story told by journalist Leonard Pitts about a “real tough kid” who was confronted unexpectedly with a different way of seeing and expressing himself. Jermaine, raised in stark poverty by a single mom, was “hell on wheels.” Sent to a school for those one step out of the slammer, his reputation preceded him and staff were prepared for the worst. But

One day an art teacher gave him a picture of wildflowers she had cut out from a magazine and asked him to paint it. It turned out that [Jermaine] had talent, and he began painting flowers; lilies, orchids and irises are his favorites.

Teacher Janis Klein-Young began tutoring Jermaine outside of class. She even found exhibitors to show his art and buyers for it . . .

Let us not romanticize the story; Jermaine Barnes is still a work in progress. . . . After all, he’s 18 years old and only in the 10th grade. And he confesses that the temptation to return to the old ways is ever present. . . . Yet . . . there is a lesson here if we only have ears to hear.

I’m struck by the fact that of all the things there are in this world to paint, this tough kid from a watch-your-back part of town

chooses flowers. Graceful, delicate flowers. After all, as Klein-Young [said], “This is a child who doesn’t get to see many flowers in his real life.”

I take it as a reminder that you never know who or what a child has in him—or her—to be. . . . he skirted—and still skirts—the rim of potential denied and promise deferred. Destiny missed like the last bus of the night in a neighborhood where walking is not advised.

The troubling truth is that kids miss that bus all the time. Miss it because of poverty, ignorance, bad choices, lousy circumstances. Miss it because nobody was watching them with eyes that really cared. . . .

We fear what they might do to our lives, fear what they might do to their own. Yet we forget that they fear too.

So we, if we are compassionate and wise, struggle with them, help them in their discovery.

We seek to peel the armor away. It’s an act of faith. (Pitts, 2000)

Jermaine, like all individuals, is not merely the sum of his hormones and his social niche. Possibilities lurk everywhere in the form of an interested adult, an unaccustomed experience, a fresh environment, a beguiling challenge, a different peer group—who knows? And identity is never a done deal: the symbolic capacity for refashioning and refurbishing remains. Social workers know well, too, that social policies can make an enormous difference in the lives of youth and their families by providing heretofore scarce resources and renewed opportunities for participation and involvement in the life of a viable community. We know, too, that many young men and women headed for trouble right themselves. In Al Desetta’s and Sybil Wolin’s wonderful book *The Struggle to be Strong* (2000), the narratives from young men and women facing really difficult times and dilemmas reflect the development of some of the seven traits and capacities that the Wolins (see chapter 3) say may mature during periods, often prolonged, of serious difficulty and crisis. Elliott was awash in alcohol and severe acting out under its influence. Whether it was his girlfriend leaving him or conflict with his mother, his consumption of alcohol became prodigious; his violent outbursts, dangerous. He decided he had to leave home and

It was easier to go anywhere I chose. I stumbled upon a nearby park that faces a river, and there I started to evaluate myself. I chose this park because of its beauty.

The setting was quiet, there weren’t many people there, and in front of me were the river and the sun setting which left a reflection of bright-colored lights on the water. Being there made it

easier for me to look at myself and try to understand what I was doing wrong. . . .

Why was everything around me falling apart? What made me lose everything? Who was causing all this to happen?

The only answer I could come up with was "me." I realized that I had to make changes in my attitude and behavior. There was no one else to blame. (p. 26)

Elliott also, after significant and difficult meditation on his predicament, said that he had to forgive himself for screwing up; that if he didn't, he would continue down this reckless path. He wrote this contemplation when he was 18 and had spent some time in group homes and shelters for homeless teens. Although his transformation may seem miraculous, we must admit that, once again, we know far too little about teens like Elliott and Jermaine.

FEMALE IDENTITY AND EXPERIENCE

In trying to understand the struggle to fashion an identity, that sense of self that is built of pride and has staying power, some feminists, young women themselves, therapists, educators, experts of all kinds, and parents have noted that as girls experience adolescence, something drastic happens to their self-confidence, their sense of who they are, their very competence. It appears that as many girls move into adolescence, the authority of the self that has, to now, been developing becomes a problem. For girls, adolescence brings with it increasing awareness of cultural values, expectations, and imagery, and these, still reflecting male biases, begin to transmute or replace, certainly mute, their own subjective sense of and implicit sanction for their selfhood. The longitudinal study of adolescent girls at the Laurel School for Girls in Cleveland done by Elizabeth Debold, Deborah Tolman, and Lyn Mikel Brown (1996) has many suggestive findings (the authors are at pains to point out that these girls are white and middle class, so how far the findings go is limited to an unknown degree). One finding (Mary Pipher [1994] also comments on this) is stunning. From the seventh to tenth grades, these girls regressed in their intellectual and moral development from knowing through procedures and plumbing their own experiences and senses to relying on authorities (usually male) and convention. Thus, they also begin to doubt the relevance and the authority of their own experience and sense of things (second-grade and fifth-grade girls, for example, are much more confident). Having been the subjects of their own lives, many girls now become the object of others' lives.

Lily, a 17-year-old, living with her Colombian father, who is divorced from her Anglo mother, says this about her "sexuality." When her boyfriend says that she looks "sexy," she feels sexy. She cannot fathom the question

of what makes her feel sexy without seeing herself through the eyes of her boyfriend, a fact that automatically privileges his point of view. "I feel good . . . it's just nice to think that he thinks of me as a way he would think of somebody walking down the street that, you know, he would say, oooh, she's so hot or whatever" (Debold, Tolman & Brown, 1996, p. 109). Here we can see that Lily has accepted the objectification of her sexuality (physically, at any rate) as her own subjectivity and, therefore, she appears more confident about it than, say, a 13-year-old.

Carol Gilligan and Mary Pipher, among many others, have pointed out that what is at risk for adolescent girls at this juncture is the bifurcation of the sense of self into true and false selves:

The coming not to know what one knows, the difficulty in hearing or listening to one's voice, the disconnection between mind and body, thoughts and feelings, and the use of one's voice to cover rather than convey one's inner world, so that relationships no longer provide channels for exploring the connections between one's inner life and the world of others. (Gilligan, 1993, p. xxi)

Simone de Beauvoir wrote that at this stage, "Girls stop being and start seeming" (cited in Pipher, 1994, p. 104). Many young women are aware that they are losing something here, that they are compromising the possibilities of what they might be. Just like adolescent males sometimes cower under the code of toughness and cool and their potential selves recede, so adolescent females struggle against something they can barely identify but that seems absolutely critical. In her novel *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan describes Lindo Jong's daughter's descent from a chess prodigy at age 10 to an uncertain and joyless chess player at age 14. The seeming reason for the change is a conflict Waverly (the daughter) had with her mother over her mother's "taking credit" for her chess accomplishments that led to an angry outburst in public. This led to months of conflict and, for Waverly, a growing erosion of the certitude about her expertise. I take it also as a story, a metaphorical account, about the fate of female identity (with an obvious cultural overlay) in adolescence.

I was horrified [losing chess tournaments that she could have, should have won, and her mother's seeming satisfaction over this state of affairs]. I spent many hours every day going over in my mind what I had lost. I knew it was not just the last tournament. I examined every move, every piece, every square. And I could no longer see the secret weapons of each piece, the magic within the intersection of each square. I could see only my mistakes, my weaknesses. It was as though I had lost my magic armor. . . .

Over the next few weeks and later months and years, I continued to play, but never with that same feeling of supreme confidence.

I fought hard, with fear and desperation. When I won, I was grateful, relieved. And when I lost, I was filled with a growing dread, and then terror that I was no longer a prodigy, that I had lost the gift and had turned into someone quite ordinary. (1989, p. 190)

The story of young women's identity and gender is, again, and with cultural variations of all kinds, the story of the inundation of social and cultural institutions, imagery, and intent on the shoreline of self-understanding and reflection; the story of turning a gift into something quite ordinary or even alien.

Identities for both males and females have physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and cultural components. For young girls, the physical self often breeds dismay and disgust. Battered by images (as we discussed before, images usually created by males) that bear little relationship to the reality of the changes wrought by pubescence and that create an impossible standard (and very probably an unhealthy one) to achieve, young girls allow their appearance to swarm their sense of who they are. Diets that would challenge a person on a fast, ambivalence about eating and food, clothes that enhance or hide features, and wild swings in appearance all reflect the now institutionalized assault on the reality of physical being for women. Young and older adolescents know that they are often judged by others—peers, boys, even parents and other adults, sometimes—on the basis of their appearance. And how one appears in the eyes of others—especially credible or powerful peers—is a recurring leitmotiv in their lives. So, for girls who match the image (of the dominant culture; not all cultures share the image), relegation to the status of sexy or sex object is fate; for the majority who don't, distress and disgust (often in the form of eating disorders) is too often the rule (ironically, one of the roots of the word disgust is *gustus*, which refers to taste, to eating) (Coontz, 1997; Pipher, 1994).

Emotionally and socially, the blossoming selves of young girls become adolescents are like reeds of prairie grass in the winds of the plains, waving wildly and changing directions with the shifts in the wind. One hopes that like prairie grass they are rooted, but it may take some time to find that out. Anne Lamott talks about her family when she was an adolescent, a family she said based on the operating principle that psychologists use to drive rats crazy—inconsistency and/or reversal of response and reward. She admits that her life and self operated on the very same principle. She was a highly ranked tennis player, doing well in school, but never sure when she would receive approbation or criticism. Bringing home a B-plus, her parents could only ask, "How much harder would it have been to get an A-minus?"

If I could do just a little bit better, I would finally have the things I longed for—a sense of OKness and connection and meaning and peace of mind, a sense that my family was OK and that we were

good people. I would finally know that we were safe, and that my daddy wasn't going to leave us, and that I would be loved some day.

Drugs helped. More than anything else, they gave me the feeling that I was fine and life was good and something sacred shimmered at its edges.

Being sexual with boys helped, too. Being sexual with anybody helped—there was a girl named Deborah . . . a full-tilt hippie . . . who looked like Liv Ullman. She used to hold a Life-saver between her teeth and have me close mine around the half that was showing so that our lips, our open mouths met as I'd take the Lifesaver into my own mouth, and I would feel my insides grow hard and quivery. Being loved by my teachers helped, but then report cards would come out, and once again I would think I had fallen short.

I was thirty-five when I discovered that a B-plus was a really good grade. (1999, p. 20)

Thirty-five. For many, the discontinuities within and the disconnections without don't resolve or absolve themselves for a long time. But let us not make the mistake so often made: always assuming that struggle and fecklessness, risk-taking and experimentation, ambivalence, challenge and confrontation, and high passion are signs of pathology and disorder. As others have said, sometimes these are dangerous and destructive, obsessive and insistent, but often they are what anyone displays when faced with uncertainty and possibility. *Risk-taking is the major tool that adolescents use to shape their identities* (Ponton, 1997). The decisions that they make about sex and sexuality, drugs, peers, lifestyles, careers, and education can be eventually growth promoting or can lead them down a road from which the return trip is difficult.

We talked earlier about the intellectual self of young women and the propensity to not only downplay cognitive and cerebral abilities but to do it so thoroughly that one's performance actually decreases. This is not an effect of a changing pubescent body. It is an effect of context, stereotype (how young women are supposed or thought to be), and peers. Claude Steele believes and has evidence to demonstrate that if you heighten individuals' awareness of a social category to which they belong that has group-enforced stereotypes, you can change performance on certain tasks. Increase a person's awareness that they are female and they will do more poorly on tests of mathematical ability. The stereotype, held by the larger society and enforced by peer group norms, is that girls are not and should not be good at math (and science)—those are the provinces of male competence³ (1997).

3. He also found that simply having an African-American fill out the race ques-

In spite of the threats to the formation of a viable self, most teenaged girls, even if they fall into dangerous and destructive behaviors and have to be “rescued,” can sometimes find within themselves, within their culture, within their families, and within their communities sources of strength and resolve and the innate wisdom of who one truly is. The following story told by Ian Frazier in his remarkable book *On the Rez* (2000), which is about the lives of the Oglala Sioux (the Sioux tribe as a whole called themselves Lakota, meaning “allies”) on the Pine Ridge reservation, is about a young woman, SuAnne Big Crow, a remarkable athlete, who is from a family with a very strong mother who was adamantly against drugs and alcohol and for activities that strengthened the body and spirit of her children. SuAnne was a gifted basketball player, and basketball for young men and women in South Dakota and Montana, especially in winter, was and is a major happening. When Native American teams (Frazier uses the word Indian as do many inhabitants of the reservation) play against non-Native teams at those teams’ home court, reaction is usually polite, but sometimes gets out of hand. In this long story, SuAnne’s team is playing at Lead, South Dakota, a place where they have been harassed on a regular basis (there is a history here that fuels this intensity). This is a story of one of “the coolest and bravest deeds” Frazier *ever* heard of (p. 209):

In the fall of 1988, The Pine Ridge Lady Thorpes went to Lead to play a basketball game. SuAnne was a full member of the team by then. She was a freshman, fourteen years old. Getting ready in the locker room, the Pine Ridge girls could hear the din from the fans. They were yelling fake-Indian war cries, a “woo-woo-woo” sound. The usual plan for the pre-game warm-up was for the visiting team to run onto the court in a line, take a lap or two around the floor, shoot some baskets, and then go to their bench at courtside. After that, the home team would come out and do the same, and then the game would begin. Usually the Thorpes lined up for their entry more or less according to height, which meant that senior Doni De Cory, one of the tallest, went first. As the team walked into the hallway leading from the locker room, the heckling got louder. The Lead fans were yelling epithets like “squaw” and “gut-eater.” Some were waving food stamps, a reference to the reservation’s receiving federal aid. Others yelled, “Where’s the cheese?”—the joke being that if Indians were lining up, it must be to get commodity cheese. The Lead high school band joined in, with fake-Indian drumming

tion before a test of intellectual ability actually lowers the score of a child or adolescent who is, by all other accounts, bright.

and a fake-Indian tune. Doni De Cory looked out the door and told her teammates, "I can't handle this." SuAnne quickly offered to go first in her place. She was so eager that Doni became suspicious. "Don't embarrass us," Doni told her. SuAnne said, "I won't. I won't embarrass you." Doni gave her the ball, and SuAnne stood first in line.

She came running onto the court dribbling the basketball, with her teammates running behind. On the court, the noise was deafeningly loud. SuAnne went right down the middle; but instead of running a full lap, she suddenly stopped when she got to center court. Her teammates were taken by surprise, and some bumped into one another. Coach Zimiga at the rear of the line did not know why they had stopped. SuAnne turned to Doni De Cory and tossed her the ball. Then she stepped into the jump-ball circle at center court, in front of the Lead fans. She unbuttoned her warm-up jacket, took it off, draped it over her shoulders, and began to do the Lakota shawl dance. SuAnne knew all the traditional dances—she had competed in many powwows as a little girl—and the dance she chose is a young woman's dance, graceful and modest and show-offy all at the same time. "I couldn't believe it—she was powwowin', like 'get down!'" Doni De Cory recalled. "And then she started to sing." SuAnne began to sing in Lakota, swaying back and forth in the jump-ball circle, doing the shawl dance, using her warm-up jacket for a shawl. The crowd went completely silent. "All that stuff the Lead fans were yelling—it was like she *reversed* it somehow," a teammate said. In the sudden quiet, all you could hear was her Lakota song. SuAnne stood up, dropped her jacket, took the ball . . . and ran a lap around the court dribbling expertly and fast. The fans began to cheer and applaud. She sprinted to the basket, went up in the air, and laid the ball through the hoop, with the fans cheering loudly now. (pp. 208–9)

This story has many dimensions, not the least of which is the courage and creativity, the seizing of an improbable moment by a 14-year-old Oglala Sioux girl. This, too, is a kind of serious risk-taking, but one which had profound and positive consequences for all involved. But even more than this, as Frazier points out, this was a moment in which a young girl leapt toward the idea of what America should be. "America is a leap of the imagination. From its beginning, people had only a persistent idea of what a good country should be. The idea involved freedom, equality, justice, and the pursuit of happiness" (p. 213). But the idea and the ideal do not live unless they are acted upon. SuAnne's was a bold act that vivified the dream,

the ideal in the moment. We have seen—in Kozol’s stories of children and teens in wretched living conditions, in McBride’s story of his family, and in thousands of daily occurrences that are rarely recorded—the acts of faith that give body to the dream, the hope, and the possibility. Unfortunately, acts of faith do not forestall tragedy. SuAnne died in an automobile accident her senior year driving with her mother to Huron for the Miss Basketball awards banquet.

Dissenting Voices. There are voices who decry the depictions of adolescence above, especially for girls. The work of Carol Gilligan is undergoing a serious reevaluation by scholars—male and female, feminist and not. The background of this reevaluation is the data that have been around for the past two decades that most adolescents are doing reasonably well. The data confirm what Daniel Offer and associates (Offer & Schonert-Reichl, 1992) have maintained, on the basis of their data, that about 80 percent of adolescents are “normal and well-adjusted.” More pointed is some of the new research that suggests, “Contrary to the commonly held view that boys are at an advantage over girls in school, girls appear to have the advantage over boys in terms of their future plans, teachers’ expectations, everyday experiences and interactions in the classroom.” This is one of the conclusions of the MetLife study of 1,306 students and 1,035 teachers in grades seven to twelve during a three-month period in 1977 (cited in Sommers, 2000). The Search Institute in Minneapolis, since 1989, has been conducting studies of developmental assets (individual, family, and community) in communities around the country. By 1995, some 254,000 public school students in 460 communities had been assessed (the students, families, and the communities) for the existence of thirty developmental assets. Since 1995, ten more assets have been developed and other communities studied. One of the variables studied was gender. In a word, girls were doing better than boys in all but one of the thirty (or forty) categories in the average number of assets possessed (Benson, 1997). In the future, more girls than boys will be going to college, and boys will continue to dominate such statistical categories as drop-outs, suspensions, and classroom failure in high school. It does seem relatively clear that boys who have no males in their lives may have a more difficult time than those who have a male who is steadfast, caring, and an active role model (Kindlon & Thompson, 1999; Shulman & Seiffge-Krenke, 1997; Sommers, 2000).

This debate is also a debate between more conservative and more liberal authors and researchers. Just as with the case of the family, how one constructs and construes research and inquiry and findings in this area is, in part, a matter of values and beliefs. But the evidence cited above is well worth thinking about.

A Note on Culture and Identity. Culture(s) situates itself inside our heads in a variety of ways. Identity is always, to an uncertain degree, a cultural product. Cultures provide different scenarios and plotlines for the inscribing of identity. So the experience of, even the existence of, adolescence is a different matter depending on the view from the particular sociocultural (social institutions and culture together) scaffolding. All well and good, but as we have discovered, most people live in the borderlands between cultures and classes. “Continuous cultural transformations, new cultural blends, and cultural inconsistencies” (Falicov, 1998, p. 9) make any generalizations about a particular culture risky and, at best, tentative. The interactions between social class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, urban-rural orientation, family structure, and culture make the easy generalizations of social science suspect.

Consider Latino families. The three most prominent Latino groups in this country are Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans (there are many groups from other Central American countries and South America as well, but not as numerous). Adolescence in these families travels a varied course. But some observers note some recurring, though certainly not universal, tensions. *Entremundos*—between two worlds—is a word used to describe what for many Latino/a adolescents is a tension between the world of their parents and the world of their peers (Falicov, 1998). More generally, the tension is between the traditional culture and the dominant culture. Add to this uncertainty the fact of discrimination and racism, and this makes the formation of a viable and valued identity and its attendant self-esteem extremely trying. Having a respected and solid ethnic identity is important—knowing who one is and valuing that fact. But the situation for many Latino/a adolescents is much more tenuous. The battle between the values of immigrant parents and their teenaged children occurs on many fronts: freedom and autonomy; respect and piety toward parents—no matter what; sexuality; peer standards of behavior; gender; even the very meaning of adolescence itself. In many Latino communities, the idea for adolescents is to continue the contribution to the economic well-being of the family and to regard the parents as respected authorities no matter how old you are. For many Latino/a teens, the ideal is the dominant version of adolescence—the struggle for freedom and autonomy and the symbolic and real drift away from the family (Falicov, 1998). In his literate treatment of the politics of transformation for Latino families, David Abalos describes four ways of life: *emanation*, being totally immersed in traditional culture; the self-contained; *incoherence*, the more or less deliberate movement away from tradition and the experience of many discontinuities (e.g., a young Latina moving away from her parents house into an apartment with another young woman shatters tradition and creates incoherence in her relationship with her family); *deformation*, crudely, the turn to violence and intimidation, maybe addiction,

to reestablish emanation and erase the pain of incoherence; the situation is aggravated enormously by the racism and exploitation of the larger society; and *transformation*, the core drama to which all are called—discovering in the experience of one's life and through the rejection of the stagnant and incoherent, the transformation of one's personal, political, sacred, and historical being (Abalos, 1993, pp. 23–42).

If Luis and others are to carry forth the best in their cultures, it will not be choosing one value because it is Latino and another value from European-American society because it is needed to perform well in this system. We are not after a mixture here but the weaving of archetypal dramas that will allow us to live them in a fundamentally new and better way within the consciousness of transformation. This means not hanging onto fragments of the dying way of life of emanation, such as uncritical acceptance of the Latino family so that we have a safe haven to which to return from the daily battles in the service of incoherence. (p. 69)

This clearly would be regarded as a radical point of view, but it does show what is at stake and very relevant to the situation of many Latino/a adolescents.

Sexuality

We tend to think of sexuality as synonymous with sexual behavior, and we also think of sexuality in terms of gender and sexual orientation—heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual. It is probably the case that sexuality is an emergent set of preferences, feelings, urges, capacities, and interests. Anyone's sexuality, as discussed in chapter 9, is a reflection of a conglomerate of factors that are eternally dynamic: the nature of your body; cultural and social definitions and expectations around sex, sexuality, gender, and sexual orientation; the system of meaning that defines your place in the scheme of things (from family to society to the "cosmos"); your identity—who you think you are and who you hope to become; social niche and context; peer relationships; parental instructions; the marketplace and media; your actual sexual behavior. So at any one time, your sexuality and sexual behavior may take on different shadings and directions depending on urges and desires, opportunities and constraints, biological development, and the social contexts in which you live.

Coming to being sexual heightens in adolescence, of course. The first changes, and they vary enormously between individuals in terms of their arrival, are called puberty (usually beginning in early adolescence or late

childhood), and they involve the eruption of hormonal activity and the increased and intense interaction between the hypothalamus and pituitary (recall from chapter 4 that these two are behind the regulation and stimulation of a number of developmental and cyclical processes such as the control of physical growth and the management of the circadian (daily) rhythm of activity/rest; appetite/satiation, etc.). For many children becoming adolescents, early or late arrival of puberty can be a trying time. To be physically more developed than your peers or to lag behind them in the development of primary and secondary sexual characteristics can be, in the first instance, stressful because of demands and expectations that one may not be prepared to deal with, and in the second, embarrassing, because one still looks like a child while peers' voices are getting deeper, or breasts are developing, or pubic hair is sprouting. The appearance of menarche (the onset of menstruation) and spermarche (the ability to ejaculate mobile sperm) is not just biological. It is affected by sociocultural factors, too—including nutrition, the presence of hormones in foodstuffs, stress, and environmental toxins. In our society, the age menarche occurs, for instance, continues to go down. Girls, on the average, are menstruating at earlier ages; 11 years old is not uncommon, and, although not common, 9-year-olds have been documented to have had menarche.

The changes in primary sexual characteristics for boys include the growth of the penis and scrotum (the penis may double or triple in size). For girls, they include the growth of the uterus, the ovaries, the vagina, the clitoris, and the labia. Changes in secondary sex characteristics in some ways are more fascinating and are more cause for concern, even obsession. In boys and girls, the growth of body hair, the increase in activity in the sweat glands, enlarged breasts and hips (any or all of these may precede menarche and/or spermarche), body growth, and because of the increase in glandular activity, a disconcerting propensity for some to acne and increased body odor. Boys experience a deepening of the timbre of the voice; girls an increase in subcutaneous fat. Boys see their shoulders widen and the hips narrow, for girls, the opposite is the case (de Anda, 1995; Schlegel & Barry, 1991). In most cases, in this culture, these changes seem to be more stressful for young women than men. And these changes usually precede primary sexual changes. As you can surmise, some of the physical changes for adolescent females are translated, thanks to widely available cultural imagery, into the perception of being fat (Pipher, 1994).

But sexuality involves more than these changes. It is the beginning of the exploration of what it means to be a sexual being (where you are in society and the influence of peers, family, and larger social forces make a difference here), how you will behave in sexual terms, decisions you will make about sexual activity, where your fantasies will take you, how your

sexuality and gender interact within your still evolving identity, how your body image unfolds, and, most importantly, how you will discover the part of the soul that is erotic (meaning the capacity for genuine passion and desire). Experimentation is the rule here. Estimates vary, but the majority of teenagers will have engaged in some kind and to some degree of sexual activity by the time they hit middle adolescence (roughly, age 14). But whether these developments lead to the development of a full and budding sexuality is always uncertain, for reasons discussed next.

These developments take place within a broader culture that is ambivalent or confused about sex, and the mixed messages hit adolescents hard: they hear messages ranging from the importance of abstinence to the idea that informed sexual experimentation and experience are important for the fullest development of sexuality. Other messages are more subtle: be a stud or be sexually fetching but don't act on those messages. Sex is the most important element of relationship and identity. Sex is recreation. Sex is the ultimate expression of a loving and committed relationship. Sex is for guys. And so on. One message, not often talked about, but real nonetheless, is the confusion between sex and violence, especially portrayed in the media. Much of what passes for sexual behavior on the screen and in books is laced with violent acts and violent talk. People can get hurt—the action is fast and furious and, too often, the denouement is violence.

One reason sex and violence dominate our current stories is that these passions are not easily integrated into daily life. Sex is not fully woven into our regular life structures; instead it appears in unwanted pregnancy, in affairs that tear apart marriages and careers, and as an obsessive presence in films and other popular media. A powerful erotic story may tell us about romantic passion and sexual desire without itself being confused about the role of sex in life. (Moore, 1996, p. 246)

Fearful as adults, perhaps overprotective or misguided, we may, in a variety of ways, rob our adolescents of the chance to become fully sexual and passionate in a way that is mindful of the preciousness of the other.

For far too many girls, however, the cultural confusion about sex and violence isn't only portrayed in the movies or on television or in popular music; it is a tragic reality. Coming of age sexually (or even before coming of age) is to become the target of men and boys. Sexual harassment—verbal, unwanted touching, put-downs, incest, and rape—are the terrible lot of some girls, more than we think. The 1992 report of the National Victim Center, *Rape in America*, reported that 1.3 women were raped every minute in the United States and that one of eight adult women were victims of forcible rape at some time in their lives. But the even starker tragedy here

is that this is a crime of violence perpetrated on the young. Twenty-nine percent of rape victims were under 11, 32 percent were between 11 and 17, and 22 percent were between 18 and 24. Each of these victims is at higher risk for drug and alcohol abuse than those who have not been raped.

For boys, other concerns erupt. Frank Pittman, in his unswerving style, if I may paraphrase, paints this picture:

Puberty is disorienting, not as dramatic as girls, and usually slower to arrive. Learning to ride the willful creature the penis down. It does have a life of its own, unless we are anxious and then it disappears from view. Hair overtakes us, we start to smell like goats, and muscles, even some of the right ones, start to bulge (or not enough) and girls might mistake us for a man but we are man manqués. Parents and others don't know what is going on inside his head or his pants, and they don't treat him like a man, he doesn't know how to talk about it, and the struggle with the penis continues. As puberty turns into full-blown adolescence a boy confronts many masculinity tests. Most of us fail many of them, but we usually find some saving test—like getting drunk or saying outrageous things to members of the establishment, or by making obligatory and often unsuccessful sexual forays with young women. (See Pittman, 1990, for a rich and evocative treatment of the subject)

Two things you might notice about this discussion of sex so far. First, it is unrelenting in its disapproving and pessimistic tone. Second, it is focused on behaviors that are seen as matters for concern; while of legitimate concern as matters of public health and the safety of children and adolescents, this concern sometimes obscures the more ordinary courses of the blossoming of sexuality. Carol-Anne O'Brien suggests that creating a discourse on adolescent sexuality that exclusively focuses on problems and paints the picture of adolescent sexuality as dangerous and deviant, separates from view, for example, female sexual agency (we don't hear much about that) as opposed to female sexual victimization. In her analysis of the social work literature on adolescent sexuality, using the approach of Michel Foucault, she writes that

None of these authors includes analyses of the pleasures young people seek in exploring sex, their lack of private spaces in which to pursue consensual sex with partners of different genders, and their need for particular types of information about sex and HIV prevention. . . . Thus in social work literature and practice concerning youth sexuality, subjugated knowledge⁴ is the diverse

4. Subjugated knowledge is a term Foucault used to describe all the sets of

sexual knowledge of young people and the knowledge developed by marginalized communities such as girls who have been sexually abused or lesbians and gay men. (1999, p. 139)

So even if we do acknowledge the realities of sexual abuse, we do not often acknowledge the experiences of those who are abused. And we certainly shrink from acknowledging the ordinary, growing eroticism and passion of adolescents. Susan Ito, in her short story "Whatever Happened to Harry?" depicts the darker side of coming of age sexually that transcends, in many ways, culture. Diane remembers how Harry assaulted her sensibilities when she was barely an adolescent, and what she would want to tell him now.

You were twenty-two years old when I met you, Harry Yoshida, almost too old for the Japanese American Community Youth. I was eager to leave the children's program to join that hip group of teenagers. I had just had the braces taken off my teeth, and I traded my black-rimmed glasses for contact lenses. That summer, I felt myself brimming with possibility. I had a low cut peasant blouse to go over my new breasts. I had hot pants, nothing more than denim panties. I hung on the edges of Youth, tantalized by the jokes, the laughing, the talk that was a maze of unopened secrets. [later, Harry invites Diane to a museum and, for a moment, she is smitten with his knowledge and his sensitivity. But on the way home, things, as they often do, change. As they drove back, Harry turned on the radio and it played] . . . *mah beautiful woh-man*, and you grinned, looking over at me. "Just like you. Diane." You touched my cheek and said those words, told me I was beautiful.

I nearly fainted. Here it was, the romantic life, right at my doorstep. I tilted my head back slightly, the way I knew women did and felt your heat moving toward me. *A kiss*, I thought, *I'm going to have my first kiss*. But your mouth, so gentle with flattery, was nearly violent on contact, huge and wet and full of teeth. Your tongue was a crazy snake, slithering over the roof of my mouth. I made myself respond with enthusiasm, even though I wanted to gag, to push you away. I was desperate for you not to figure out what a child I was, a baby without a clue. You were smooth, professional, the way you unhooked my bra with one hand and slipped off my shirt. . . .

knowledges that have been quieted and disqualified in explaining or clarifying anything. These are subjugated by official, institutionalized, and authorized knowledge higher up on some imaginary ladder of truth.

You pushed your face into the side of my neck, moaning and saying, "God, Diane, you're fantastic." I believed you, giddy and terrified. You clawed at my pants, the zipper opening with a tearing sound. Your fingers, with jagged unclipped nails, kneaded the flesh through my cotton panties.

You gasped into my neck, "Does it feel good? Yes? Do you like this?" Your eyes were closed, and it seemed you could barely breathe.

It didn't feel good, Harry, not in the remotest sense. It was red pain. But it appeared that this grinding thing you were doing, this mashing down on my sex, was supposed to feel good. I whispered. "Yes." (1993, pp. 267-68)

In sexual encounters, sexual fantasies, and struggles over one's sexual nature, society and culture, biology, family, peers, the past, and identity all come calling. A lot is at stake, from self-respect to safety to health. With respect to the latter, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are always a risk. Adolescents more than other groups tend to engage in unprotected sex and are somewhat more likely to experiment with sexual partners and practices and be encouraged by partners about whom they know little. This is probably more true of males, whether gay or heterosexual. Sexually transmitted diseases such as human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS), chlamydia, genital herpes, genital warts, gonorrhea, and syphilis are the most common; chlamydia is the most prevalent. Some 13 million men and women have STDs, and two-thirds of those with disease are younger than 25. One reason for the rise in the incidence and prevalence of STDs is that people are becoming sexually active earlier, marrying later, and having more sexual partners. And in spite of widespread educational programs, many teenagers still have sexual relations without using contraceptive devices. AIDS/HIV is the only STD mentioned above that cannot ultimately be treated effectively, although newer drug "cocktails" are prolonging the asymptomatic life of those who are infected. However, HIV/AIDS is still a killer. In some inner cities, it is one of the leading causes of death in 15- to 25-year-old males. Many treatments exist for the other STDs, but because they are often asymptomatic early on, especially in females, they may not be treated until the infection has spread. STDs in females are usually more severe and more frequent. They can also be associated with cervical cancer, especially human papillomavirus infection, which leads to genital warts (NIH/NIAID, 1996). It also seems clear that "risk" factors clump together for many teens. Drug and alcohol use often lead to unprotected sex, for example. And under this set of circumstances an

unwanted pregnancy is considerably more likely (NIH/NIAID, 1996; Ponton, 1997).

But culture, again, makes a difference, not only in the incidence of the risk but how it is understood and handled. Latino/a adolescents are less likely to use contraceptives when they engage in sex, they are less likely to be sexually active before they marry (especially Mexican teens), but they may be more likely to get pregnant and to give birth. Cuban and Mexican teens are more prone to use pregnancy as a step toward marriage or at least long-term relationships in which obligations to the child are strongly felt (Falicov, 1998). Celia Jaes Falicov (1998) reports the story of Angel F. (it appeared in a *New York Times* article in 1995) who was a hardened gang member but devoted and caring toward his newborn baby boy and his girlfriend. Angel said that he planned to leave the gang eventually and to take care of his "new *familia*" (p. 231).

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Being a gay, lesbian, or bisexual adolescent poses special problems and opportunities. Obviously, they face many of the same challenges with respect to identity formation, becoming a more complete self, finding a place in the social scheme, and making a life. Some authors, such as Vivienne Cass (1984) early on and Anthony D'Augelli (1994) some twenty years later, have supposed that there are stages to the development of a gay or lesbian identity. For D'Augelli, the first stage is coming out or exiting a heterosexual identity. That happens the very first time one tells another of his or her sexual orientation. Often, the most difficult place to disclose is within one's own family. Even when families are more composed when confronted with the revelations about the sexual orientation of their child, there is often a tremendous anxiety about the child's safety in relation to the hostility of the larger society and the perceived predatory, highly sexualized nature of the gay, lesbian, or bisexual community (Johnson & Colucci, 1999). Developing a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity is the next step; that is, putting together those images, feelings, and self-definitions that constitute the new but often only internal identity. These are tenuous and revisable, especially as the individual begins to have contact with others of the same orientation. The identity then becomes validated and social when others are aware of the status of the individual and provide confirmation, acceptance, and support. Over time, families begin to manage their own means of coping, and for many individuals, becoming a gay, lesbian, or bisexual offspring of the family is a major development. The next challenge is to develop intimate relationships. The relative absence of cultural and social narratives and

stories makes the formation of a same sex intimate relationship problematic. But eventually, a distinctive, particular, and adaptive understanding and definition of who we are together may emerge. The final stage for some is to engage the larger lesbian, gay, and/or bisexual community, to become more politically active, and to realize that sexual orientation requires a recognition of the history of oppression and a commitment to the health, safety, and liberation of one's comrades as fully fledged citizens. As with all stage theories, there is doubt in some quarters about the applicability of D'Augelli's theory across cultures, classes, and time, and further questions exist about its linearity when compared to the recursive, emergent, transcendent nature of most human experience. A study of how coming out to families is affected by culture, by Joseph Merighi and Marty Grimes, is suggestive here. Interviews with eighteen African-American, twenty-five European-American, eight Mexican-American, and six Vietnamese-American males with a mean age of about 21 years focused on how they came out to their families and how their families responded. The following excerpt tells how an African-American grandmother demonstrated her support for her 20-year-old grandson's welfare and happiness.

My grandmother's reaction was like at first she was unhappy with it. It's like she's disappointed or something because she wants me to give her grandkids and have a girlfriend and just live the normal, beautiful, like run off to college and be rich and famous or whatever life but she dealt with it pretty well. She found out by reading my journal. She was all, "Oh, there's something you need to tell me." I was like "What are you talking about?" and then my mom told me she read my journal and I was livid. I was so mad that she was getting into my life. . . . Now every time I talk to her it's all, "Are you using condoms?" and I'm all, "I'm not having sex." "Well just make sure, even if you're getting oral sex." and I'm all, "Grandma!" Like every time I'm over, "Are you having sex yet?" I'm like, "I'm not talking about this. You're my Grandma." She's a trip. She's funny. She's cool with it now. (2000, p. 38)

Interestingly enough, as you might have suspected considering our discussion of cultural borderlands and the weaving of the dominant culture through the strands of the multiple cultures that make us up, the researchers found more similarities than differences between these groups of young men (it was not recorded, but I have the sense that they were mostly middle class young men, which may account for some of the similarities). In all cases, the need to preserve the family bond was a major consideration in initially avoiding and then eventually coming out to the family.

Risks and Resiliency: The Family and Community in the Life of Adolescents

Adolescents bring much to the table in the lives of their families and in the life of the community, too. We do (I have in this chapter somewhat) tend to focus on the problems and tensions in these relationships. In this section, we will examine some concerns and then look at what adolescents can offer a community and how they enrich families.

VIOLENCE AND THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Jim Myers, a journalist who lives in Washington, D.C., about a mile from the Capitol, was trying to determine just how many people had been shot and killed in his neighborhood in the 1990s. After asking neighbors and consulting his own memories, he figured maybe thirty, but it felt like fifty. Police records indicated that since 1992 thirty people had been killed, an average of about four homicides a year in this small neighborhood. Eighteen of those murders are still unsolved. Witnesses to these crimes hesitate to call 911 because they don't want people to see a police cruiser pulling up to the house, identifying and thus "marking" the caller. Each death, however, is a singular individual and collective tragedy. People grieve and moan and shout and wonder what they must do and when, Oh Lord, will the killing stop? Many of the shootings have taken place around Payne Elementary School—many of the victims and the shooters have been Payne alumni. Myers points out that Payne is not a bad school; test scores, he says, are among the best in the city. Murder came once to Columbine High, he says, but it is a regular feature of life at Payne. But Myers wants to explain this in a way that doesn't belittle or transmogrify the reality. His explanation is worth hearing. The young men in this neighborhood, he says, cannot be so different from young men in other neighborhoods; many have no clue about what they want to do or can do with their lives. Not so unlike other neighborhoods. But in this neighborhood, like too many in this country, there is

sweeping aimlessness on our streets. We have men all over the place who are doing nothing productive. Some are angry and hopeless about the future. Some are at war with the way things are; their enemy is the system, order, the police, or people who've made something of their lives.

Look down our streets day or night. One mile from the Capitol, at the moment of the highest employment in decades, you'll find block after block of idle men. They've been marginalized, ostracized, abandoned. They are drained of hope and initiative. Perhaps

with reason. America fears them—doesn't want them around. So they operate in the alleys and the shadows.

Urban warfare readily wins their hearts, because it is easy employment and seems exciting. Alternatives such as jobs are way off in Maryland or Virginia. The war zone is close by. The recruiting office is on the nearest corner. So are promises of camaraderie and adventure, surely a more thrilling option than stocking shelves at K-Mart. Warring—shooting and being shot at—is also rich in irony; it makes you feel alive, especially if you are young and foolhardy enough to think you are immortal. And this war has romance: you can listen to veterans talk about the battles they've seen, about heroic deeds, about warriors who saved their buddies from certain death. It's a wonder they haven't started giving each other medals. . . .

Sometimes it is said that none of this living for the moment makes any sense. The problem is that it makes too much sense. Our children doing what comes naturally; it makes at least as much sense as World War I. (2000, p. 80)

This lengthy quote embodies some ideas that are worth noting. Violence is not usually the sole province of the sociopath or insane. It is deeply related to economic distress, political powerlessness, social pressures, and the anomalous status of people. It is also related to gender. Although there are females who kill or engage in other forms of violence, males far outnumber them. It is also universal—in a sense. Thanks maybe to genes and to the role they are required to play in the scheme of things as “sacrificial lambs,” boys over the world are engaged in killing and in doing the dirty work of their leaders (usually men).

In other countries and throughout time, teenage boys are acolytes and castrates, slaves and soldiers. They carry automatic weapons instead of backpacks; they dig all day in the fields and underground for diamonds and coal; they kill large animals and get killed in turn; they are sent out alone into the forest and the desert to survive and find a name and learn their purpose in life . . . They don't go to school. Many don't grow up. (Tisdale, 1999, p. 27)

Sally Tisdale is contrasting the lives of young men around much of the world with those in this country. The situation of many young men in this country, like those described by Jim Myers, is eerily similar.

WHEN THE STREETS ARE MEAN

Of all the problems that plague poor inner city neighborhoods and communities, as the plaint from Jim Myers suggests, it is violence that rips the

community apart. Life chances and circumstances clearly feed into this—unemployment, underemployment, the lack of a living wage, racism, rampant availability of drugs, and the sting of a lack of hope. According to Elijah Anderson, the pervasive despair has led to the rise of two cultures. On the one hand are those many families who, against huge odds, are labeled by the residents of these neighborhoods as “decent” families. They accept the values of the larger culture, work hard to protect their children, and guide them in their social, moral, and educational values. They tend to be strict and value hard work, sacrifice, and education; they do have hope for the future of their children. They tend to be working poor, somewhat better off financially than some of their neighbors. They are two-parent, extended, and single-parent families. On the other hand, there are families who represent something of an oppositional culture, referred to as “street families.” These families often show a lack of consideration for their neighbors, and although they may love their children, they have difficulty coping with the physical and emotional demands of child-rearing. They live by the code of the streets—that informal, fluid set of informal rules that governs interpersonal behavior and includes violence and revenge. The centerpiece of the code is respect; a commodity that is always open to interpersonal negotiation and can be reflected or deflected by demeanor, dress, attitude, and intent. Slightings, being “dissed,” can rapidly erupt into violent confrontations—outbursts caused by infractions of the code that might seem petty to outsiders.

By the time they are teenagers, most youths [in these neighborhoods—from decent and street families alike] have either internalized the code of the streets or at least learned the need to comport themselves in accordance with its rules, which chiefly have to do with interpersonal communication. The code revolves around the presentation of self. Its basic requirement is the display of a certain predisposition to violence. . . .

In the most fearsome youths . . . a cavalier attitude towards death grows out of a very limited view of life. Many are uncertain about how long they are going to live and believe that they could die violently at any time. They accept this fate; they live on the edge.

At the same time . . . a competing view maintains that true nerve consists in backing down, walking away from a fight. . . . One fights only in self-defense. This view emerges from the decent philosophy that life is precious, and is an important part of the socialization process common in decent homes. (Anderson, 1994, pp. 93–94)

The overwhelming majority of families in these neighborhoods are decent, struggling against the spread of the code. Many less-alienated youths from

these families may assume the street demeanor, but “embrace a more moderate way of life; they, too, want a nonviolent setting in which to live and raise a family” (p. 94). But the reality of racism and its continual erosion of spirit make the oppositional street culture seem legitimate and compelling. Imagine having to make a choice like that at the age of 11, 14, or 16. But also imagine what it takes to walk past it. As Tito, a gang-banger put it, “I respect these brothers [fellow gang members] ‘cuz they respect me. But I don’t trust nobody but my family,” and you “can walk around trouble, if you have someplace to walk to, and someone to walk with” (McLaughlin, Irby & Langman, 1994, pp. 31, 219).

In our stories of adolescents, especially those who are poor and in inner cities or in isolated rural areas, we spin the strands of tragedy, violence, recalcitrance, and defiance into webs of hopelessness, despair, and fear. The code of the streets is real; muggings, shootings, car-jackings, drive-bys are real. But the fact is that many youth make it to a life of citizenship, accomplishment, and pride. We are impeded, as a society, and as adults, by some myths that affect the way we understand and treat adolescents. In their remarkable five-year study of “hopefuls” (kids who ducked the bullet and found hope and promise and contribution) and “wizards” (those adults who led the way for them) and six youth organizations in the inner city, Milby McLaughlin, Merita Irby, and Juliet Langman found that these successful programs countered the myths that so often discourage or frighten. Most youth *are not* beyond hope; given support and direction and interest and real things to do, teenagers change direction. Inner city kids *are not* lazy; given the chance, they work hard, and devote themselves to projects and tasks. Teenagers *do* want discipline; a discipline based on respect, consistency, and security. Teenagers *will join* organizations: “They want so bad to connect with something that they are in control of, can be a part of” and that do not punish, demean, or stigmatize them (1994, pp. 208–213).

ADOLESCENTS AND COMMUNITY

The distinctive capacities of adolescents and youth are often denied to the community because we think they are too immature, or scary, or unreliable to participate in the moral, civic, and political life of a community. But, as the example above suggests, they can bring distinctive gifts to a community given the opportunity, direction, structure, and degree of control. The question is what are these gifts and how can they be unwrapped?

Adolescents have time. They bring ideas, new perspectives, and creativity to the table. They are in the community and neighborhood more than any other group, except elders and young kids—and, as we have, seen, they have a tremendous stake in the well-being of the community and each other.

Peer groups are a source of energy and drive, when they have somewhere to go and can become positively involved in projects relevant to them and their families. Adolescents have a degree of ebullience and intensity that would lend any community project or group fresh ideas and new perspectives as well as energy (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

There is a fairly direct relationship, according to Peter Benson of the Search Institute (1997), between the assets and resources available to kids in the community, in their families, and within themselves and how adolescents fare in school, on the streets, in their families, and in local institutions. He claims that there are some forty potential employable assets divided into internal and external (individual, family, and community), including the following. *Community*: a community that values youth; a community sees youth as resources and provides useful roles for them in the community; a community in which children (and adults) feel safe. *Family*: the family provides high levels of love, support, and expectation; the family has clear and age-appropriate rules and boundaries; the family is involved in the schooling of their children. *Individual*: the young person is motivated to do well in school; the young person is actively engaged in learning; the young person is developing, through activities and relationships, empathy, sensitivity to others, and the capacity to form bonds (pp. 27–53).

In the view of the Search Institute, some of the questions that community leaders and residents might want to ask include Do we have safe places for youth to gather? Do all children have access to creative activities? Is there adequate funding for day care? Do congregations have quality programs for adolescents? Do we provide opportunities for youth to be resources and activists in our communities? Does our community celebrate families? Do we celebrate cultural strengths and differences? Do we invite all people of the community to the table? (Benson, 1997, pp. 118–21). I would add to that Is the physical environment—houses, apartments, streets, and parks—optimistic, hopeful, taken care of? The broken windows theory of James Q. Wilson and George Kelling, criminologists, suggests that crime is the inevitable result of disorder—broken windows and graffiti, for example. If windows are left broken and unrepaired, people conclude that no one cares and no one is in charge. “In a city, relatively minor problems like aggressive panhandling, graffiti, public disorder are all the equivalent of broken windows, invitations to more serious crime” (Gladwell, 2000, p. 141). Where these are attended to, as has been done in New York over the past few years, crime rates plummet. Again, the power of the environment to set expectations for behavior.

In communities where these assets are relatively lacking and these questions have not been addressed, the future for adolescents and children is not as salutary as it might be otherwise. Benson cautions, as do others,

that in any community, however, there are children and families who flout the unfavorable odds of limited or diminishing assets. The encouraging element here is that most of these assets cost nothing to strengthen and compile—they are free; a matter of will, determination, understanding, and collaboration between associations and groups in the community, between youth and adults, between private and public sectors. The more widely that assets are accessible, the more that problems we typically associate with adolescence and that we have discussed in this chapter can be managed. But it requires communal, collective effort.

Around the country, there are programs that reflect the basic beliefs underlying asset-based approaches. The Saturday Academy, originally funded by Aetna Foundation, now has many iterations around the country. Some 70,000 young people have graduated from these programs. These are enrichment and enhancement educational programs, based on the idea that the adolescents have strengths, can learn, and can, with insistent positive expectations, improve their self-esteem and readiness for the job market or for higher education. Some of these programs have been instituted in economically distressed neighborhoods. One of the most successful is sponsored by Atlanta Clark University School of Social Work and the Housing Authority of Atlanta. It is set in a public housing community across from the university. Over ten years or so, many children have graduated from the school (an eight- to twelve-week course on Saturday mornings) and have been successful in completing their schooling, getting good jobs, or going on to higher education. In addition, the parents have been directly involved in the program and their children's education, thus strengthening family ties and motivating some parents to restart their own education (L. Beasley, personal communication, February, 1999).

In Detroit, fifty-five community organizations banded together and hired 600 youth to help in the rebuilding of parts of the city. These teens were engaged in projects close in their neighborhoods, if possible, and some of their work included educating residents about significant health issues; organizing a tour of the local toxic sites that compromise health and safety, rehabbing housing, painting murals, building a basketball court; and making puppets for a local parade (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

ADOLESCENTS AND FAMILY

Although adolescents pose any number of interesting and challenging developmental tensions and perplexities for families, they also bring something valuable to their families. Certainly, most families, no matter what their structure and process, will be faced with the necessity to increase the elasticity of its rules and boundaries and will have to accommodate the

adolescent's struggle with becoming independent but still needing dependence, safety, and guidance. The experimentation that adolescents pursue in self-image management, sexuality, friendships, drugs, dreams, social roles, ideas, and values are part of trying out elements of identity (and maybe trying parental patience). Particularly troublesome to some families can be the flowering of sexuality in adolescence; fathers, for example, may distance themselves emotionally from their daughters. Parents may be stuck in a place in their own sexual relationship that does not allow them to welcome easily the new found sexual being in the house. But adolescents can be bearers of new ideas and cultural forms and fads; they can bring to a family or to caretakers a level of energy and interest (although it may be labile) that can invigorate and energize.

Teenagers are often adept critics of conventional values or family norms and may force family members to confront ideas or practices that have become matters of rote and may not serve the family well. Although it is difficult given the relative absence of productive social roles that society offers adolescents, teens can and do find in hobbies or projects activities that can benefit a family or bind them together as they pursue newfound interests together. Whatever else they are and however they are shaped, families are intergenerational institutions, providing the opportunity for young and old to engage in mutual projects, enjoy each other, and share the wisdom of different eras.

We ask families in this complicated age to do too much, and as a society, we provide much too sparse resources and time for them to actually be so responsible for socialization without the support of a larger community. But families can do things that cement positive relationships. In our efforts to get a handle on the problems of teens, we have forgotten to notice and encourage those simple things that families can do together. Lynn Ponton's long walks with her father through desolate Chicago streets where she learned about teens without homes and the devastation that homelessness and poverty can bring to the lives of families and children became the basis of her interest in working with troubled adolescents and their families (1997). Paule Marshall (1983; cited in Aptheker, 1989) describes the "poets" in the kitchen of her house where her mother and her mother's friends (they worked as domestic servants during the day) taught her the importance of the artfulness of language.

The basement kitchen of the brownstone house where my family lived was the usual gathering place. Once inside the warm safety of its walls the women threw off the drab coats and hats, seated themselves at the large center table, drank their cups of tea or cocoa, and talked. While my sister and I sat at a smaller table over in the

corner doing our homework, they talked—endlessly, passionately, poetically, and with impressive range. No subject was beyond them. (p. 49)

So many simple and ordinary activities can be the focus of family relationships that bring enjoyment, relief, learning, fun, and problem-solving. Eating meals together, shopping together, playing games, fixing things around the house, listening to music, helping each other out (with homework or housework), tackling a problem together, playing musical instruments, learning a new skill together, going to the movies, and so forth. Parents under the gun, because of poverty, working long or irregular hours, or an environment of racism and indifference can and do these and other things. In every family, no matter that they may have the sense that they are overwhelmed, clinging desperately to a tree in a hurricane of problems, there are moments of calm, of togetherness. Mrs. Washington, a lifelong resident of public housing and mother of eleven, the last having just left home, managed, in spite of enormous pressures and economic problems and without much support (except from her children), and engaged in two activities that she believed were important to the strength of the family: eating meals together and reading the Bible to the children in the evening. Even when her kids “were raising hell” she was determined to do these things (M. Washington, personal communication, April, 1995).

When working with families, especially those with adolescents in various states of turmoil and confusion, Froma Walsh (1998, pp. 134–58) reminds us that an orientation to strengths and resilience requires, at the least, the following appreciations and approaches:

1. Tapping into their desire “for mastery and belonging”; reviving their hopes and dreams, and invigorating their positive intentions and expectations.
2. Celebrating and acknowledging their successes, achievements, and efforts, even though they may have failed.
3. Finding strengths and capacities in the midst of challenges and adversities that are daunting.
4. Discovering and drawing out hidden or forgotten resources, talents, and personal virtues.
5. Helping family members establish more empathic connections to each other; helping them often through sharing of stories to get to know one another beyond their encrusted roles and relationships.
6. Helping families to learn from their experiences, even those that they define as failure, and from that to develop strategies for facing problems in the future.
7. Developing a positive, future-oriented outlook; turning from complaints to aims and possibilities.

I would add to this: helping families forswear the language of scapegoating, blaming, and stereotyping, especially when it comes to adolescents; and helping families find, in their community, resources for engagement and accomplishment.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY IN UNDERSTANDING AND INTERVENING

Teenagers having children out of wedlock is, in many communities, a serious problem, more so for the teen mother (very occasionally the father, too) and her child. Raising a child today, under the best of circumstances, can be a difficult, time-consuming proposition, especially for someone not fully mature or, perhaps, even not connected. As I have pointed out, child-rearing requires economic, social, communal, and personal resources that many adolescents lack. I suppose the basic tension here is the irony and difficulty of meeting the sometimes overwhelming range of needs of an infant by someone who has a different but still impressive array of needs. Again, it is important to recognize that, in spite of these challenges, teenage mothers, like other single-parent families, may have a variety of strengths, ranging from the interest and support of extended family members, to supportive programs in the community, to their own determination to be a good parent, to adequate health and health care, to an abiding sense of hope based in spirituality, for example.

Remember that these young women are a part of a larger group of unwed mothers of all ages. I might add here that one in seven of all children in single-parent families lives with a father—about 2.5 million children.⁵ And remember, too, as Stephanie Coontz points out, that these numbers seem to be increasing rapidly primarily because the number of people getting married is decreasing, so the proportion of unwed to wed parents is larger. The actual growth in the number of unwed mothers has been rising but more slowly than we think (Coontz, 1997). Also, the numbers of available and economically stable young males continues to drop. As that has happened, the numbers of unwed young women, including teens, has continued to rise (Schorr, 1997). It is also important to realize that unwed motherhood is rising around the world. It is probably no accident that this may be more common where industrialization and globalization of the workplace and marketplace have taken hold, bringing with them the increase of wealth for some but declining economic conditions for others.

Poverty, as it always does, makes a difference here. The thinner economic, medical, and service resources create a number of potential risks to

5. We do not know much about these families; there have been few studies and they seem harder to locate. This includes all fathers, not just teenaged ones.

mother and child(ren)—lower birth weights and premature birth, low Apgar scores, some developmental delays, and, in some case, fragile general health. The future may not be as bright either, because the majority of these mothers are likely to drop out of school (part of that depends on whether the school will have a place for them once they are mothers) and face dim economic prospects, thus, in some cases, ensuring the passage of poverty from one generation to the next (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). But, remember, too, as a society (we express this through a variety of means from attitudes to legislation), we seem intransigent in our unwillingness to provide anywhere near the support that these families need. We do not do much to make it more likely that the young woman and biological father could stay together, if they chose to do so, as a family (Coontz, 1997).

Lisbeth Schorr (1997, pp. 194–95), gathering data from a number of programs around the country, says that there are things we can do—albeit, as with most social problems, there is no single, easy fix:

- Provide young people, especially those in difficult economic straits, the promise of a better future with high quality schooling, jobs, and a decent wage. I would add, too, provide the construction of pipelines to higher education.

- Do all those things that help young people avoid pregnancy: provide access to knowledge about sex and sexuality; make contraceptive service available; and furnish community supports that help delay sexual activity.

- Rehabilitate communities so that they support families with children; support, honor, and guide children and youth as they move to adulthood; and provide for them full participation in the immediate and distant society in which they live. Ensure the availability of adults to support, guide, mentor, and advocate for children and adolescents.

- Create a climate in the neighborhood and the nation that makes it clear that children and child-rearing are valuable contributions to the vitality and viability of a democratic society.

But these ideas, these compilations of the “situation” of single teen moms, don’t come close to reflecting the intimacies, turns, surprises, and struggles of an individual story. Andrew Billingsley (1992), in his accounting of remarkable young African-American women who faced impressive and unfavorable odds, tells the story of Beatrice Clark. She became pregnant in high school. After giving birth to her son, she returned to school. After graduating, she moved out of her parents’ home, got a job, and entered Temple University. This was, as Billingsley tells it, a reflection of the strong motivation for achievement she received from her parents, who were poor but not desperately so (mother cleaned houses, and father worked as a janitor).

“My mother always had the potential of doing so much more with her life. But she came from a poor family, too. She died when she was forty-five and never had the opportunity to do the things I’ve done. But she provided me with the kind of influence I’ll always remember.”

After graduating from college Clark worked for several large computer companies, including IBM. Now both her education and her earnings placed her squarely on the lower rungs of the growing black middle class. Her motivation showed in her behavior and her attitude. “There was no luck involved. . . . It was very, very hard. You have to be unwilling to accept the average. You can’t be afraid to make changes in your life.” (pp. 342–43)

The point is, I suppose, that there are many ways out of the potential problems that come with teen-age pregnancy and poverty. We can stand to learn from these young women and those like them. “The reasons for the achievement of these families are varied, but they all include high school, graduation, supportive family systems, welfare, work, and high career goals, which means that an understanding and supportive human and resource environment is necessary” (p. 346). Clearly, we must be conscious and aware of the beneficial things we could do as families, communities, and a society to address this growing concern.

CONCLUSION

Like all stages of life, adolescence is a sociocultural construction of considerable heterogeneity. That it is a construction does not mean that there are not people of this age range or that they do not face a profusion of challenges in a variety of ways. That it is a construction means, rather, that we have given a class or group of people who do have and share some of the experiences discussed above a designation that carries with it a lot of symbolic freight and has impact on those who are so categorized. It doesn’t mean that “adolescents” don’t have significant hormonal disruptions, for example, but it does mean that the complex of motivations, intentions, urges, emotions, and relationships we attribute to the phenomenon we call adolescence are categorizations that encourage us to see and experience them in particular ways. We tend to see them primarily as individual matters, occasionally with family implications. Because of this, we do not often see the intricate ties between self, family, neighborhood, economy, polity, and the well-being of people who happen to be of this age, no matter what their ethnicity, gender, or class. This has a dramatic impact on how we think of and act toward this

group of polyglot individuals who live their lives in an astonishing array of divergent circumstances. Policies and programs that affect adolescence, like drug prevention, tend to focus on individual behavior and decision-making. Though this may be useful, it can only take us so far. Adolescence is a species of our fascination with the individual and identity as the core elements of society and of behavior. In other cultures, in other times, such an emphasis would be seen as ludicrous compared to the importance of the community or extended family.

Having said this, I still am stuck with the need to maintain some continuity over time, some durable sense of meaning that comforts and stabilizes my sense of self and my identity as I fly through time and space. We are not just passive collectors of the forces of biology and society; we do work and rework what *is* happening to us, what we think *will* happen to us, what *has* happened to us. We try to stitch together a whole cloth of self and experience, of relationships and realities. The thing that makes adolescence so fascinating is that the pace of change is so accelerated that we are likely to experience a sense of discontinuity. It may be that discontinuity we see in the struggle of adolescents to become somebody, anybody, worthwhile.

M and M Dialogue

MEREDITH: I think you know that a lot of this information is hard for me not to personalize. Like I've told you before, Benjie is 12, a little immature physically for his age, and I am waiting for the explosion to occur.

MITCHELL: Like what explosion?

MEREDITH: Well, in growth, sexuality, other interests, peer involvements, maybe experimenting with trouble—smoking and stuff.

MITCHELL: Those things, with the exception of smoking, I suppose, don't have to be omens of trouble, do they?

MEREDITH: Not necessarily, I guess. But even though you talked about how we overdramatize or construct adolescence in a kind of negative way, you did that a lot yourself. I mean you talked about street violence, unwed parents, the agony of struggling to find out who you are, the tough, hard culture for males. That kind of thing. It doesn't exactly make for a confident parent.

MITCHELL: You're right, I did. But these are some of the things that people—parents, policymakers, teens themselves—are concerned about. Even with that I didn't talk much about drugs and alcohol, depression, eating disorders, and the like. But I tried to balance that with noting when these are not present, or how teens, families, and communities resist

them. And, maybe I didn't say this enough, but even in the case of many of these behaviors, most, maybe only a slight majority, but most teens do not do more than tinker with some of them.

MEREDITH: I was interested in this regard about the whole notion of risk; you seemed to indicate that risk was a major part of the adolescent's experience; taking risks, experimenting with behaviors and beliefs, stuff like that. But let's say I'm working with a family in my field placement and their oldest boy who's 16 is staying out late at night, has violated the parents' curfew several times, and is dressing in a fashion that seems outlandish—it's like he's taken on a new identity, at least superficially. What's more, he's been seeing a 19-year-old girl who is out of school and not working. They are worried. Should they be?

MITCHELL: I don't know. I'd have to talk with them all, learn more about them. I'd especially want to hear the son's story. I'd want to know how they have handled things in the past, how rapidly this change has come on, how they have talked about it with each other, if they have. I think, generally, however, we have to understand risk from the point of view of the adolescent. For some, risk means romance, being different, being mysterious, getting out of your rut. For others, it means meeting a challenge, trying on something new in the way of behavior. For others, it is following your nose right into your peer group—you do it because they do it. I'd also like to know what the neighborhood is like; or if there is an extended family—what the context of all this is.

MEREDITH: Okay, but you really didn't answer my question.

MITCHELL: Well, like Lynn Ponton says, you have to place risk in the context of development as well as relationships with peers, parents, biology, media, etc. That is, risky behavior can be a way for teens to deal with the all-important issues of forming an identity, exploring one's sexual side, learning to separate from parents and be more independent, figuring out who you want to be.

MEREDITH: I get that. But I wonder if it is bad risk-taking when the consequences are harmful to the teenager and others; if it is done out of a lack of control; if it is not well-considered; if it is just following behavior, things like that.

MITCHELL: I suppose so. It still is hard to separate out sometimes the good and growth-promoting from the bad and stultifying.

MEREDITH: Another thing that intrigued me, and we've sort of talked about this before, is what seems to happen to young women when they hit adolescence. I talked about my trouble with eating and with how I looked and felt for a while in adolescence. It didn't occur to me to think about how I felt about myself when I was younger. Boy, I was a pistol. I guess you would've called me a tomboy. I played all kinds of sports.

I think partly because my mom was a feminist-type. She made sure I wasn't stopped by dumb ideas about gender. I could hold my own in most sports, sometimes against boys. I felt strong and good. Then my mom and dad divorced, I started to change physically, my friends did, too, and before I knew it, I was different or at least I felt and looked different. And I went from being kind of a reedy, sinewy, gangly kid to a teen who was just, in my mind, big and ugly. I didn't look anything like those beautiful teen models looked like. At the time I didn't notice or even care that my friends didn't either. So eating, among other things, became a source of comfort and, like you said, a reason for disgust as well.

MITCHELL: I think your story is repeated far too many times in our society. And it isn't just teens who are having their body image assaulted, it is a lot of people of all ages. Even things like skin color, the texture of hair, and height are subject to manipulation in the media and marketplace. Philip Slater many years ago talked of that faceless group, "the ego mafia," I think he called them, advertising pros who create imagery in the media and the market designed to create a void in your self-image, a void you have to fill up with their products—make-up, cars, clothes, food and drink—you name it. The void manifests itself in the idea that you are not quite all together; something is missing.

MEREDITH: I get that, I sure do. Another thing I wanted to mention before I go. You refer a lot to the community and how important it is to the health and stability of families and children. This touches me because of school and work, I cannot make the connections I should with resources—people—in the community. So Benjie and Scott are kind of on their own for a period of time most days. So far, so good, they're good kids. But I guess trouble can knock at anybody's door. I wish I had better ties to the community; things for the boys to do, people to watch after them.

MITCHELL: Well, you know there is a hue and cry—well, at least some interest—around the country in having schools offer more after-school programs and places for all kids, not just the athletes or band members. It might be worth your while to check with the school district to see what they actually have. Or check with your church. I believe you said you belonged to the Methodist church—sort of, I think you said. Maybe even asking some of your colleagues at your field practicum might yield some leads.

MEREDITH: I'll do that. I just didn't think too much about it until you started talking about the community. I've got to run. See you soon.

MITCHELL: I'll look forward to it.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Person/Environment, Part V: Maturing and Aging in Family and Community

Maturity [is] the capacity to appreciate the relativity of situations, the ability to take a historical view, and to tolerate paradox.

—GEORGE VAILLANT

MATURITY: LOVE, WORK, CONNECTION, AND CLOSURE

It was Freud who maintained that the major task of adulthood was to come to terms with the intimacies and intrigues of love (*lieben*) and the demands of work (*arbeiten*), to find joy and fulfillment or maybe just resolution there. Rueben Fine claims that Freud did not use the terms *lieben* and *arbeiten* but rather *leistung* and *genuss*, which translate to achievement and enjoyment (1983). Since that time, other authors and students of human development have expanded on this notion. George Vaillant, whose work we've encountered in previous chapters, maintains that the definition of maturity turns on the availability and relative preponderance of healthy defense mechanisms. Recall that those defenses, whether healthy or not, are adaptive styles used to manage the challenges and conflicts of life. The mature (healthy) defense mechanisms include altruism, suppression, humor, anticipation, and sublimation (see chapter 6 for more detail). But Vaillant also discovered in his completion of the Grant study of the lives of Harvard male graduates during a period of thirty-five years that the best predictor of mental health was "sustained relationships with loving people" (1977, p. 337). This, as I am sure you recall, is one of the hallmarks of resilience as well.

As the quote from Vaillant suggests, intimacy, which is the ability to establish a satisfying, mutual, reciprocal relationship with another person or persons that is infused with emotion, caring, responsibility, collaboration, and a sense of partnership, is also considered by others to be a hallmark of maturity—perhaps, the first step (Borysenko, 1996; Erikson, 1950). Intimate relationships may be established with a number of people; these relationships may or may not be sexual. But they all reflect that, over time, a person has been able to resolve the implicit tension between coming together and being

independent or coming together and reformulating family-of-origin ties. Joan Borysenko says this about the requisite of intimacy in early adulthood for women:

The development of a core self, a strong, yet pliable identity in which the previous development of relationality, intuition and the logic of the heart are combined in a conscious way, bestows life's most precious gift—the ability to relate to self and others with true intimacy. (1996, p. 76)

The capacity for work (assuming the availability of it and the quality of it) is more than just having a job, but the development of a sense of mastery and competence. Coming to what Bandura (1997) called a sense of “self-efficacy,” experiencing yourself as an agent in the conduct of your affairs or in communion and common tasks with others all may be elements of what theorists mean by work. The idea of agency and instrumentality is that you can use constituents of your self—physical, cognitive, moral, emotional—to get things done, to make things happen. This meaning of work may or may not be related to actual employment or even a career. It can grow to full flower in hobbies and avocations, in service to family or community, in parenting or family roles. Work also implies motivation and dedication; the spilling over of self into activity and pursuits—even trivial ones, I suppose (Merriam & Clark, 1991). Work insinuates learning, too. That is, maturity reflects a continuing ability and interest in learning in your career or work, learning within your intimate relationships, and learning in response to unfolding adult responsibilities and opportunities. I suspect that much of learning and cognitive change, the change of our minds and in our mind's eye, is the need to make sense out of the world, to—once again—make and revise meaning within the varying contexts and dynamics of our lives.

Establishing connections to the larger world of social and communal obligation is often considered an ingredient of maturity. Developing a sense of civic responsibility, becoming part of the social and human capital of the community or neighborhood, and maybe just widening the circle of one's involvements all presuppose some sort of grounding of the sense of self and a degree of confidence and interest in the larger world (Schaie & Willis, 1996). One of the recent complaints about generation X, or the “me” generation (born between 1965 and 1977), now young and middle aging adults, is that the level of participation in communal and civic affairs has diminished—voting, volunteering, and joining local associations; although some argue that this is widely true of contemporary society (Putnam, 2000).

The conception of maturity for some requires animating biological, interpersonal, and spiritual resources. Biology in that there may, in fact, be an inherent urge to health and growth. It can be easily compromised but it continues steadfast and immanent. Also, some theorists suppose that there

is an inevitable neurobiological basis to maturity—a gradual unfolding dictated by our genetic makeup that may be halted or detoured but nonetheless remains a force. Interpersonally, maturity relies upon the authentication and regard of the self by others who matter. Ego theorists, such as George Vaillant and Erik Erikson, believe that maturity depends not just on supportive and caring relationships with others but hinges on the incorporation and internalization of bits and pieces of others—their values, beliefs, mannerisms, and morals—who mean something to us or who have had an impact on our lives (Erikson, 1950; Vaillant, 1993). The very term spirituality begs for clarity but it refers to many things: the capacity for wonder and awe; faith in the human condition and its possibilities (and one’s own); the formation of a transcendent meaning that gives new luster to the ordinary and places the abhorrent and alien in perspective; perhaps even the development of a calling (to service or to a profession or to an understanding) (Moore, 1996).

Theories of the Adult Development of Maturity

In this section, I will briefly present three approaches to understanding adult development. Two are stage-of-life approaches; one applicable to white middle class females (Borysenko); the other claiming universality (Levinson). The third is not so much a theory as a challenge to the whole idea of staged, linear development and is much more focused on the interaction between individual consciousness and evolving, dynamic social and interactional contexts of experience (Lewis, Bruner, and Gergen).

JOAN BORYSENKO

All the ideas about maturity reflect, in my view, models or ideals, desires and hopes. They may be seriously compromised by historical, class, and culture biases. They are constructions born of the wish and the experienced “reality.” In some sense, they are anthems to the good life. But they must vary by culture and historical era. A Navajo woman living on a vast expanse of reservation might emphasize and practice *mizhoni*, which means “walking in beauty, a measuredness and harmony among all things” (Frazier, 2000, p. 81). A career woman, Irish-American background, in New York might be avid in pursuing and pushing her values, against great odds in her corporation, to the point of collapse. A 40-year-old man and an 18-year-old male living today in Los Angeles might be more alike than, say, the 40-year-old compared to a 40-year-old living in Los Angeles in 1935. Underlying most developmental theories, according to Norton (cited in Kastenbaum, 1993), is

what the Greek philosophers called *eudaimonism*: “the ethical doctrine that each person is obliged to know and live in the truth of his *daimon* (or genius), thereby progressively actualizing an excellence that is his innately and potentially” (p. ix). I would also add there is a slight inclination to regard the passage from young adulthood to late adulthood as a “journey.”

Borysenko, a physician, on the basis of her experiences as healer, scholar, friend, and colleague, gathered stories from hundreds of women and fabricated them into a theory, a biopsychospiritual (her term) theory of women’s transitions in childhood and adulthood. The female life cycle, she observes, has traditionally been understood with reference to three “blood mysteries”—menarche, childbirth, and menopause. Borysenko divides the female life cycle into four quadrants with three seven-year periods in each. The four quadrants are childhood and adolescence, young adulthood, midlife, and the elder years.

In the years from 0 to 7, especially in the first few months but continuing to unfold as a major theme in the lives of women, is the development of the capacity for empathy.

Relationship is the essence of life, and even newborn babies come wired to respond to human touch, speech and facial patterning. . . . By three to four months of age, human faces are a baby’s favorite sight, and human voices her preferred sounds. By six or seven months even an initially cranky baby . . . is likely to be disarmingly social, mimicking other people and hopefully being mimicked or mirrored in return. (Borysenko, 1996, p. 23)

Also developing during this era are learning to make one’s needs known; the beginnings of a sense of initiative (Borysenko suggests as do other feminist thinkers that this can be compromised by old cultural models of the way girls are supposed to be); learning to understand the interconnection between things in her world; of course, basic sensorimotor and cognitive skills; a budding sense of the spiritual (angels and imaginary playmates are a part of their lives); language, the capacity for which suggests that the left hemisphere is maturing and, thus, the emergence of the capacity for rational thinking. “The bio-psycho-spiritual basis of the feminine life cycle is wired firmly into place by the end of early childhood, conferring the gifts of empathy, relationality, interdependent perception, and intuition” (p. 35).

Roughly, from ages 7 to 14 (puberty),

The gifts of middle childhood build on the circuits of empathy, interdependent perception, and intuition. . . . The ability to see relationships with clarity, the uncanny tendency to recognize instances of relational injustice and cry foul, and the development of

the morality of the heart are remarkable female capacities that mark middle childhood. (p. 59)

The struggle of adolescence (14 to 21) is, as has been noted by others, the struggle for authenticity, the problem of balancing the needs of others with the requisites of the evolution of the self—"the power to be or the power to please" (p. 62)—and biology plays an enormous role here as the species requisites of mating and the continuation of the species mingle with the psychosocial footprints on body image. The wide-hipped and plump species mother clashes directly with the emaciated, ghostly female image lauded by the media and other social institutions. But the key to this time of life is to learn to balance the caring for others with caring for and about the self, which allows the adolescent female to build on the empathic capacities developed earlier. The unleashing of one's authenticity helps ensure, along with empathic abundance, the kind of reciprocal relationships in which each party can thrive and grow.

Early adulthood (21 to 35) brings with it, in the most favorable circumstances, the continuation of the capacity for empathic ties to a complex world of relationships as well as its extension into the world of intimacy and sexuality—elements that have shifting biological foundations, psychological contours, and spiritual dimensions. Now the work is the creating and sustaining of these relationships authentically and, for some, creating new ones through giving birth. The ongoing development of relationality, reason, and intuition all come together in a "pliable identity" manifest in the development of long-term career, family, community, and/or service goals and aspiration. To take care of children or other dependents, financially and emotionally, becomes an important piece of business. The age thirty transition involves, according to Borysenko, making family and work equally important in the nooks and crannies of one's life, developing a sense of independence outside the home while managing the home well—even if one is single this is a part of the work—and, finally, coming to terms with one's intimate relationships (here to stay or to be ended—this is the peak time for divorce for white, middle class women). The next era (35 to 42) involves finding a sense of balance and harmony in all the areas of one's life. This is the time of life when the strands of all the previous experiences, harmful and helpful, are woven into the gold of understanding, resolution, meaning, and forgiveness—or not—and, thus, the opportunity may be lost.

The wisdom gained from healing [from divorce or abuse, for example], together with the ability to balance many different life tasks, provides a stable bio-psycho-spiritual feedback loop to support the emergence of the prodigious wisdom that is about to flower as we enter the next cycle of life. (p. 139)

The next era is a major metamorphosis (I suppose all metamorphoses are major), “a second puberty” (p. 145). This is the time when women learn to mother the larger community and world and, as the capacity to have children ends, it may free up a bounty of sensuous energy that may be directed sexually or socially. Here, if things go well, a woman learns to protect herself and her interests and develops the ability to see injustice, confront it, and bring out the best in herself and others. Old interests, even friendships may pass by the wayside if they are not in the best interest of her values and the freeing of time and space in her life for others and for service and work.

Menopause, roughly the ages 49 to 56, brings with it many physiological changes and crises, some of which spur psychological and spiritual crises as well. A lot is at stake here, from physical health to moral and psychological mindfulness. For many women, the “symptoms” of menopause lead to a recommitment to understanding and preserving body, mind, and spirit. The fact that Borysenko spends some time talking about hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and its dangers is based on her idea from reading medical evidence that menopause, importantly, may not be a result of estrogen deficiency. Becoming more aware of one’s health practices and the quality of life and seeking other means of hormonal balance may be more important and more salubrious than HRT.

From here, Borysenko describes further elaborations of life that I will mention in passing. From the mid-fifties to roughly the mid-sixties, women come to feel a “post menopausal zest” (a term Borysenko attributes to Margaret Mead), an energy and kind of “masculine” tenacity (say, as in yang so that women now possess a balance of yin and yang). Women now often find themselves doing society’s important work, becoming more activist—witness the Gray Panthers movement (largely a women’s movement) and the feminist movement—many older woman were at the activist forefront of the various feminism(s). Borysenko quotes an old Cheyenne proverb: “A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground.” The implication is that the last and often strongest line of defense for women’s interests is in the spirit and determination of older women.

Women from this point on have the capacity to develop wisdom and reflection, a real generativity and perspective, as they begin to confront many changes in their lives—the loss of loved ones; illness, perhaps; sometimes dramatic changes in their own bodies. Here, at the beginning of the end, a recapitulation, a looking back, an appreciation comes. Toward the end of these years, the reality and possibility of death sets foot in the house. Now, for those women who wish it, sharing their wisdom with others, especially of different ages, is the last and best gift that they can offer, the final statement of empathy, relationality, and wonder.

Borysenko's gift to understanding (limited here, as she willingly admits, to middle class and white females) is the blending of the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual. This is an orientation that should be seductive to social workers, given our claims about the person–environment perspective. It is not so much the particulars but the frame of mind that is to be admired here and perhaps imitated in our own work.

DANIEL LEVINSON

Levinson's theory is another stage theory, roughly inspired by the work of Erik Erikson, but predicated on the belief that, just as children pass through sequences and stages, so do adults. The original work focused on men (*Seasons of a Man's Life*, 1979). More recently, Levinson and his wife Judy applied the approach to women. Daniel Levinson died before the work was complete. The method of their study involved "intensive biographical interviewing" and "biographical reconstruction." The Levinsons encouraged forty-five women, aged 35 to 45, over a period of time to tell their life stories—in a very complete way—up to age forty-five. The women represented, fifteen each, three different life paths—homemaking, corporate financial careers, and academic careers. Then the Levinsons set about to construct out of this bountiful raw material a biography for each woman. From that, the task was to construct a theory from the set of biographies.

The theory is based on a widely available metaphor and its attendant reality—"seasons of the year." Levinson¹ claims that these seasons are found universally, although they can vary dramatically depending on gender, race, culture, class, genetics, situational contingencies, and historical era.

The imagery suggests that the life course evolves through a sequence of definable seasons or segments. Change goes on within each season, and a transition is required for the shift from one to the next. Every season has its own time, although it is part of and colored by the whole. No season is intrinsically better or more important than any other. Each has its necessary place and contributes its special character to the whole. (1996, p. 14)

Levinson portrays the basic structure of the life cycle as a sequence of epochs or eras (seasons), each having a distinctive character biologically, psychologically, and socially. Major changes occur in our lives in each era. Within each of these there are less crucial but nonetheless perceptible changes and

1. I am using the singular Levinson because, as his wife Judy suggests, the work and the theoretical structure are primarily his.

shifts as well. These partially overlap with new eras that begin as the previous epoch begins to wane. For each, there is a cross-era transition normally lasting about five years that signals the end of the current era and ushers in the new. Levinson argues that each era and each period of development within each of them begin and end at a well-defined average age, with a deviation of no more than two years above or below the average. He claims that his research (based on these intense interviews) continually shows the relationship of age to structure.

The central conceptual frame for Levinson is life structure. This is the underlying beat and tempo, pattern and arrangement of a person's life at a given time. The basic elements of life structure are found in relationships with others: what they do together; the meaning of the relationship; the exchange pattern of the relationship (what the person gets and gives); the social context(s) of the relationship—work, family, polity; the place and importance of the relationship in the individual's life structure; the evolution of the relationship over time and its shifting or stable meaning.

The concept of the life structure requires us to examine the nature and patterning of an adult's relationships with all significant others, and the evolution of these relationships over the years. Relationships are the stuff our lives are made of. They give shape and substance to the life course. They are the vehicle by which we live out—or bury—various aspects of ourselves; and by which we participate, for better or worse, in the world around us. (p. 23)

Briefly, development involves building a structure (choices and relationships, goals and values) at particular periods of time. These last, whether tumultuous or tranquil, for about five to seven years, and then we are confronted with a transition period that involves, in one sense or another, changing the life structure in significant ways. These periods last around five years. So the adult seasons look something like this:

Early Adult Transition. Early adult transition involves, from roughly the years 17 to 22, the ending of childhood and the beginning of young adulthood. This cross-era transition, like all others, requires not only a change in life structure but a fundamental shift in the life cycle. This is a period in which there is no clear idea of what the future will bring. It is a time of working it through and redeveloping.

Entry Life Structure for Early Adulthood. From ages 22 to 28 or so, the time for key decisions comes, especially with regard to love/marriage/building a family, work and career, and separation or reestablishing relationships

with the family of origin, and forging a lifestyle of sorts. This is the beginning of a new life structure. It is provisional but is an attempt to carve out a place in new contexts and with people of another generation.

Age Thirty Transition. The age thirty transition occurs in the midst of the second era (early adulthood). This is a time when people typically begin to rethink and reevaluate the life structure that has formed during this time. It is also a time of further individual/lifestyle development and the formation of new possibilities for the next life structure. Levinson sees this as a time of fairly severe developmental upset and difficulty.

Culminating Life Structure for Early Adulthood. Levinson sees the primary task at ages 35 to 40 as forming a structure that allows us more security and “place” in the world as we move from junior to senior membership and as we become fully fledged citizens.

Midlife Transition. The midlife transition is the fabled bridge between youth and maturity and has elements of both (40 to 45). We try to create a workable combination of being both young and old and further sculpt our individuation; an especially important task in that it will be the basis for a fuller and continuing identity and sense of self for the rest of our lives.

Entry Life Structure for Middle Adulthood. Entry life structure for middle adulthood looks like the same work of the previous transition in that we may be in the same job, same intimate relationship, same community, but we are, in a serious way, different. Relationships are deeper and more binding. We more firmly establish ourselves as members of the generation and a part of the collective identity (ages 45 to 50).

Age Fifty Transition. The age fifty transition is like the age thirty transition because a basis is created for the ensuing new life structure. This, too, is a time of considerable developmental upheaval. This is especially true for those who have not made many changes or who have made unbecoming changes in the previous decade or so. This should be a time of rethinking the entry life structure as a way of starting the spiritual, moral, emotional, and relational basis for the new life structure to come.

Culminating Life Structure for Middle Adulthood. The culminating life structure for middle adulthood becomes the basis for accomplishing the

requisite tasks of the era (ages 50 to 60). It is here that the major visions and hopes are realized (or not).

Late Adult Transition. The late adult transition is the end of middle adulthood and the beginning of late adulthood (ages 60 to 65). It often brings with it a significant appraisal and reevaluation of one's life and a sense of what one has (or has not) accomplished and how the rest of one's years might be lived out (Levinson, 1996, pp. 12–37).

Levinson has some things to say about gender differences. Even though he regards the life structure and the sequence of eras and transitions as universally applicable, he does think there are some critical differences between male and female experiences. The foremost of these he designates as “gender splitting.” This means the social and institutionalized creation of rigid differences between men and women, male and female, masculine and feminine. There are four major splits in contemporary society that affect women differentially, depending on their circumstances: (1) The split between the domestic sphere and the public sphere as social domains for men and women—men being more prominent in the world of the economy, government, and body politic; (2) the split between the female homemaker and the male provider in what Levinson calls the traditional marriage enterprise; (3) the splitting of men's work and women's work; and (4) the splitting of masculine and feminine in the individual psyche. Clearly, these are all related, and they do have an enduring impact on the way that women (and men) fashion and structure their lives and the avenues of satisfaction and accomplishment available to them—psychologically and socially (1996).

A CONTEXTUAL/CONSTRUCTIONIST VIEW OF DEVELOPMENT

There really is no well-shaped view of development that could be called constructionist (see chapter 2 for a discussion of meaning-making and constructionism). In a sense, such an idea runs counter to the very impulses and insinuations of constructionism itself. Most models of development trap us in our past or in our head. Infancy and childhood, of course, lend themselves more readily to the idea of stages, fixed sequences of development, and epigenetic ground rules that dictate the time of ascendance of various capacities (compromised or not by circumstances). The fact that developmental theories got their grounding there is no accident. But even childhood varies enormously between individuals, between cultures, and between historical eras. You can see it most in the differences between siblings. As self-consciousness and the sense of self develop (and they develop early), narratives and stories, plot lines and characters surface and develop. The unfolding and telling of this “spontaneous autobiography” (Bruner, 1990) is enwrapped, of

course, in larger events and cultural forms. Events and chance play a role as well. As individuals mature, the justifications and characterizations of life choices and contingencies become more intense and cluttered with increasing amends and emends, rationalizations, and questions. As adults, we make sense of the past and reconfigure it continually, usually in terms of the present and in terms of a persistent, maybe metaphorical theme (“I was always a schemer; could always make things go pretty much my way”; “If I hadn’t been in that car accident, I could have been a player”). The narrative is not just a plot or text but a way of telling also (Bruner). And, interactions with others continually shape the direction and force of the tale. This is true of families as well as friends. “Every face-to-face culture has its occasions of ‘joint attention’ where members come together to ‘catch up’ on the state of things, to recalibrate their feelings toward one another, and as it were to reaffirm the canon [normative rules and story-lines]” (Bruner, p. 131).

A more constructionist/contextual approach holds the belief that we can change our fate, alter the direction of our lives, and reconstruct our past, in part, because of our understanding and involvement in the relational, institutional, and contingent contexts of our lives at the moment. In this sense, behavior and subsequent meaning is produced to help the individual adapt to the demands of the moment (Gergen, 1994). “The ability to think about the future, the use of our consciousness to make plans and alter past mistakes, the occurrence of chance events in the sequence of development—these are not isolated happenings but the fabric of our lives” (Lewis, 1997, p. 70). We should not underestimate the play of chaos, random events, eruptive change, nor even the unanticipated effects of our decisions in our lives. These do not render us helpless but merely form a phalanx of forces and possibilities, and we are called upon to use our wits and our wiles to meet them. The lives of Cándido and América, his wife, immigrants from Mexico, seeking the good life but continually thwarted by circumstance, the malevolence of others, racism, and bad luck is instructive here. T. C. Boyle’s novel *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995) is rich with irony and contingency as he creates a contrapuntal narrative of two families—Cándido and América and the Mossbachers, quintessential and well-to-do southern Californians who live on the hills above the canyon where Cándido and América live and hide from immigration officials. Cándido and América have been through innumerable trials, disappointments, Herculean efforts to get work, and physically brutal experiences. Now América is pregnant, due any day (their first child), and suddenly in the canyon—their home—a fire leaps “to the trees like the coming of the Apocalypse” (p. 274). They struggled to get away from the thermal torrents of this rapidly spreading inferno. Eventually they found a haven, a shed, behind the house of the Mossbachers, under the rolling smoke and momentarily away from the flames.

It was hot. It smelled bad. She was scared. She couldn't believe she was having a baby in a place like this, with the whole world on fire and nobody to help her, no midwife, no doctor, not even a *curandera*.² And the pain. Everything was tight down there, squeezing in, always in, when it should be pushing out. She was in a shed, floating in a sea of rustling plastic sacks of grass seed, the sweat shining all over her like cooking oil and Candido fussing around with his knife—sharpening it now on a whetstone—as if he could be of any use at all. . . .

Outside, beyond the tin skin of the shed the inferno rushed toward them and the winds rattled the walls with a pulse like a drumbeat . . . She could barely move and the pains were gripping her and then releasing until she felt like a sharp rubber ball slammed against a wall over and over. And then, in the middle of it all, with the terrible clenching pains coming one after the other, the animals suddenly stopped howling . . . América heard the fire then . . . and then a thin mewling whine that was no howl or screech but the tentative interrogatory meow of a cat, a pretty little Siamese with transparent ears that stepped through the open door and came right up to her as if it knew her. She held out her hand, and then clenched her fist with the pain of a contraction, and the cat stayed with her. “*Gatita*,” she whispered to the arching back and the blue luminous eyes, “you’re the one. You’re the saint. You. You will be my midwife.” (pp. 282–83)

Their troubles do not end here. But imagine some distant day how these perilous adventures, heart-stopping moments, the fortuitous appearance of the *gatita* will be folded into the evolving narrative of their lives together, including the improbable life of their beloved Socorro (their daughter—born in fire and later that very day saved from perishing in water).

At any rate, it is difficult to make sweeping developmental propositions about the nature of adult life. But it may be true, as Neil Smelser says, that

There are probably universally occurring *issues* of adult life that arise from biological and social exigencies—issues such as organizing the care of the young and helpless or confronting the finiteness of human life—but the socially preferred ways of confronting these issues, as well as the outcomes of those confrontations, should be expected to display great variation. (1980, p. 15)

2. A *curandera/o* is a healer able to heal diseases and resolve troubles caused by natural or supernatural forces.

One quick example. Among the Gusii of Kenya, a culture of both Bantu and Nilotic bonds (language and people related to the Nile), the “life plan” (this discussion relies on the work of Robert A. LeVine [1980]), as it is in all cultures, is about how life should be lived and shared expectancies about what the course of life will be. This is primarily an agricultural society (cattle villages were abolished by the British in 1912, but the Gusii still herd goats, sheep, and cattle) and the social institutions are not differentiated into economic, social, and religious spheres.³ Rather, patrilineal decent groups provide the basic organization for all social behavior, and all social roles and functions are carried out in terms of kinship roles. Each homestead supplies its own food, meets other common needs, and conducts its own religious ceremonies. The homestead is based on a particular moral order that governs the design and arrangement of individual abodes and their rooms, ornamentation, and footpaths and who may enter which household in a given homestead.

The Gusii do have a division of the life course and designations of each of those divisions. Except for infancy (*ekenjwerere*), the labels are different for men and women, reflecting drastically different statuses in a patrilineal society. The labels are the same for infants and children because mothers claim to treat boys and girls the same up to a certain age. For boys, the life stages begin with *omoisia*, uncircumcised boy. The label used to refer to herd-boy but since there are no more cattle, it refers to the fact that these young men must be useful and respond to the commands of their elders. To call a circumcised boy *omoisia* is to insult him for being childish. A boy then becomes *omomura* by becoming circumcised (usually between 9 and 11) and passing through the rites, seclusion, and trials that go along with it. The word means warrior. This is a very important transition, seen as the transition from childhood to manhood, from dependency on and intimacy with the mother, to greater personal responsibility, bravery, and preparation for marriage. He has now achieved independence of a sort and will have his own homestead in preparation for marriage and the assumption of adult responsibilities. This period may last a long time—it only ends with the marriage of the man’s first child. This is the period of “young adulthood,” although a man, if he married late, might be *omomura* for forty years. When one marries depends on the availability of cattle to offer as bridewealth, and the availability of cattle depends on his sister’s marriages and the claims on their bridewealth by older brothers and father. So getting married is the most important goal and determinant of a man’s future. An *omomura* becomes *omogaaka*, or male elder, when one of his children gets married “because now there is someone *outside* who calls you ‘father’” (p. 85). This is

3. The story of the Gusii reflects life up to the early 1980s.

the most venerated status in the community, and elders have constituted authority as well as the power to invoke sacred decree in defense of their status and power. *Omogaaka* also refers to the elder of the homestead—the patriarch—of whom there can be only one. A man can lose this power and authority if he grows infirm or foolish with age.

For women, *egesagaane*, uncircumcised girl, like the male counterparts, is a drone, low in the hierarchy of the community. When they are circumcised,⁴ usually at a very young age (7 or 8), they go through a ceremony that reflects the ideals of marriage and procreation. But because girls are circumcised so young, a term, *enyaroka*, uncircumcised thing, is reserved for them. Since the age of marriage is usually around 15, the intervening years are seen as preparation for marriage. *Omoiseke* is the term for a girl of marriageable age. The girl also must leave the home forever after marriage, so for parents, having a girl of marriageable age is a cause for ambivalence. They will be compensated for her (bridewealth) but they will, in essence, lose her. A woman married is *omosubaati*, and she can look forward to a period of significant and difficult adjustment in her new surroundings. She will be scrutinized closely by her new relatives in terms of her skills, work habits, and attitudes but her ultimate status depends on her bearing children. The circumcision of her first child is an occasion of great significance and meaning and is the occasion for her to be regarded as an elder (*omojina*). As an elder, a woman is granted much more freedom. She can speak publicly. She can be assertive. She can even partake of beer at beer parties (she cannot, however, join the men).

So for the Gusii, development is not just a matter of age but, after marriage, of status related in part to marriage and children. Those with no married children are at the bottom, those with married children higher, those with grandchildren even higher, and those grandparents with no living peers of the same sex in the homestead, the highest (LeVine, 1980). Things have changed, and in the 1970s when this fieldwork was done by LeVine and his associates, children were not economic assets but rather costs, so that marriage and economy were not, in fact, wed as they had been in the past. But children are seen as a spiritual asset, adding to the parent's inner strength and worth. The spiritual part of life is momentous, particularly for elders who are seen as possessing spiritual wisdom and capacity. Thus, any contributions to that are welcome.

In summary, however, people in mid to late life do not fit very well into age-stage theories. The popular theories, including the two above, are based on small samples, and both include some cramming of life stories into

4. I do not know if the circumcision involves only the removal of the prepuce (skin) around the clitoris or the clitoris itself. In any case, by current morals, this is regarded as a horrific experience.

prefabricated categories and stages. Winifred Gallagher, reflecting on the National Survey of Families and Households, reports that of more than forty projected typical middle life events, *none* was likely to happen at a certain, predictable age (1993).

Generational Differences

Alexis de Tocqueville observed two centuries ago that “among democratic nations, each generation is a new people.” Thus, differences we see between, say, a 25-year-old and a 45-year-old are probably related to the singular social and historical backdrops to their lives. Gail Sheehy in *New Passages* (1995) makes some interesting distinctions between five generations. The *World War II generation* (born 1914–1929) were children and young adults through both the depression and World War II. Nonetheless, this generation probably had a great deal of optimism that their future would be better than their parents’. They fought (or saw it fought) the last “good war”; they saw government and business come together to ensure the economic health of future generations; they saw expanding opportunities for education and career development (the GI Bill, for instance). But this was also a time of strict gender role norms and the rapid expansion of male-dominated hierarchical, bureaucratic organizations (which emulated in some ways the military). Even though there was optimism about economic growth and expanding opportunity, a good many families were left far behind. Race relations were strained at best and deeply segregated.

The *Silent generation* (hey, those are my people!), born between 1930 and 1945, was the first to live as children with the threat of nuclear war at hand. I can remember at school seeing films about what to do in case of a nuclear blast (get under your desk and cover your head. When the safety siren sounds—take a shower to wash off the radiation.). This was a generation characterized by an unquestioning faith in authority and the responsibility and honesty of social institutions and corporations. The rebelliousness of youth was mostly benign and personal (like combing your hair in a ducktail after it had been smeared with pomade or wearing Levis that would never be washed), although drinking among youth was considered very cool. Even then, this group had the lowest rates of all social pathologies that one could think of. However, because of ignorance and the lack of birth control methods, many youthful indiscretions turned into early marriages. This was a silent generation because of the epidemic fears of communism and the resultant widely spread and institutionalized repressive attitudes and behaviors, making it risky or unthinkable to speak out on a variety of social and political

issues. Getting labeled as a communist sympathizer brought all kinds of personal travail and misery. Gender lines were still strongly drawn, and most women seemed destined to be homemakers. Opportunities in the world of business were growing dramatically, and a lot of young men enlisted in the corporate armies. Nonetheless, about half of all young men still worked in unskilled, service, or sales occupations. The Korean war (called a police action by the government) had much less of an effect on the lives of those who were not drafted or did not volunteer for military service—life seemed to go on stateside. The anomalous thing about this generation is that by the time the sexual, political, and social revolutions of the 1960s hit (“make love not war”), they were too old to be a part of it. That did not stop some 30-year-olds from joining in these revolutions, much to the dismay of families and to the detriment of some careers.

The *Vietnam generation* (1946–1955) is the first television generation. Ironically, exposure to the mindless pieties of situation comedies about family life like *Ozzie and Harriet* or the *Stu Erwin* show ended up, for many boomers (this is the first cohort of baby boomers), in protest and the active reviling of the moral and value base of such ideas, values that represented the belief system of their parents and the adult world. Adolescence became something of a philosophical and psychological entitlement; teenagers became for the first time a large influence in the entertainment and media world; their tastes were celebrated and catered to by those who wanted to make a buck. But these early boomers were also pathfinders. They stayed single longer and went to college in greater numbers (often so the men could avoid the draft), and developed a sense of social consciousness that had not been seen among youth in many generations. 1968 was a singular year in the experience of this generation: the Tet offensive in Vietnam (following the government’s assurances that they were not on the offensive); the universal draft; the unruly democratic convention in Chicago in which adult television viewers got to see their sons and daughters thrashed by the Chicago police; the assassinations of two cultural heroes—Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. All these, and a visceral distrust of anyone in the adult world, propelled youth into social protest, whether against the war, against racial discrimination, or against an insensitive and conservative government. Though those who look back see them as insular and touting that they were “more socially conscious than thou,” this generation still has a level of social consciousness that remains with them. But the protests, the activism, ended as quickly as they started.

Then the *Me generation* (1956–1965) appeared on the scene. From “burn, baby, burn” Sheehy points out, we went to “earn, baby, earn.” The business of many on this generation was the coddling and nurturance of the “self.” Former radicals turned from social protest to ersatz spiritual and mystical

adventures or to rock and roll. But the marker of this generation was their sense of being entitled to all the material and psychological goodies that were available. They were determined to advance themselves socially and egoistically. "The truest symbol of the Me Generation is Madonna. The blatant 'Material Girl' thumbed her nose at the self-righteousness of the Vietnam Generation. More than anything else, the Me's identified with her raw, shrewd, incessant striving for narcissistic recognition" (Sheehy, 1995, p. 39). The life structure of the Me generation was less a structure than an ongoing flow of possibilities. This generation withheld serious commitment to work and to others well into their twenties and thirties. This generation also seemed to have an ethos that made intimacy difficult, preferring, in a sense, the technological and methodological approaches to relationship and understanding that were focused on creating an image of who one might or wanted to be. This generation was also the first of great technological appreciation and adeptness; the first comfortable with computers and other information systems.

The *Endangered generation* (1966–1980) is roughly gen-Xers, what some have called the slacker generation. Duh, whatever. Fearful of commitments because of the broken promises of parents and government, this generation seems willing to make only the most carefully wrought interpersonal and career commitments lathered over by a "What, me worry or care?" demeanor. They have a notoriously bad press. Witness the following:

[Gen-Xers] have been bombarded with study after story after column about how dumb, greedy, and just plain bad they supposedly are. They can't find Chicago on a map. They don't know when the Civil War was fought. They watch too much TV, spend too much time shopping, seldom vote (and vote for shallow reasons when they do), cheat on tests, don't read newspapers, and care way too much about cars, clothes, shoes, and money. (Howe & Strauss, 1992, p. 78)

The fact is though that this generation, among all discussed here, received fewer supports and social interest than any other. Parents went to work, governments withdrew all kinds of child supporting programs, and many of these children were left on their own. It was in this time that the term "latch-key children" surfaced. Given these "broken promises" (Sheehy, 1995, p. 43), it is no wonder that this group is somewhat averse to making certain kinds of commitments. But a rereading of this generation currently taking place is that they, as a group, are fiercely independent, ambitious, and determined. They also have considerable purchasing power. And while large numbers of them do not get married or make intimate connections, they do forge careers or, better yet, find innovative ways to support themselves. The whiz kids of Silicon valley were primarily gen-Xers. The president of the

Sierra Club is a gen-Xer. The self-righteousness of the early boomers has given way to pragmatism and situational ethics. Whether or not this bodes well for increments in social capital for our society no one knows (Hornblower, 1997).

So generations define us. But we must also be alert to the fact that these experiences *do not necessarily reflect* the experiences and defining moments in all ethnic groups or even social classes.

SOME IMPORTANT MOMENTS IN ADULT LIFE

Leaving Home

Many years ago, the clever psychotherapist, researcher, and writer Jay Haley wrote a book on the difficulty that many children have leaving home and the attendant difficulty that parents have in knowing how to deal with this (Haley, 1997). He thought that it was mostly disturbed young adults who had this problem. The fact seems to be, however, that during the past few decades the number of children who stay at home after they have reached young adulthood and the numbers of those who return home as young adults is increasing. This is a reversal of the trend that has persisted for much of the twentieth century, the lowering of the age of first leaving the nest. The change seems to have started in the 1970s, but took hold in the 1980s. There have been many explanations for it, but two seem to be plausible: the delay of marriage (since 1970 the average age of first marriage for men has crept up from 23 to 27; for women, 21 to 25 [Hornblower, 1997]) and a decrease in hot economic prospects. These two are probably related. In addition, the lessening of subsidies of various kinds and increases of cost have made college less of an option for many youth, and thus another route to financial independence is cut off.

This generation [the twentysomethings of the 1980s—late boomers and early gen Xers] has no “call” to leave home, not to the armed services via the draft, certainly not to marriage, and increasingly not to go to college away from home, at least, not right away. At the same time there may be a strong economic “push” to remain home, given the difficulties young adults of the late 1970s and 1980s have experienced in a difficult job market, together with numerous increases in the costs of housing. (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999, p. 37)

Luckily, some of the parents of these young adults are fairly well-off and can provide them with some support. Yet, psychologically many parents are

not willing to let their children stay at home as adults and, seeing such a turn of events as a sign of immaturity or “pathology,” push them out the door. For this group of young adults, it is also important to note that the reasons for leaving home have changed in their relative balance. College, marriage, and military are less influential as flight paths out of the nest, and nonfamily reasons have increased—such as just wanting to get one’s own apartment, be independent of family influence, cohabiting with a partner, becoming a single parent, and/or getting a job (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). There is also some variance by ethnicity and social class. African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asian-Americans leave home, on average, more slowly than white young adults do. The reasons for leaving home vary in importance between the groups, however.

Social class also makes a difference. In spite of the hue and cry of middle class parents about how long their children/youth are hanging around, the largest increase in the age of leaving home is among those families in which the parents had a high school education or less. This is no doubt due to the difficulties these children may be having in cracking the new labor market and the preparation and support available to them in doing so. This may be another example of the widening and discouraging socioeconomic rift between those who are doing well and those who continue to struggle. But in the end, the pattern of leaving home is changing for other reasons—far more often than their parents or grandparents they leave to go to college, but even more often than their parents they leave to establish an independent base or to form nontraditional families through cohabitation or single parenthood (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999).

BOOMERANG BABIES

The acerbic label *boomerang babies* refers to those adult children who return home for a variety of reasons. Returning home, for a time anyway, is an increasing part of the transition to adulthood in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It has gone from being a relatively rare event to one that about half of all those who leave home (and their parents) will experience. The numbers of people returning home who left home to get married have increased somewhat (divorce and separation and poor economic prospects are driving more adult children back home). But the largest increase in returning adult children has occurred in those who left for other reasons—to go to school, to take a job, or to become “independent”—whatever that meant (usually just to get away from parents or to try one’s own wings). Those who left home to live on their own show the greatest increase. They also may have been more likely to leave early, defining, as they did, graduation from high school as the end of one’s life as homebound child (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999).

Love and Work Together

Work and love in some sense are inextricably bound together. That is to say, those things we might subsume under the banner of love—sexuality, intimacy, mating, raising a family (they don't all go together, of course)—weave in and out of our occupational and career identities and lives. These differ for men and women, to a degree, and also have cultural iterations. For women, the choices between family and home, between having children and a career, are fraught with all kinds of complexities, social pressures, self-doubts, and risks. The fact that many women are able to combine love and a career satisfactorily is testament often to their resilience, guile, drive, and cleverness. But one thing that should be noted here is that women do not necessarily bifurcate their worlds when they do manage to sustain a family and nourish a career.

Women's experience is characterized by systems of interdependencies, relationships, and networks. Women are not as likely as men to see family responsibilities as distinct from and competing with professional responsibilities. For women, the two are part of one reality and must be accommodated simultaneously. . . . This perspective suggests that returns from education are refracted not only through the lens of income, status, and career ladders but through familial and community roles. (Mickelson, 1989, pp. 59–60)

For men, the usual discussion of the evolution of work or career and its interaction with family life and love turns on the idea that work is ascendant; work rules. But some more recent research and thinking suggests that the hallmark of maturity for men is the ability to mesh the interests and demands of work with the fabric of life at home and the challenges of intimacy and, in some cases, childrearing. Such a coming together, however, is difficult for both men and women and varies by the kind of job and the demands it holds and the security it provides (Barnett & Marshall, 1992a, 1992b; Vaillant, 1993).

LOVE AND MATING: THE COMING TOGETHER OF BODY, MIND, AND CULTURE

In chapter 9 I talked a bit about the process of coming together and staying together for men and women. The work of David Buss, mentioned before, is instructive, and I will expand on it here. As you recall, it is his claim, on the basis of his study of some 10,000 people in thirty-seven different cultures in different parts of the world—rich and poor, rural and urban, East and West—that men and women have different motives in mating and forming sexual liaisons. Buss argues that these motives and intentions have

a genetic basis and, at some point in evolutionary time, were adaptive. That is, they worked to improve the reproductive success of individuals. These can be modified, to varying degrees, by culture and the immediate context of experience. They also can be modified by your interpretation of events. But these sexual “strategies” appear in all of the thirty-seven cultures, and there is evidence for them historically as well, suggesting their universality and, thus, their biological grounding. Women, for example, are judicious, if not circumspect, about the qualities they desire in a male. Women have valuable reproductive resources to give. The costs of not being careful about the selection of a mate were high for ancestral women and included abuse, deprivation of nourishment, and abandonment. So women then and women now seek those traits that suggest evidence that a potential partner has resources: maturity, standing, intelligence, age, ambition, physical strength, and skills. For ancestral women, the importance of having a strong, athletic, mature, respected (and feared) individual was to offer her protection and security for her resources and children. A woman’s children will survive and thrive if the male has these qualities. Women seek sincerity and commitment as well, but the signs of these are much harder to discern. The fact is, in every culture there is divorce, desertion, and affairs, and the preference for many partners and casual sex among males is pronounced.

Men today, in contrast, and also following their ancestral lead, seek those qualities that are evidence of fertility and, thus, reproductive success. These qualities include youth, health, physical appearance (this varies enormously from time to time, culture to culture—think of the importance of thinness in one place and time and fullness in another). These make evolutionary sense: we would only be the descendants of men and women who chose resourceful and fertile partners. Now mind you, neither men nor women are going around saying how can I ensure myself success in creating heirs? Genes—the species—promote the search. When advertisers sell beer or jeans to a market of young men, the fact that they do it with scantily clad, attractive young females as a come-on does not prompt the males to say, “Aha, look at the potential fertility therein!” When women see a commercial with a younger woman on the arm of a distinguished but clearly older man about to step into a Lincoln Town Car, they don’t say, “Thank you, genes” (Buss, 1994, 2000).

Mating and sex obviously are not poems written with the pen of rationality. Love, in all its forms, helps to ensure (but doesn’t guarantee) that when someone more resourceful, stronger, wiser, or pretty comes along you won’t necessarily junk your commitment or that when the ravages of illness eat away at you, your partner won’t say so long. But both men and women have reasons for straying, and affairs appear in all cultures (although the incidence varies considerably). Likewise, jealousy is a powerful and

common emotion. For men, many partners, in an evolutionary sense, means they out-reproduce rivals. But it also means that they must have partners. And that reality means that they understand that their mate could be a willing partner for someone else. Thus, men's sexual jealousy is deeply rooted. (The intensity of this jealousy reflects the reality that women also have a desire for other partners, though not as many or as intense as men's.) For men, there is also sperm competition. The volume of sperm in humans relative to their body weight is twice that of the males in monogamous primate species. Also, human sperm come in different shapes. The most numerous are those sperm that swim fast, heading for the desired egg. But there are other sperm, much less numerous, with coiled tails, that kill the swimmers and commit suicide in the act. Given this and the reality that sperm can survive for up to seven days in a woman's reproductive canal,

Sperm competition occurs when the sperm from two different men inhabit a woman's reproductive tract at the same time. . . . If a woman has sex with two men in the course of a week, sperm competition can ensue, as the sperm from different men scramble and battle for the prize of fertilizing the egg. (Buss, 2000, p. 17)

There may be perfectly good historical reasons for women to have had affairs. If times are lean in, say, hunting societies, having other men available may mean more resources to feed oneself and children. But most importantly, ancestral women faced the probability that their husband would not survive the rigors of the hunt or warfare, and thus affairs provided some degree of mate insurance. Under these harsh conditions, women who managed to attract other men had a degree of insurance that their resources would be preserved and that other resources would be forthcoming.

In any case, these evolutionary developments have fostered not only the bedrock of love, allure, passion, and the urge to mate, but the primary defense against the loss of these—jealousy. David Buss has argued that jealousy evolved, over millions of years, as an adaptive emotion that protects and safeguards the benefits of long-term relationships and the commitments of love. It is the essential defense against infidelity and the emotional defection of one's partner. This is a co-evolutionary development, men and women, over eons of time, developing adaptive strategies as responses to various threats to stability and loyalty. For example, part of men's adaptive response lies in the ability to conceal straying activities or interest in another's mate; for women, part of their adaptation lies in the co-evolved ability to detect and read the signals of deception. Women also have evolved the strategy of intentionally evoking jealousy. Flirting, for example, is one way of evoking a response from one's partner. If he is outraged (and she may court the real possibility of violence here), then the woman has a gauge

of the strength of the relationship. The intensity of jealousy thus gives the partners some sense of the strength of commitment. Jealousy may be an essential line of defense in assessing and ensuring commitment and loyalty. It does, obviously, have its dark side; tragedies of love and betrayal are both the stuff of lamentable headlines, wrecked personal lives, and the literature of ill-fated lovers over the ages and through all cultures (Buss, 2000).

Culture, Passion, and Mating. Although we may be propelled by evolution to practice a variety of mating and sexual strategies that, at least at one time, were adaptive, we practice them in different cultures and in different interpersonal and natural environments. Even though the desire for many partners seems universal among men, as does the desire for casual sex, each culture and its social institutions has differing sets of inhibitions or proscriptions that may increase or decrease the likelihood of such behavior as well as its erotic meaning and moral gravity. As Alfred Kinsey said years ago (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948) after his groundbreaking research on male sexuality, “There seems to be no question but that the human male would be promiscuous in his choice of sexual partners throughout the whole of his life if there were no social restrictions” (p. 589). But culture also implies interpretation, the idea that our behavior has to fit with the narrative and symbolic structure of our lives. Thus, any individual has the capacity to override, to an unknown degree, the siren call of genes and hormones.

Joan Borysenko reminds us, in her discussion of mating and physical attraction in women, that though hormones and, thus, our specieshood play a role, that isn’t all. For example, phenylethylamine (PEA), a neurotransmitter in the limbic system, may be released when in the presence of an attractive and desirable male (other hormonal/chemical activities also play a role here). Infatuation erupts. The limbic system is in high dudgeon. This passing euphoria (it may last months, however) is “nature’s way of assuring the continuation of the species” (1996, p. 84). Reason is not welcome at this party. Neither are friends with cautionary tales about this “new love.” When this all wears off or wears down, then our assessments are based upon more tangible, visible, and conscious criteria. If it turns out that this is a reliable, caring, individual, then a more secure, calm, and comfortable phase may begin. But there are more than pheromones and psychology at work here.

During infatuation we are given a glimpse of what “holy” matrimony can be. The partners think the best of one another and through the resulting kindness and encouragement bring each other more fully into being. The people flower and confidence soars. Sex, too, is usually an experience of deep communion in the beginning.

Even inexperienced partners can bring pleasure to one another when PEA has temporarily dropped the barriers around our hearts and two have become as one. . . .

Infatuation is a kind of grace, a gift that we receive without having worked for it. (pp. 84–85)

WORK

It is implicit in our evolution as lovers and mates that work or division of labor is implicated in all of this. The mating and sexual strategies discussed above were related to the ancestral economies of each gender—who had to do what in order to survive, as individuals, as a home unit, as a clan, as a community and, in the end, as a species. Today, the truth of the relationship between love and work for men and women is much more blurred and varied.

For women, the meaning of work and its reality seems attendant, as I said above, on the balance that can be won between work and love, mastery and pleasure, caring and accomplishment. Studies of women and the degree of integration and balance in these areas indicate that where the bargain is well struck, the sense of mastery, identity, and contribution to family and community is highest. This seems to be related to age, to some degree. Some younger women seem more devoted to establishing intimate links and connections in their life, seeking out a partner. But a secondary motif that for some will later emerge forcefully is the concern about personal growth, achievement, and establishment of a career or, at the least, remunerative work that can contribute to the family coffers (Merriam & Clark, 1991). But many women still encounter outside the home, in the judgments of others, in the availability of career lines, and in their own hearts barriers to full commitment of their intelligence and heart to work and family. Esther Fibush writes about one of her psychotherapy clients, Martha Morgan:

[Martha] felt that she must never compete; for it was as dangerous to win as it was painful to lose . . . She would veer from the frightening thought that she was far superior to everyone else to the sickening thought that she was no good at all. To escape this dizzying swing, Martha had turned to the substitute that is not only permitted but actively encouraged if you are a woman: the love relationship in which a woman makes herself so indispensable to a man and later to her children, that she need not compete or achieve in the world outside her home. (Fibush & Morgan, 1977, p. 129)

This is somewhat dated. No doubt the situation of many middle class women is quite different today. But still, for far too many women, the integration

of work and love (home, partnership, family) is an act requiring extraordinary devotion, some luck, understanding friends and relatives, and opportunities for employment and career in the community, and it may lead to internal conflict and strained intimate relationships.

For men, the situation is somewhat different. The emphasis on work and on consolidating a career often takes precedence over establishing intimacy—but never completely. To the career or trade, the man, if lucky, brings a sense of commitment and competence, a sense that may not be relevant for some men in their family or intimate lives (Vaillant, 1993). The research is thin, but some studies tend to show that, in terms of some standard of maturity as well as satisfaction, men who are able to synthesize the demands and joys of work with those of intimacy and family somehow do better. But it still seems true that, in many social contexts defined by culture and class, men find their primary identity in work and are more likely to make sacrifices in their family or intimate life than women for the sake of work. And where poverty and unemployment savage opportunities for work, men may suffer debilitating losses to self-esteem and a fraying connection to family and community.

Still, there are various relationships between these two domains that go beyond merely being evidence of some gold standard of maturity. Certainly, we all know that we can bring work home, that intimate tensions and conflicts can affect our ability to work, or that good things in one arena may mean good things in the other. Sharan Merriam and Carolyn Clark discovered in their research that, yes, there were patterns of interaction between these two domains. They analyzed questionnaires from 405 adults, mostly well educated, mostly white, and mostly female (293 to 112 males) who evaluated, for each year, their work and their love as either good, okay, or bad. They found (remember finding often means “constructing” and “interpreting” the meaning of the information one has) three different patterns of the way work and love (love here refers to intimate relationships, family life, and domestic affairs) interact:

1. The parallel pattern—here the events, moments, and changes in one area shape and affect the other. Many whose lives reflect this pattern speak of a conscious effort to balance and integrate the two areas, but in their minds these two areas are distinct and different, although there were a few respondents who did fuse the two areas so that distinctions between them were blurred. There were many ways to achieve the balance, and these changed as circumstances changed. Barbara, a college administrator, says, “I view them [love and work] as totally different. Once I’m at work, I don’t think of home, and when I’m home I don’t think of work. They are very distinct” (Merriam & Clark, 1991, p. 79).

2. The steady/fluctuating pattern—one domain is usually regarded as constant, not changing much, and the other as highly variable. The stable area tended to be work for most respondents. The fluctuating areas tended to be responsive to external changes in a person's life—a move, the death of a loved one—and often, for periods of time, yielded negative or difficult feelings. After her father died, a Vivian, 62-year-old librarian said, “When it actually hit [father's death] it was such a down time with me . . . it also hit me with the fact that my mother was now going to depend on me and I would feel responsible for her and I guess I was a little bit overwhelmed right at that time . . . But I also wanted to keep my stability with my work” (Merriam & Clark, p. 112).

3. The divergent pattern—here the work and love domains seem to bear an independent relationship of two kinds: they move in opposition to each other (one area is becoming better just as the other begins to sag), and they move in parallel fashion though far apart (work is good consistently over a period of time, and love is, during the same period, usually bad). Ellen says, “The work I was doing was in retail . . . something that I have always loved. . . . We increased sales 12 percent every year—we were extremely successful. . . . my husband was extremely resentful about it. It really caused more and more of a rift between us” (Merriam & Clark, p. 145).

So, in a sense, with many variations within each, there are three ways that work and love intersect, and, in this study, they did not differentiate men and women. For some people, there wasn't much of a relationship between the two domains. It is as if they were partitioned or compartmentalized. For others, the nature of the balance was to find gratification and meaning in one sphere that may not have been available in another. Yet others found the values, meaning systems, capacities, rewards, motivations in one sphere migrate to the other. So when we think about work and about personal, intimate, and family life they do, even though they are different contexts, affect one another.

A NOTE ON CLASS

In her wonderful and disturbing study of working class families from different ethnic groups, Lillian Rubin examines the issue of love and work in the stories of various families. For many men, the extending of help in the home, even though it may not add much to work they must do every week, is enough to balance the fact that their wives may have to work full-time in order to keep the family afloat financially. Gary, for example, sees that his working is different than his wife's. He must work, he says, meaning that it is the man who is supposed to support the family. So his wife Irene's job is not of the same moment. But it remains a fact that Irene, in order to

help out Gary, has to work an extra eight hours per day. So she wants a little more consistent and dedicated help from him around the house and with the children. She says, "He'll give the kids a bath or help with the dishes. But only when I ask him. He doesn't have to *ask* me to go to work every day, does he? Why should I have to ask him?" Gary says, "I mean, women complain all the time about how hard they work with the house and the kids and all. I'm not saying it's not hard, but that's her responsibility, just like the finances are mine." But Irene, like so many other women Rubin interviewed, does, in a way, count her blessings and sees that it could be worse. "He's a steady worker; he doesn't drink; he doesn't hit me" (1994, pp. 85–86). In Rubin's words:

The women, exhausted from doing two days' work in one, angry at the need to assume obligations without corresponding entitlements, push their men in ways unknown before. The men, battered by economic uncertainty and by the escalating demands of their wives, feel embattled and victimized on two fronts—one outside the home, the other inside. Consequently, when their wives seem not to see the family work they do, when they don't acknowledge and credit it, when they fail to appreciate them, the men feel violated and betrayed. (pp. 87–88)

THE SINGLE LIFE

More and more people are opting to remain single in their lives. Others find themselves single because of divorce, death of a spouse, or desertion of their partner. As a society, we don't know much about those who choose to remain single, and in some ways, we have always been somewhat circumspect about them. Myths and stereotypes about inhibited and repressed "spinsters" and lustful and indiscriminate "bachelors" are a thing of the past, but there is still some suspicion about those who opt for the single life, at least for some significant period of adulthood. There has always been something of a social rift between those who are married and those who are single, and it gets wider as people age. Sometimes singles are seen as a threat to people who are married, sometimes they are the objects of secret envy, but most often it is assumed that there is something amiss with them since marriage is a "normative" condition. The fact is that being single is one way to live life. More and more people are opting for that—at least for significant periods of their adult lives. In 1997, according to the World Almanac (based on Bureau of Census data), about 27 percent of all households were maintained by a person living alone, some of whom, of course, were divorced or widowed. And given the fact that the divorce rate remains around 50 percent

of all first marriages and that people are living for longer periods of time, the number of people who are single, for any reason and for long periods of time, will continue to rise.

Some people who are single do want to have a partner, but cannot find one or have other inhibitions that make it difficult to meet someone who might become an intimate partner. Others make being single a life choice and find their needs for love and intimacy in other ways. Culturally, we have welded together love and marriage, making it difficult to imagine other, nontraditional ways of expressing and finding reciprocal love and affection (Holland, 1992). We should understand that being single has many motivations; that it can actually be a moral, psychological, emotional, and spiritual decision; and that we really do not know much about people who choose to be single, especially since we regard marriage (and work) as the ultimate sign of maturity.

There are variations on this theme among different ethnic groups. Among African-Americans, there are any number of economic and social pressures and factors that leave many men and women unmarried for long periods of time. Robert Staples suggests a typology of singlehood for African-Americans. *Free-floating singles* do not seek a permanent relationship, are not attached to any person, and date more or less randomly. *Open-couple relationships* are those in which the relationship is loose enough that other individuals outside the relationship may be sought for sexual or romantic intrigues. *Closed-couple relationships* bind each person exclusively to a relationship where they find their needs for sexual, romantic, and intimate liaison met. *Committed singles* cohabit and have an agreement, at some point, to establish a permanent relationship. But the more tragic reality is that the high rate of mortality for African-American men, the exorbitant rates of incarceration of young African-American men, the devastating effects of poverty and the lack of regular work for some males, and the constant drumbeat of racism in the daily reality of life for African-American men lead to a high rate of unmarried women and men (Staples & Johnson, 1993). For African-American women, it isn't just the quantity of men, but the qualities sought, the most important being (as it is for most groups) employed and demonstrating economic stability. And as the above suggests, a near majority of African-American men of working age are unemployed or underemployed (Staples & Johnson). So the combination of racism, poverty, and excessive morbidity does not bode well for a committed, lifelong partnership for many women. There is a psychological component here, too. In the dominant culture, work is a central aspect of identity, especially for men (although this is increasing for women). To be unable to play the breadwinner role, especially for reasons that are beyond one's control, is a devastating blow to the psyche of many men.

It is important to say here that (1) the interaction between institutional, interpersonal racism and the relationships that develop between African-American males and females is complex, but adds an element of politics and economics to intimate relations that is hard to overestimate; and (2) remarkably, in spite of these pressures, many men and women have long and happy relationships with each other. Home is often a place where the icy fingers of racism cannot penetrate.

In the end, as they approach their forties, many people who are single need to redefine life structure, to see being single as authentic, a legitimate way to express oneself as a human being and to be in the community and family. For many, this will also entail revising the importance and meaning of work and volunteering. Work and volunteer work will become an important source of gratification, meaning, satisfaction—meaning that vocation and/or avocation will have to be taken more seriously. Last, it is important to note that having a degree of personal freedom is one of the real attractions and benefits of being single (Berliner, Jacob & Schwartzberg, 1999).

COUPLES WHO DO NOT HAVE CHILDREN

Ninety percent of all couples who can have children in any given year do. However, there is a small but growing number of couples who choose not to have children. The reasons may be economic, work-related, moral (to bring children into this chaotic, uncertain, and stressful world is not responsible), or personal/emotional (we choose to devote ourselves to each other, our family, our work, our community). This does not include those couples who, for whatever reasons, are infertile. Some make their choice provisional on the robustness of their financial and economic circumstances (certainly one reason why many women have children at later ages is the postponement of the decision dependent upon establishing a career and financial stability). Not having a family is hardly seen as a liability for men, and it is seen less so for women (at least in certain ethnic groups and in the middle classes) these days than formerly. Nonetheless, a good deal of prejudice remains for those couples, especially the women, who do choose not to have children. Says a professional musician in her thirties:

When I am in a group of fellow female workers, I am usually the only one without a child. Inevitably the subject comes up, and although said in a teasing manner, the real message of many of the comments made to me is: "What's the matter with you?" For me, the irony of all this is that most of the talk about children is in the way of complaints about the time and energy they take, etc. (J. Glass, personal communication, May, 1999).

There has been a spate of books written on the subject of “child-free” women (nulliparas), and somewhat fewer on men and women who together decide not to have children in the last two decades. Social work has been somewhat slower to come to an understanding of these women and these families. Two prominent themes run through this literature and inquiry. First, the antagonism toward and prejudice against adults who do not have children, especially women, is age-old and still strong, though tempered somewhat because the numbers of women who choose to be childless is now around 15%. Another prominent theme is that the decision is often intentional and, though it might bring some disadvantages and occasional regrets, for many women and men it is a conscious choice about how they choose to live their lives and where they will expend their moral, physical, and emotional energies (Lang, 1991; Lisle, 1996). So even though these families have their own trials and tribulations, they also have their particular joys and strengths and may require singular efforts to find acceptance, harmony, and a place in the community. Pagan Kennedy wrote of her final decision not to have children. She met up with a soulmate, an antipopulation activist, Les U. Knight, who

worked as a substitute teacher and was an outspoken advocate for children’s rights. In fact, he saw population control as an issue linked inextricably to children’s welfare since, according to him, 40,000 children die of malnutrition everyday. . . .

Hanging out with Les made me realize that there are many ways to be a mother. Some of us will bear babies, and some of us will adopt, and some of us will march with signs, and some of us will volunteer, and some of us will watch over sick friends. And we will all be right. (1998, p. 4)

Becoming a Citizen: Family and Community

Many theorists of adult development have variously noted that among the tasks of adulthood are certainly the responsibilities for completing the raising of children, possibly taking care of aging parents, adjusting to the physiological changes of midlife, perhaps revisiting and recasting the elements of one’s sexuality and intimate relationships, and beginning to take more seriously the rights and responsibilities of citizenship (generating resources and hope for coming generations) (Borysenko, 1996; Erikson, 1963; Havighurst, 1972; Levinson, 1996; Vaillant, 1993). There has not been much attention paid, however, to the role of mature citizenship, the kinds of involvements and commitments that one might make in neighborhood,

community, or government or volunteer work. But clearly, it is at midlife, especially after children have been launched, a career path has been laid down, or simply because of a change in perspective, that many people find the commitment to community. There are many barriers to becoming a citizen with full portfolio. Not the least is the highly individualized nature of the core of the dominant culture expressed, as I have said before, in the marketplace and the media and even in governmental circles. “Being all you can be” does not necessarily foster engagement in collective endeavors, mutual pursuits, collaborative projects. So many of us face a subtle and not so subtle ongoing struggle between individualism (and, I would add, familialism—focusing primarily on the well-being of one’s own family) and commitment to the larger collective. Robert Bellah and associates point out that there may be two kinds of individualism. One, with success as its motive and reward, involves being able to compete in the marketplace with other consumers and producers to one’s benefit and to the ultimate benefit of the marketplace itself. The other, with joy as its motive and reward, involves the ideal of citizens voluntarily banding together bound by mutual love and respect in the service of making some part of the world a better place. Although in their study most respondents agreed that these two types of individualism could be, in theory, pursued (and should be, many thought) Bellah and associates found reality to be somewhat different.

A fundamental problem is that the ideas that Americans have traditionally used to give shape and direction to their most generous impulses no longer suffice to give guidance in controlling the destructive consequences of the pursuit of economic success. . . . when [Americans] think of the kind of generosity that might redeem the individualistic pursuit of economic success, they often imagine voluntary involvements in local small-scale activities such as a family, club, or idealized community in which individual initiatives interrelate to improve the life of all. They have difficulty relating this ideal image to the large scale forces and institutions shaping their lives. (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1985, p. 199)

As the baby boomers screech into middle and older age (the oldest boomers turn 55 in 2001 and, thanks to the size of their cohort—78 million—by the year 2011 the number of people 65 and older will approach 15 to 17 percent of the population—it is 13 percent now—and by 2050, one-fourth of the population will be 65 and over), certain concerns typify their life “structure.” Because they are possibly the wealthiest generation (again don’t forget the middle class bias inherent in the descriptors of this generation) and because they are not, like their parents, always alert to the possibilities of economic depression, war, or living on the economic margin, their interests,

according to a recent poll, turn to the spiritual side of life, the possibility of being economically independent, forging or maintaining a satisfying intimate relationship, health, and developing a new vocational or avocational interest. Community seems far down the list of concerns and interests, although there is a fairly strong sense that the integrity and quality of community have declined ("By the numbers," 2000).

If we take community to mean, in its ideal form, people who perceive themselves as a community; who have an individual identity attached to that sense of community; and who participate together in common practices grounded in common goals and visions, make decisions and act on decisions together, and commit themselves to solving common problems or meeting common needs, then as a commodity for most of us, community would seem to be precious indeed. But, as I said in chapter 8, the relationship between individuals, families, and communities is a delicate and important one. Families are often the first barometer of stress or things going badly in a community. The community is also the immediate context where people find opportunities for relationship, support, participation, understanding, activity, contributions, meaning-making—a place where abundant social capital can significantly improve the quality of the lives of individuals and families. In fact, many observers believe that the erosion of community is at the heart of contemporary discontent, confusion about values and purpose, and the rampant increase in egoistic individualism and the importance of celebrity (Putnam, 2000; Sandel, 1996). But as usual, it is the poor who suffer most as the ties and supports of community unravel and disintegrate. As Claudia Coulton pointed out as a result of her studies of the quality of neighborhood life and child outcomes, when neighborhoods become dangerous, when crime and drug dealing and physical deterioration increase, the ties between neighbors decrease and, thus, how parents raise children changes—they are less likely to form communal or relational supports for each other and to create informal child-caring, educational, and recreational arrangements (1996). This obviously affects children and their life chances. But it also has an effect on adults. To be a fully endowed citizen; to be engaged in collective efforts; to be filled with the sense that you have some control over your life, the lives of your family, and neighbors; and to have the opportunity to do something organically beneficial for the neighborhood are, in a way, powerful components of the self at every waystation in life from childhood to late adulthood (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). In the gay and lesbian world, for example, community has been essential to the health, vitality, and even sanity of individuals and families. Judith Stacey writes:

If there is anything truly distinctive about lesbian and gay families, it is how un-ambiguously the substance of their relationships takes

precedence over their form, their emotional and social commitments over genetic claims. Compelled to exercise “good, old-fashioned American” ingenuity in order to fulfill familial desires, gays and lesbians improvisationally assemble a patchwork of blood and intentional relations—gay, straight and other—into creative, extended kin bonds. *Gay communities more adeptly integrate individuals into their social worlds than does mainstream heterosexual society; a social skill quite valuable in a world in which divorce, widowhood and singlehood are increasingly normative.* [emphasis added] (1996, pp. 142–43)

Among those who have traditionally found their ties to the community severed or loosened are people with disabilities. The labels “handicapped,” “developmentally disabled,” and “mentally retarded,” for example, operate, as labels do, to emphasize what is different, what is “deviant,” and what is “abnormal” about individuals facing various physical, cognitive, and emotional challenges. But the fact is that individuals facing these formidable labors have a variety of capacities, interests, needs, and gifts that can be expressed and discovered only in the community. A genuine community, as John McKnight (1993) has often pointed out, only functions at optimum capacity when it includes all of its members and finds places for their contributions and ways to meet their needs through the natural resources within the community. Often, when people with disabilities are brought into the matrix of community life as full-fledged residents and participants, they begin to escape the isolation and retard the deterioration that come from being marginalized and totally dependent on social and health service organizations. Robert Blair, a professor of sociology and social work at Morehead State University in Kentucky, recounted his struggle with becoming disabled from a serious accident at the age of 23 and the pain, rage, fears, limitations, and triumphs of will and soul over the years. At the end of his narrative, he makes a plea for the reintegration of people with disabilities into the community:

If communities, neighborhoods, and local organizations will encourage and sponsor activities which promote the interaction on an equal basis between these groups then, I believe, that as those interactions increase, those without disabilities will more easily observe that a disability is only a small part of who a person is. And as those with disabilities are viewed primarily as individuals with unique talents and experiences, then covert discrimination will lessen significantly. (1999, p. 14)

To consign any citizen with a disability to only that small and narrow sector of life—the agency, the institution, the group home—however necessary it is to rehabilitation, misses out on the healing and self-enhancing

properties of actual participation in the life of a community and the expression of one's gifts, however humble they may be. Nora says this about Catherine, a woman in her seventies who has lived almost her entire life in an institution and whom Nora took into her home to help provide companionship and care for her children. "Because our parents and grandparents live very far from us Catherine represents a grandmother for our family. The love the children and she feel for each other is nurturing all of them. She not only fills a gap in the lives of our children but ours as well" (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 78).

There is one other sense of the relationship between family and community that is especially important for social workers. Being an activist in the community, working for social change, doing outreach to impoverished communities, and participating in community-building activities (however modest these may be) has many moral, developmental, professional, and temperamental sources. Bellah and associates (1985) tell the story of Cecilia Dougherty, who turned to political activism in her forties following the death of her husband. She began by working in the campaign of a local democratic congressional candidate. A chance meeting led her to a feminist consciousness-raising group that, oddly enough, returned her to her roots—earlier commitments and identifications buried by her role as a spouse and a parent of four children. "I want to see the have-nots have power that reflects their numbers, and I want to protect the future of my children and grandchildren. I felt a historic family responsibility for continuing to be working for progressive causes" (p. 160). That historic family responsibility involved the emulation of her mother's inherent feminism and the labor background of her father. Her mother was an Italian immigrant, and her father was an Irish immigrant; they both worked to make their adopted country better. So Cecilia draws upon the heritage, wisdom, and courage of her biological family, springs into activism because of the unfortunate death of her husband, and works now to make life better for families and their neighborhoods in Santa Monica, California. The links between family and community are forged with steel and coated with familial love spread generously across them.

A NOTE ON THE SANDWICH GENERATION

One of the things that makes it difficult for some families to reinforce their ties to community is an increasing reality for many families. Because people are living longer, because most elders do not end up in long-term care facilities, because people are getting married and having children later, and because children are older when they leave home, many adults find themselves at midlife caring for both aging parents (maybe even both sets of parents, although that's not common) and raging (just kidding) teenagers.

In some cases, with older children returning home because of divorce, perhaps, they might even have grandchildren folded into this intergenerational mix. In terms of the actual nurturing care that may be needed for the older and the younger generations, women are usually the providers. Men may provide a degree of financial support and may help in maintaining the assets of parents. It is lucky, as Winifred Gallagher points out, that when these needful generations merge, the midlifers are usually at the peak of their powers, intellectually, emotionally, and financially (1993). Nonetheless, caring for a parent whose powers are in serious decline or if dementia has begun its inevitable corrosive course is difficult on every conceivable ground. John Daniel, recalling his life together with his parents and taking care of his increasingly frail and dwindling mother, recalls her last autumn in this metaphorical way:

In the fall she could only watch the [dogwood] tree unleaving itself. By late November of her last autumn the branches shook in the wind with only a smattering of leaves still clinging, and there came a morning when only one was left, on a lower branch near the window at my mother's end of the breakfast table. She pointed out to me and again the next few mornings. "Still there," she said, smiling as if with a secret we shared.

One morning . . . I glanced at the window and saw that the leaf had fallen. I pointed as I poured her coffee. "It's gone," I said.

She gazed blankly out the window.

"The leaf is gone," I told her. "The last leaf."

"Oh," she answered vaguely, "The leaf."

Because it was absent from her present sight she had only the faintest memory of it. The leaf was profoundly gone for her, and soon would be absolutely gone, but in my own mind it still hangs on. . . . It's only memory that holds it now, and memory, at last, that lets it go. (1996, pp. 5–6)

COMING OF (OLDER) AGE IN AMERICA

Societies vary enormously in how well elders are integrated into the daily life of the community. We saw in the discussion of the Gusii of Kenya above that elders of both genders occupy a special place in the social, civil, and spiritual life of the community. The dominant culture in America seems, at best, ambivalent about aging. I said earlier that older Americans are a growing political and economic force to be reckoned with (those people over 55 are the wealthiest age group in this country), and their voices are increasingly heard in the debates over a number of social concerns (long-term care,

Medicare, maintaining income while receiving social security payments, for example). But we still seem to not see older people (over 65, say) as fully functioning and fully endowed citizens. How often do you see older people used to sell products in the media (except Depends, false teeth fastening gel, and vitamins)? How often do you see them portrayed as sexual beings in films or on TV—except as a joke? How many times are elders depicted as heroic? Sometimes it seems as though we regard elders as little more than stumbling, bumbling, dementia-bound burdens on society. The social being of people—the social, historical, contextual content that frame older persons—has been painted in perpetually negative colors. This is a part of ageism.

The truths about aging and late adulthood, as with everything else about the human condition, are far more intriguing and intricate than our stereotypes allow. People are living longer in society as a whole (how long varies significantly by ethnicity, race, and class). The vast majority of people over 65 are reasonably healthy and active. It is true that the longer people live, the more likely they are to encounter some disability, develop some chronic condition, or experience a serious illness, but there is a certain element of curiosity here. It seems that if you make it to and beyond certain ages, some illnesses diminish in incidence and prevalence. If you make it to the seventies, there seems to be some decrease in some heart diseases; to the eighties, some decrease in certain kinds of cancers. There is now a burgeoning literature on the “hale” nineties (Baltes & Baltes, 1993), and although the rates of disability gradually increase after age 55, the fact is that more people are living an active life fifteen to thirty years beyond their retirement. That is not necessarily an unmitigated blessing. For some, it means an increase in the chances to experience common challenges of late adulthood: losses of all kinds (spouses, family, friends, partners; also the loss of certain capacities) and facing serious and/or prolonged illness and, of course, “the worm at the core”—death.

Some have made the point, and Ernest Becker made it most eloquently, that behind our occasionally disparaging treatment of older citizens and our celebration of youth is the reluctance to face two realities. First, the fact that we all face—in our bodies and, to a lesser degree (barring illness), our minds—the gradual decline of functions provokes an unwelcome anxiety. Second, the reality of death—the finality and dread of it—is something that, as a society, we choose to ignore or gloss over. We invest in cultural heroes, symbols, rituals, and practices all designed to mask the terror of death. But it isn't just death that unnerves us, it is “extinction *with insignificance*” (Becker, 1975, p. 4; 1973). In our current society, we erect youth and youthful appearance on a scaffolding that is meant to obscure the fate of every member of our species. We invest in massive cultural repression designed to quell the anxiety. This is too bad, because old age is not such a bad deal. Listen

to Morrie Schwartz, a beloved and elder professor, slowly dying from the ravages of Lou Gehrig's disease (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), in one of his conversations (or classes on dying and living) with his young friend and former student, sports writer, Mitch Albom:

[This is Mitch talking] Later that day we talked about aging. Or maybe I should say the fear of aging—another of the issues on my what's-bugging-my-generation list. In my ride from the Boston airport, I had counted the billboards that featured young and beautiful people. There was a handsome young man in a cowboy hat, smoking a cigarette, two beautiful young women smiling over a shampoo bottle, a sultry-looking teenager with her jeans unbuttoned, and a sexy woman in a black velvet dress, next to a man in a tuxedo, the two of them snuggling a glass of scotch.

Not once did I see anyone who would pass for over thirty-five, I told Morrie I was already feeling over the hill, much as I tried desperately to stay on top of it. . . .

"All this emphasis on youth—I don't buy it," he said. "Listen, I know what a misery being young can be, so don't tell me it's so great." . . .

Weren't you *ever* afraid to grow old I asked?

"Mitch, I *embrace* aging." . . .

"It's very simple. If you stayed at twenty-two, you'd always be as ignorant as you were at twenty-two. Aging is not just decay, you know. It's growth. It's more than the negative that you're going to die, it's also the positive that you *understand* you're going to die, and you live a better life because of it." (1997, pp. 117–18)

Morrie has hit upon something here that recent research on midlife and older individuals is confirming. That is, the longer you live, up to a point, the greater the possibility of wisdom. Paul Baltes, David Featherman, Orville Brim, and others have been looking at elements of this for a number of years, stimulated by the question "How much can humans actually change after the physical development has stopped (around the age of 30?" (Gallagher, 1993). The usual answer is not much. Robert Cloninger (1994) has, over the years, examined more than 1,000 individuals from age 18 to 99 and concluded, on the basis of biopsychological theory of personality development and from the data he gathered, that after the age of 30 there is little change in basic temperament or what are presumed to be genetically driven traits. That is, if you are still shy and somewhat prone to moodiness at 30, you will be at 80. But even though basic temperament may not change much, people do, in fact, change as they age. And one of the changes is that many people, no matter their race, culture, gender, religion, physical ability,

or sexual orientation, develop a kind of wisdom. This is the newer good news. The question is, how do they do it?

First, let us ask what wisdom is. Wisdom may be the capacity to grapple thoughtfully with the contentious, complex, and ambiguous matters that characterize so much of the human condition. It is not necessarily intelligence, and it seems to come with experience; some say it grows between the years 40 and 70 and even beyond for a few. Baltes and Smith (1990) believe it has to do with the conservation of great factual knowledge; the integration of one's own experience with that body of knowledge; a firm sense of the process of considering, evaluating, and mulling over; the capacity to cope with uncertainty; the ability to frame a problem or an event in a larger context; and an awareness and appreciation of the relativity of values and beliefs across time and cultures. David Featherman and associates (1993) believe that wisdom and what they call a reflective planning orientation are not the same, but both are related forms of adaptive competence. Reflective planning involves, among other things, expertise (factual, procedural, and epistemic knowledge) about the process of structuring solutions to problems. A belief in the uniqueness of every problem and the rejection of static or pro forma solutions are also a part of this reflective orientation. To engage a problem, even if it is technical, one has to understand its social, interpersonal, and cultural elements and to apply both divergent and convergent⁵ thinking. Featherman says,

At some point in middle age, we're inclined to become more tolerant of the uncertain, the complex, and the impossible, and even to learn to dismiss some problems as unsolvable or not worth our effort. Along with being good at figuring out what to do in real-life situations, the wise are skilled at advising others—in sharing their wisdom. (Gallagher, 1993, p. 68)

But all of this is dependent to an unknown degree on the sociocultural surround. If the society or culture does not value the wisdom of the elder, if it does not summon it up in most *ordinary* circumstances (don't forget, many of our politicians and leaders are middle-aged and older—but that is not ordinary), and if it is not institutionalized or lionized, will it be underdeveloped? On the other hand, as society ages (that is, the numbers of elderly grow and the mean age of the population rises) will the value of the individual and collective wisdom of older citizens increase? As social problems

5. Divergent thinking involves the generation of multiple possibilities when faced with a task or problem and is associated with creativity. Convergent thinking is the kind required on most tests—the generation of a single correct answer to a question or problem.

become more knotty and complex, full of entanglements and uncertainties, will we begin to see the wisdom of our older brothers and sisters as an important part of social capital?

Successful Aging

We know the litany of ailments and degenerative processes that afflict the elderly. We celebrate them, in a peculiar way, in much of our lore about aging and the aged. We know much less about the adaptive resilience of elders. But let us begin here by briefly examining some of the “ravages of age.” Then we will contemplate some of the aspects of resourcefulness and resilience among older people.

AGING AND DECLINE

Even the word decline here is loaded with referential and symbolic freight. What I mean is to indicate the fact that aging does bring with it a certain amount of wear and tear. But many of our “parts” wear out not so much because of use but because of design—we are programmed to only live so long. There is no question that the specter of death prompts many of us to wish for increased longevity—not just long life but one replete with youthful looks and vitality. Understanding more about the genes that control aging may, one day, allow us to more effectively treat or prevent some of the diseases and afflictions that commonly accompany aging. We have known for a long time that there is a relationship between genes and aging. If we have had long-lived parents we are somewhat more likely to live long as well—but the effect is modest, maybe around 25 percent (Herskind, McGue, Holm, Sorenson, Harvald & Vaupel, 1996). Other factors play a role, too, such as personality, luck and contingency, lifestyle (diet, exercise, health care), support networks, and positive outlook, among others. That fact that in many postindustrial societies the population is living longer, on the whole, is not due to a change in genes but in sanitation, improved quality of the water supply, diet, availability of health care, the control of epidemics, antibiotics, and many other factors. I remember reading years ago a study of a sizeable segment of the population of Mill Valley (a well-to-do northern Californian community). The purpose of the study was to see if there was a relationship between the availability and use of health and medical care and longevity (Mill Valley had more physicians per 100,000 people than just about any other community at the time). It turned out that it wasn’t the access to and use of medical care resources that made the difference. No, it was lifestyle factors, things your mom might have told you—get enough sleep, drink in moderation, don’t smoke, eat three well-balanced meals a

day, relax and play, exercise, reduce your stress, and other factors. As a matter of fact, those who conformed to most of these factors lived an average of eleven years longer than those who followed just a few. Health care made little difference.

But the body does “rust.” Recall from chapter 4 that in every cell there are mitochondria and they all have DNA. As time passes, DNA is lost, mostly through the process of cells dividing and the slips and errors in that cellular division as our bodies age. This is a sign of the process of oxidation. We use an incredible amount of oxygen per day in our cells, but some of that oxygen is dangerous—free radicals, forms of the oxygen molecule with a lonely, not a paired, electron. “When oxygen combines with metal it’s called rust. When the free radicals generated from oxygen attack our cells, it’s called aging” (Hamer & Copeland, 1998, p. 278).

ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE

The neuroscientist Alois Alzheimer (remember he was one of the neuroscientists that Kraepelin brought to Munich; see chapter 4) discovered the form of dementia (there are many forms and probably many causes) named after him. He found, upon close examination (this is the early 1900s so the close examination was nowhere near as close as it is today) that cells in certain areas of the brain had been rendered helpless and exhibited what are still understood as the singular signs of Alzheimer’s—plaques and tangles. Some neurons and their axons (the relationships to each other), for unknown reasons, become full of knots and snarls (tangles). They also show deposits of something that turned out to be a protein—beta-amyloid—in the cell bodies that causes them to become hard and not functional—plaque. Some 4 to 4.5 million Americans have Alzheimer’s. If you include other dementias,⁶ the number of people with this progressive, intractable set of diseases increases. The particular tragedy of Alzheimer’s is that it is the creeping loss of self, beginning with short-term memory loss⁷ and ending up with, as far as we can tell, a vacuous place where there was once a self-reflexive being. If it has an early onset (in the fifties, say) the disease may run a course of fifteen to twenty years. People with Alzheimer’s have a variety of symptoms

6. Other dementias include vascular dementia (usually the result of a stroke), Pick’s disease, Parkinson’s disease, Huntington’s chorea, and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. There are reversible dementias as well, including those caused by nutritional deficiencies, drug and alcohol use, and brain tumors.

7. There are many reasons for memory loss—much of which is an expression of natural aging of the brain; some of which is not paying attention. But you can tell the underlying anxiety associated with the experience of memory loss and the possibility that it might be a harbinger of Alzheimer’s in the conversation of many middle-aged people.

as the disease progresses, from acting out, to pack-rat behavior, to hostility and anger at loved ones, to accidents. The risk of physical illnesses also increases—heart attacks, strokes, and certain kinds of cancer being the most common. The behavioral and physical changes brought by the disease vary tremendously between individuals but are, in the end, devastating (Schaie & Willis, 1996).

Alzheimer's disease does seem to run in some families, so there has been a search for some genetic basis for it. Nothing much has turned up yet, but a prominent suspect is a protein called apoE4, one of three alleles (versions) of the apolipoprotein gene. Patients with Alzheimer's compared to normal controls were more likely to have this version of the gene. This means a threefold to fivefold increase in the probability of getting the disease. Two copies of the gene increased the risk eightfold (Hamer & Copeland, 1998; Mayo Clinic, 1999). However, many people who have this form of the gene do not get Alzheimer's, and there is no good reason to suspect a fat-bearing protein in the blood to be implicated in a neurological disorder. So like many aspects of the disease, this is a puzzle to be solved. The diagnosis of Alzheimer's is improving through the accumulation of knowledge of the manifestations of the progression of symptoms and through the beginning use of magnetic resonance imaging and computed and emission tomography (single-photon emission computed tomography and positron emission tomography), but it still is a diagnosis that can only really be confirmed posthumously. Medical treatment of Alzheimer's is focused on the use of the newer generation of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) that do not affect the stomach lining. Such treatment is based on the theory that the disease might have properties of a serious infection. There are also drugs that increase the availability of the neurotransmitter acetylcholine because it has been thought that a decline in the availability of acetylcholine somehow might be implicated. Finally, researchers are experimenting with high doses of vitamin E and a drug, selegiline, both of which are antioxidants.

The most progress continues to be made on how to assist, comfort, and best manage people who are on this slope, many for years, toward the loss of the self, and, very importantly, on how to support those who are their caregivers. Caregivers, of course, are important for all elders. Only 3 to 5 percent of all those over 65 are in long-term care facilities or assisted care facilities, so most of the caregiving is done at home—although, it must be said, for those in the later stages of Alzheimer's, institutional care is highly probable (Mayo Clinic, 1999; Schaie & Willis, 1996).

There are a variety of other chronic physical conditions and decrements in physical and cognitive functioning that are experienced by older people, but I would like next to talk about one that is often unrecognized or misdiagnosed and involves physical, cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal changes: depression.

DEPRESSION

Depression affects every segment of the population and every age group. Once thought to not afflict children, it is now clear that depression is no respecter of age, and although they may express or manifest it differently than adults, children most surely do become depressed. In this section, although I will comment more pointedly about elders, I will be referring to all adults, too.

Depression comes in many forms and many degrees of severity and courses but, in almost all cases, it is a total biopsychosocial and often spiritual experience. It is commonly confused with the “blues,” sadness, bereavement and grief, and moodiness. Depressive moods also can be expressed in ways that belie its true source—anger, anxiety, physical concerns and pains, acting out and aggressive behavior, drug use. Depression is a symptom of many physical illnesses (and is often the first symptom) including lupus erythematosus, hypothyroidism, a variety of viral infections, testicular cancer, and many others. Depression often follows the cessation of heavy drinking and other drug use (especially uppers). So, in a real sense, depression can be the result of the following forces, in any combination: biology (including genetic predisposition, illness), adaptive challenges (adaptive capacities and skills are overwhelmed by the demands and challenges of environmental changes and stresses), and life circumstances (chronic poverty, living with a terminal illness, living in a war-torn country, for example). Besides anxiety, it is probably the most common emotional disruption that humans experience.

Among older adults, depression is the most frequent mental health disorder. However, it is extremely hard to get an accurate picture of just how common it might be. Some older adults with the symptoms of depression are mistakenly thought simply to be showing the “signs of aging.” On the other hand, some adults who are experiencing the effects of loss—of a spouse, job, a place in society—are, in fact grieving and mistakenly diagnosed as being depressed. Furthermore, the average number of drugs—prescribed, over-the-counter, and including psychoactive drugs—taken by a person 65 years or older is twelve. Many of these drugs are prescribed by different physicians, and the interactive effects between drugs are not monitored or even suspected. Two of the most common interactive affects of drugs are anxiety and depression. Finally, heavy alcohol use or abuse among elders is probably more common than we think. Some observers think it may be as high as 15 to 18 percent of those 65 and older⁸ (Moss, Mortens & Brennan, 1993). Depression is often concomitant to such drinking patterns.

8. A study some years ago (Zimberg, 1987) found that the rate of alcoholism among widows was 105 per 1,000 compared to a general rate of 19 per 1,000. That is an astonishing difference.

The diagnosis of depression, in any age group, must follow an extensive biopsychosocial assessment, including a thorough physical exam and laboratory tests, a drug screen and psychopharmacological evaluation, a thorough review of symptoms, an accounting of significant life events (losses, for example), and a review of the current life context of the individual. The stakes are costly here. The suicide rate for elders, especially men over 60, is high, and the failure to diagnose a serious physical illness underlying the depressive symptomatology could be life threatening (Gitlin, 1996; Klein & Wender, 1993; Saleebey, 2000).

A study by Rachele Dorfman and colleagues of the incidence of depression in a nonrandom “normal” older population in Los Angeles is revealing. They used two screening procedures to enlist subjects: a forty-five-minute telephone interview that included items from two diagnostic protocols (Mental Health Inventory and the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale) and a day-long screening and health promotion clinic where individuals were evaluated for a number of functional and mental health problems. During the latter, those individuals who scored high on the two protocols were interviewed and offered counseling and referral back to their physicians by social workers. Of those 973 elders interviewed over the phone, 374 (38 percent) were thought to be at risk for depression. Sixty percent of those thought to be at risk ($n = 220$) actually attended the clinic. Of the 220 interviewed by the clinical social workers, 22 percent were determined to have major depression (according to the criteria of *DSM-IV*). Most interesting were the findings about “risk” factors (there was not a concomitant analysis of protective factors, although one could make some inferences). Women were at higher risk than men (this is a finding for all age groups, although there are many possible interpretations of this, such as men handling depressed feelings differently—excessive drinking, sexual acting out, throwing themselves into work, etc.—thus making an accurate diagnosis more difficult). The lower the socioeconomic status, the higher the incidence of depression. Unmarried people had a higher risk of depression than married people did. There was a correlation between illness, especially health problems that limited mobility, and depression. Finally, social isolation and depression were correlated, although it would be hard to say what comes first, the isolation or the depression (Dorfman et al., 1995). In any event, it seemed likely to the researchers that depression was more prevalent among elders than previously thought and seriously underdiagnosed. Although they constitute 13 percent or so of the population, older adults 65 and over may account for 20 to 25 percent of all clinical depressions (Saleebey, 2000).

A related challenge here is the loss of a spouse. Widowhood is a harsh label and carries a lot of emotional encumbrance, but it is inevitable for

married couples. About three-fourths of existing widows are women, some of who lost their spouse at a relatively early age. The first six months after the death of a spouse (this seems more true for men than women) seem particularly risky—the death rate of the surviving spouse rises precipitously, as does the incidence of depression and anxiety. The demographics for survivors changes dramatically over time as well. The ratio of women to men for those aged 65 to 69 is 120:100, but by the age of 85 it is 256:100. In spite of this, a few of those who are widowed get remarried (there are fewer and fewer eligible men, however) or at least establish informal, companionate, often intimate relationships (Saleebey, 2000; Schaie & Willis, 1996; Walsh, 1999).

The good news is that, in most cases, major depressive disorder, even that having a biochemical basis, is eminently treatable. But an accurate, painstaking assessment is absolutely essential because depression can be the result of so many other conditions or can be disguised or masked as some other plight or state. No matter what the age, medications, support groups, education, certain kinds of psychotherapy (interpersonal psychotherapy and cognitive behavioral are the most effective) and even electroconvulsive therapy (not the kind made infamous from the 1940s to the 1970s) can be helpful. In addition, attention to diet, the use of supplements, and exercise can bring sometimes considerable benefits (Austrian, 1995; Gitlin, 1996).

AGING WELL

My dad is 87; his three brothers range in age from 83 to 91. Clearly, they benefit from their genetic background—long lives are the rule not the exception. But other things contribute as well. My dad's temperament has always been flush with optimism, an outgoing nature, and relative fearlessness. In addition, he is extraordinarily active. He goes to a club every morning where he and his buddies "solve most of the problems of the world." He plays dominoes three times a week and competes in international tournaments. He plays bridge once or twice a week and poker once every two weeks. He has garage sales and is a habitué of others' garage sales. He and a buddy do estate sales every now and then. He travels. He maintains close relationships with every generation of his family. He has not had major health problems. His third wife (of twenty-five years) died recently. For six months he cared for her and met her exaggerated medical needs virtually alone. He never thought that his was an unfortunate lot; "I did what I had to do." Much of his time, since his retirement twenty years ago, is spent engaging in what I could only call service to others. Finally, he said to me recently, "You know I don't think about dying; sometimes I just don't think I will die. I'd love to be a 100, but if not, so be it."

My dad is no paragon of virtue or biology, but in his story you can see many of the elements that go into successful aging. Paul Baltes and associates have spent years studying the differences in paths of aging for individuals and groups. From this, they have developed some useful ideas in thinking about how people age and why some people are better at it than others. To begin, a caveat of sorts—there is *great variability in how people age*. This variation and heterogeneity is probably affected by three general factors. First, the interaction between genetic predispositions and environmental conditions is critical and obviously intricate; also, the interaction may have a cumulative effect over time, enhancing some genetic factors. It seems clear that, in my father's case, he has a strong genetic push toward longevity. But he also lives in a propitious and benign natural environment (San Diego), interactional environment (he has many constant friends and relatives), and socioeconomic environment (he is financially secure and his surrounding social environment is secure and relatively stress-free as well). Second, there are many ways in which individuals influence and shape their own life course. The interpretation of events, opportunities and tragedies alike, their very construction, is critical here. Likewise, choices that people make about lifestyle can be critical to modifying the subtleties of the aging process. My father decided thirty years ago to quit smoking and hasn't lit up since. He also decided more recently to begin walking every day. But it really is his lifestyle, the network of friends and family, the variety of interests that he pursues that add life to his life. Finally, there are pathologies and illnesses that can intersect the life path at any time and divert it or truncate it (Baltes & Baltes, 1993). James was a successful African-American faculty member at a major university. He taught in the business school. He was in his early fifties. He decided to take up cycling for his health and in addition to recreational cycling, he rode a bike to work. One day, he was making a turn at an intersection, going pretty fast in order to beat oncoming traffic, his tires lost traction on gravel, and he was thrown from his bike, hitting his head sharply on the curb. He suffered severe and irreparable neurological damage. Since that day he has been on the medically assisted floor of a long-term care facility. He can barely speak, cannot take care of his most basic grooming needs, and has to be fed. The hand of contingency brought a degree of trauma that has made his life course extraordinarily different and abridged, in terms of quality. So aging is not a uniform, predictable process but highly mutable, subject to the blandishments of genes, environment, interpretation, trauma, and luck.

Another element that intensifies the plasticity of the aging process is the availability of *latent reserves*. This is the academic version of the pop aphorism, "If you don't use it, you lose it." This means that through training,

learning, exercise, or exposure to enriched social and interactional contexts, older adults have considerable reserves and can learn new cognitive and behavioral skills. The irony of this is that in many of the social contexts and roles we encourage or provide for older adults, the norm is passivity and dependence, not activity and independence. Many long-term care facilities and even “golden communities” subscribe to a view that elders are relatively inert receptacles for programs and practices conceived by others that do not stretch the imagination, the physical capacity, or the intellectual reach of older adults. This is changing, but we have a long way to go. Another element of this is that some studies have shown that new learning, new skills, and new cognitive capacities can be acquired independently by healthy older adults (Baltes, Sowarka & Kliegl, 1989). There are limits to cognitive reserves that become more obvious the older a person gets, so that even with practice they cannot do as well as younger individuals or as well as they once did. Nonetheless, we frequently, via policy, program, or practice, ignore the potential and the innate reserve capacity of older adults.

Knowledge and technology can have a profound effect on how we age. We can overcome some of the biological and cognitive effects of aging through the development of strategic and pragmatic strategies of knowledge development and technical aptitude. These can be taught or they may be discovered as the individual attempts to adjust to the loss of some skills and mechanical deftness. Remembering that knowledge is a social, cultural, and interactional product as well as a technical autonomous phenomenon, we would do well as a society to provide technical, intellectual, and cognitive support systems and to teach strategies of adaptation and extension of skills to enrich the lives of the older people. In turn, they enrich the lives of others in ways yet unimaginable (Baltes & Baltes, 1993).

Other strategies for successful coping with aging include *selection*, the narrowing of domains of one’s interest in order to maximize performance and involvement, and this may include novel arenas of interest; *optimization*, the continuing quest for behaviors and opportunities to enrich and enhance one’s general reserves and adaptive capacities; and *compensation*, when skills clearly diminish, people seek to augment their performance with technical or cognitive or physical compensatory devices and strategies (Baltes & Baltes, 1993).

Our culture is unkind to people who are old. Too often, we poke fun, ignore, isolate, and stereotype our elders. The context of aging—the network of resources and relationships, the cultural meaning wrapped around the idea of aging, the technical supports and tools, the systems of medical, and social services—is critical to how elders are treated and how they see themselves and their world. As a society we are in uncharted territory. With

more and more people living longer, we have more older adults living alone, more who are married, more who are retired, and more who have serious medical and health needs. But nonetheless, we should be mindful of what Betty Friedan once called the “strengths that have no name” when discussing older adults. May Sarton said in her essay *At Seventy* that this can be the best part of life because we are less fearful of being ourselves, we have achieved more balance, we are clearer about those things in life that are important to us, and we have a moral perspective that instructs and guides without so much doubt (Walsh, 1999).

DYING AND DEATH

Morrie (see above) has sage and direct things to say about death.

“Everyone knows they’re going to die . . . but nobody believes it. If we did we would do things differently.”

So we kid ourselves about death, I [Mitch Albom] said.

“Yes, but there’s a better approach. To know you’re going to die, and to be *prepared* for it at any time. That’s better. That way you can actually be *more* involved in your life while you’re living.”

How can you ever be prepared to die?

“Do what the Buddhists do. Every day. Have a little bird on your shoulder that asks, ‘Is today the day? Am I ready? Am I doing all I need to do? Am I being the person I need to be?’”

He turned his head to his shoulder as if the bird were there now.

“Is today the day I die?” . . .

“The truth is Mitch . . . once you learn how to die, you learn how to live.” (Albom, 1997, pp. 81–82)

The truth is, Mitch, that we do not face the reality of death in the dominant culture very well. I talked earlier about Ernest Becker’s trenchant ideas about our denial of death, a denial that stems, in part, from our discomfort with the idea of our organismic limitation and deterioration so that elements of the culture become means to perpetuate the lie—that we will not die, that we can transcend mere organism, that by hitching our wagon to heroes and celebrities, to political causes and moral crusades and devotions, we will be immortal. Every culture, in this way, is an immortality project (Becker, 1973). But, some cultures are more prone to deny, while others defy, and yet others accept.

In many Latino cultures death is not ignored. In these Latino societies, for example, the Day of the Dead is an important expression of religious belief and an attempt to come to terms with the eternal foe. This fiesta is held once a year and entwines folklore, religious belief, and poking fun at

and taunting the specter of death. In Mexico, it is a ritual of mourning and grieving that takes place each year for four years after the death of a family member. On this day, the family erects a portable altar decorated with a photograph of the dead person and some of his or her favorite things and surrounds it with flowers that can only be used for this ritual and with the person's favorite foods. After a day of visitation from friends and relatives, the altar is taken to the cemetery. Close family (usually women and children) may stay the night to keep company (Falicov, 1998, 1999). Celia Jaes Falicov quotes Octavio Paz on the Mexican view of death:

The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love. True, there is perhaps as much fear in his attitude as that of others, but at least death is not hidden away. (Paz, 1961, p. 49; cited in Falicov, 1999, p. 148)

Death, of course, leaves survivors. For spouses, widowhood can be a difficult state and for children it can be difficult—especially if death is premature or unexpected and sudden. Many bereaved spouses become depressed, perhaps as many as 5 percent seriously clinically depressed and between 15 and 20 percent with some degree of depression. There is an increase of death and suicide rates in the months following death, and this is more true of older men than older women. This may be in part due to two things: many men find at retirement that their status and purpose in life is deflated because male identity, at least for previous generations, is wrapped so tightly around work, and men are often connected to the community and others through their spouses. So when a spouse dies, some men are deeply alone, isolated, and in despair. For women, the greatest problem is a diminishing of financial resources and bleak prospects for remarriage. Women over 75 are at serious risk of poverty, more than 50 percent have incomes of \$10,000 or less (Walsh, 1999). But for most people, thanks to a conscious grieving process, the comfort and understanding of family and friends, and concrete supports (like moving in with one's children), do move beyond grieving, although it does seem harder for men since, for many men, the expression of feeling is very difficult. There is also the issue of complicated grieving, a state of mind and mood that looks, after some years, like depression but is in fact unresolved grieving that the person is likely no longer aware of.

Joan Borysenko tells of the night her mother died. She and her son Justin were sitting on the bed where her mother was slipping away. Borysenko recalls that there was a sudden shift in her consciousness and awareness, and she then had a vision in which she was a pregnant mother giving

birth and was also the child being born. Her awareness then shifted totally into the body of the child being born and she was propelled down a long tunnel and came upon a light much like the people who have had near-death experiences describe. The light—"a kind of formless divinity"—shone love, bliss, and mercy. As if the light had seen to the bottom of her soul, she was told that she was pure because of her repentance and acknowledgment of the mistakes she had made in forty-three years of life.

I was told many things about the relationship my mother and I had shared, and every trial and difficulty seemed to have a higher purpose. At that moment I realized that our lives together had come full circle. My mother had birthed me physically into this life and I had just birthed her soul back out of it and had been reborn in the process. (1996, p. 250)

CONCLUSION

We have covered a lot of ground here. In the process, we have also skipped over much terrain as well. I hope that this review gives you renewed appreciation for the variety and complexity of life and how the filaments of genes, family, community, contingency, and sheer determination and will-power all charge each other to make possible the inevitable light of a life well-lived or a life faltering, even a life betrayed by circumstance. There is always, in each life, something of a miracle of survival or steadfastness or surprise or success, even in lives where you would not suspect that would be so. To work with others is, in a sense, to celebrate and acknowledge the miracle or to help make it happen when vitality is snuffed out by circumstance or unfortunate decision.

Time flies. As coach Al McGuire once said about getting older, "It seems like I'm having breakfast every 20 minutes." Ogden Nash put it this way in *You Can't Get There From Here* (1957):

How confusing the beams from memory's lamp
are;
One day a bachelor, the next a grampa.
What is the secret of the trick?
How did I get old so quick?

That's a miracle of sorts, too.

M and M Dialogue

MEREDITH: I remember my grandmother on my mother's side. She developed multiple sclerosis, probably early in life but it went undiagnosed

for a long time. I can recall that she used to slur her speech a little and when I got older I thought she was probably taking a nip or two of sherry in the kitchen. Finally, after ruling out every other conceivable illness, when she was 50 she was diagnosed with MS. She just gradually deteriorated but my granddad, he was a fireman, took care of her at home. It must have been a really stressful time for both of them. But neither of them said very much about it and we sort of took it as okay, nothing unusual, which, when I look back, is probably how they wanted it. But I remember he did retire early so he could take care of Grammy.

MITCHELL: How long did this go on?

MEREDITH: For a lot of years. I guess the thing we all noticed was changes in her degree of mobility. At first she could walk, although she looked like she was a little tipsy. Later she needed a cane to walk, then a walker, and finally a wheelchair. This happened, as I recall, over a period of five to eight years. She had a harder and harder time with her speech and her vision became really terrible. You could see, at the end, that my granddad was really under a lot of stress. He never said anything but every time I saw him he always looked tired and he was more irritable than I ever remember. My brother who lived in the same town saw them all the time and said that he thought that Grampy's heart attack was directly related to his caring for Grammy. Someone came into the home to help my grandmother, and my brother arranged for family to help too, while Grampy was recuperating. But soon he was back at it. They did not want any outside help. I do think that Grampy thought that it was his religious obligation to do this on his own. He was a quiet but extremely devout Catholic. Grammy always said that he should get some help but he wouldn't do it.

MITCHELL: Looking back, how do you see that? Was he heroic, doing something extraordinarily decent and good or was he foolish, compromising his own health and his ability to care for her?

MEREDITH: I don't think it matters. He did what he thought was best and he knew that no one could give her the care and attention and love he could.

MITCHELL: You're probably right. But we do make judgments all the time about how people should handle situations like this. I guess, in your grandfather's case, to have tried to impose some sort of alternative care-giving system would have been an insult of sorts.

MEREDITH: Yes. When it finally did come time for her to be placed in a long-term care facility, he didn't resist, he knew it was right. But, in a sense, he still did it his way. In his late seventies, with failing eyesight and high blood pressure barely under control, he drove every day and I mean every day, to the nursing home, twenty-five miles each way, rain or

snow, it didn't matter. He stayed there with her five or six hours. While he was there, he did everything for her—feeding her, bathing her, talking to her. Her speech was so garbled that no one could understand her—except Grampy, that is. I guess by today's standards he might be called co-dependent or something but he was truly remarkable and he never once complained. My brother would even try to get him to let off a little steam about the situation. He never did. He did this for six years. Ironically, one day he was feeding her. She had a terrible time swallowing so it took a long time for her to get enough nutrients for it to be called a meal. He had just spooned something in her mouth, turned to watch something on the TV. When he turned back just moments later, she was choking. He called for the nursing staff. But it was too late. She died in his arms. I have such admiration for them, this couple, humble and modest, who waged such a heroic battle against these circumstances. I just hope that in our efforts to help we don't trample on people's wishes or capacities to help.

MITCHELL: Would he have been better off with, say, some respite care?

MEREDITH: Honest to God, I don't know. I do know—my brother told me this—that he did two things that seemed, at least in my view, to reduce tension. He had a Manhattan cocktail every night before dinner (a pretty hefty one, my brother says). And every morning, early, he would go to church and pray. Stress management, I guess. No, more than that. He did not go to formal mass but the church was, in some way, the root of his strength. I think my mom was a big help, too, although at first she was going through hell with the divorce and her depression and all. But later her visits seemed to have a steadying effect on everybody.

MITCHELL: I guess as professionals we don't want to interfere with the reparative processes or resilience of those we try to help. Doing social work sometimes requires us to make a judgment about when or not to intervene. And it's a tough call.

MEREDITH: Yes, I can see that.

MITCHELL: How did your grandmother cope with having this disability?

MEREDITH: She was distraught at first. Didn't want to see friends, even family. And the more obvious her illness got, the more reclusive she got. No more family dinners, poker games. But at some point something happened. I don't know what exactly. My mother, my brother and I talked about it and we think it might have been the appearance of great-grandkids on the scene—mine, and my brother's. Mine weren't around that much because we lived some distance away but my brother's were—he had like four in rapid succession. They didn't seem to care about the illness because this is all they knew; this was their Grammy,

for all they knew this is what she was always like. Maybe they even thought that all Grammys were like this.

MITCHELL: Maybe.

MEREDITH: Real quickly, I want to go back to something totally unrelated. All the stuff about mating and biology. It really does sound more than a little sexist to me.

MITCHELL: Perhaps so. How do you think it is?

MEREDITH: Well, what men and women look for. I find it hard to believe that what a lot of feminists—men and women—have called stereotypic seem rooted in biology and our genes. Did this guy, David Buss, go into the study with some sort of male assumptions that he was bound to affirm?

MITCHELL: I don't know. I do know that many individuals, males and females, were involved in designing and carrying out the study. But consider this. Even if the fact that men exert control over resources and exert control over women and their sexuality, which is at the heart of some feminist critiques of the current situation between men and women, there still may be some reason to suspect an evolutionary basis for this. Buss's study shows similar patterns of mating, and male and female sexual strategies, rooted in economic circumstance, and, ultimately, it would seem, designed to promote reproductive success. Men's control over resources contributes to their success; if women choose men who have resources, it contributes to their success and safety, and the survivability of their children. Think of this, in evolutionary terms. Men who failed to control women's sexuality—they didn't attract a mate, they were cuckolded, they didn't hold onto a mate—were less likely to have children or had lower reproductive success over all.

MEREDITH: But doesn't this sound an awful lot like an excuse for men to continue oppressive behaviors?

MITCHELL: Well, I think maybe the naturalistic fallacy is involved here.

MEREDITH: Which is?

MITCHELL: Basically you mistake what *is* for a moral prescription of what *ought* to be. Just because things exist in nature—and that includes things like viral infestations, plagues, wars, famines—does not mean they should be. It does not mean that, in terms of our values, we should not strive to overcome or meliorate them. Aggression and war seem a part of the human condition and human nature. But should we give up trying to create a more peaceful world? I think not.

MEREDITH: Well-l-l. I may have to chew on that for a while.

MITCHELL: See you soon?

MEREDITH: Sure.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Reprise, Vision, and the Final Conversation

Inevitably there are ideas, theories, evidence, and perspectives that are missing, that I have forgotten or shortchanged. In this final chapter, I want to acknowledge some of those. Further, I want to craft a vision of what Stanton Peele once called “a world worth living in.” Finally, I want to give Meredith and Mitchell a more extended time to finish their conversations and dialogues. The two come from the voices in my head, the conglomerate gabby memories of family, students, scholars, friends, and colleagues I have known over the years.

REPRISE

Each one of you has ideas and perspectives that you believe I should have included in this book. Furthermore, I have ideas that are in the book that I want to recast and reiterate. In this section, I will attempt to do honor to both.

Spirituality

The idea of spirituality is implicit, I think, in the discussions of and allusions to meaning-making. Ed Canda has written with great wisdom about the nature of spirituality. Summarizing his perspective, I would say it has three core assertions. First, spirituality refers to the essential, holistic quality of being that transcends the merely biological, psychological, social, political, or cultural but incorporates them all. Some, like Thomas Moore, refer to this transcendent essence as soul, the seat of the possibility of the sacred and the awareness of the magic of enchantment. This quality obliterates categorizations and dichotomies such as that between mind and body, substance

and spirit (Canda, 1997; Moore, 1996). Second, spirituality reflects our struggle to find meaning, a working moral sensibility, and purposes that extend beyond selfish, egoistic concerns. Finally, spirituality refers to an essence that extends beyond the self, that defies ego boundaries, and that allows us to join and revere the mysteries and complexities of life. This might be manifest in visions, peak experiences, cosmic revelations, experiences of the numinous and awe-inspiring. Moore says about the numinous:

[It] seems most accessible to the “beginner’s mind,” to the child’s attitude of wonder and lack of ambition. It appears once our striving for it has diminished and once we simply open our eyes without concern for high spiritual achievement, discovering that the numinous is as commonplace as the sun setting behind a cloud or the moon casting blue shadows on a snowy scene. (p. 303)

But in the innocent’s eyes are reflected forces and encounters that go beyond the usual experience of everyday life crafted from our roles and obligations, our busyness and business, our trials and troubles.

Spirituality, as many have noted, is not religion, though it may clearly be an element of religious experience and participation, even institution. The capacity for revealing and relishing the spirit allows us ordinary humans to bridge and transfigure the often dangerous differences that we set for ourselves daily—the divisions of race, of gender, of belief, of culture, of age, of ability. In many of the snippets and fragments of life stories in these pages, one experiences wonder and awe, respect and reverence, whether it is in the forgiving of children we have relegated to poverty and racism or indigenous peoples affirming their soulful relationship with the spirits who heal and comfort.

In social work, we would do well to understand that spirituality is a quality of being that can bring a new level of understanding, appreciation, and energy to our work (but it only happens if we allow ourselves the luxuriance of soulfulness). Regrettably, far too many social agencies, social programs, and policies are engendered from a barren view of the nature of human being. They are too often not places or programs of renewal and veneration but of stultification and limitation.

The Ordinarity of Everyday Life

Eating, drinking, making love, driving or taking the metro to work, going on a picnic, having relatives over for Sunday dinner, taking a walk in the park, catching a cold, working, listening to music, praying, playing pickup

basketball, being sick, fixing a leaky faucet, reading a novel, taking a young child to the zoo, decorating an apartment, taking a nap, playing poker with friends, all the things we do and we share because we are human and have a life to live are sometimes obscured by the veil of theory or concept and the modernist requisite for evidence.

I don't know how we can bridge the gap here. But as a social worker this is what you do, in part. You enter the life of an individual, a family, a community, and you have to open yourself to the sights, sounds, smells, rhythms and tempos, activities and moods, and shape of daily life there. In a way, it does require a kind soulful contemplation and respect to enter that lifeworld, to understand the songs and stories that abound there. Somehow we are obligated to bring our theory to the street without muffling the cadence and lyrics there.

It is, however, in the ordinary that we find the heroic, the tragic, the magical, the forbidding. A mother caring for a child dying of a slowly lethal illness; a woman who raises twelve children in a bereft and besieged public housing community; a man working two jobs so he can send his children to college—the first members of his family to do so. The heroics of everyday life are rarely recounted in the public arena. We sometimes do not even notice because they are humble, modest, hidden, or smothered by the din of celebrity and horror that constitutes so much of public collective life. But in the ordinary, if we look, we may find the magical, the extraordinary, the beautiful, the “truth.”

Vladimir Nabokov, the prolific and esteemed Russian author, found in the lives of butterflies the grace and mystery of the ordinary and natural world. Nabokov's interest, maybe obsession, led him to study these creatures with the passion and skill of an accomplished naturalist. In an interview in 1967 he said,

In summer [my life] is calmer. My wife and I set off traveling in search of butterflies. I adore mountains, in Switzerland, in Italy, in the south of France. I like staying at a thousand meters and climbing up every day to at least two thousand meters to chase alpine [a type of butterfly] there. I know few things sweeter than to go out early in the morning with my net and take the chairlift towards a cloudless sky, following underneath myself, at the side, the shadow of the airborne chair with my seated silhouette climbing, the shadow of my net in my fist, sliding along the slopes, waving under the alders, still climbing, slim, supple, rejuvenated and stylized by the effect of projection, crawling graciously in an almost mythical ascension. The return isn't so pretty, since everything has changed place, and you see the shadow stunted, you see two big knees,

everything has changed. (Dommergues, 1967, p. 62; cited in Boyd, 2000)

Most of us can't romp around the alps, but we can recall in some of the commonplace, uncomplicated pleasures we take such poetry and excitement. For me, such a moment is sitting in the sun right before the beginning of a baseball game, anticipating the joys to come, all promised in the wonderful symmetry of the playing field.

In describing her struggles with eating until she was 33—"I ate, starved, binged, purged, grew fat, grew thin, grew fat, grew thin, binged, purged, dieted, was good, was bad, grew fat, grew thin, grew thinner"—Ann Lamott reminds us just how something as simple and everyday as eating can become torturous and tricky (1999, p. 190). Finally, after quitting drinking and drugs ("I felt that when I got sober, God had saved me from drowning, now I was going to get kicked to death on the beach. It's so much hipper to be a drunk than a bulimic. Drunks are like bikers and wrestlers; bulimics are baton twirlers, gymnasts" [p. 192]), she goes to see Rita, a therapist who specializes in eating disorders. Rita makes her attend to the ordinariness of eating.

"Why did you have breakfast?"

"I had breakfast because it was breakfast time."

"But were you hungry?"

"Is this a trick question?"

"No. I just want to know how you know it's time to eat."

"I know it's time to eat because it's mealtime. It's morning so I eat breakfast, or it's midday, so I eat lunch. And so on."

She finally asked me what it felt like when I was hungry, and I could not answer. . . .

So for the next week, my assignment was to notice what it felt like when I was hungry. It was so strange. I was once again the world's oldest toddler. . . . And I paid attention until I was able to isolate this feeling in my stomach, a gritchy kind of emptiness, like a rat was scratching at the door, wanting to be let in.

"Wonderful," Rita said, and then give me my next assignment: first, to notice when I was hungry, and then—this blew my mind—to *feed myself*. [emphasis added] (1999, p. 195)

There is something almost spiritual in the attention paid to and the fascination with something as ordinary as eating. This, too, is a kind of intrigue. "Every repast can have soul and can be enchanting, it only asks for a small degree of mindfulness and a habit of doing things with care and imagination" (Moore, 1996, p. 60). This is precisely what Rita is asking of Ann Lamott. Sometimes, in our anxiety to be professional, we lather over

ordinary events and processes with categorical assessments, grids of diagnosis, labels and schemes of all kinds. In doing so, we sometimes fail to see the people and the activities there. In doing community work, for example, it is absolutely essential to abandon oneself to the beat and to hear the music of the people who live there. Program and policy, technique and method are never enough.

Multiculturalism

I have talked often about the role of culture in setting the symbolic frame for understanding the sense and essence of the many contexts in which we live our lives together. As we have seen, culture insinuates itself into our identities as well as our social institutions. These are attractive and compelling ideas, but some cautions should be issued here. No culture is monolithic. Many of us live our lives in the borderlands of many cultures, some more compelling than others. These give rise to disharmony and paradox as well as shared and public union. But we would do well to remember that the borderlands, as Renato Rosaldo as shown us, occur at the edges of officially recognized cultures. One can have Lebanese and Irish ancestry, be a Presbyterian, be a United States citizen, and live in a neighborhood of primarily Asian-Americans. Add to that mix the insistent flavor of social class and we have a truly distinctive concoction. Cultures are almost always in a state of flux as well. As they intermingle, cultures inevitably change each other. One piece of evidence of this that we have noted before is in the attitudes, language, and behavior of the children of immigrant parents. At first, sons and daughters reflect the discordant melding of their parents' culture and the one that dominates the world outside their family. Soon the cultural harmonies of the parents begin to fade in the younger generation's demeanor and relationships, although never completely disappearing.

Celia Jaes Falicov cites the experience of the Chicana poet Gloria Anzaldúa whose experience highlights and sharpens life in the borderlands:

The new mestiza [a woman of mixed Indian and Spanish ancestry born in the United States] copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be Indian in a Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad, and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 79, cited in Falicov, 1998, p. 15).

As Rosaldo argues:

The fiction of the uniformly shared culture increasingly seems more tenuous than useful. . . . human cultures are neither necessarily coherent nor always homogenous. More often than we usually care to think, our everyday lives are crisscrossed by border zones, pockets, and eruptions of all kinds. . . . Along with “our” supposedly transparent cultural selves, such borderlands should not be regarded as analytically empty transitional zones but as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation. (1989, pp. 207–8)

Given this, it is requisite for the practitioner in border zones as well as singular cultures to be open to the possibilities, nuances, stories, rituals, tools, tastes and colors of culture and multicultural. This demands of us an openness, readiness, respect, and a certain fearlessness and curiosity. Thus, we can become apt students of the culture(s) that we find ourselves working in.

However, to become culturally competent sends us beyond mere sensitivity and appreciation. Doman Lum, who has done much to develop the elements that forge cultural competence, says that we must understand its various elements, including:

1. Cultural awareness—the awareness of one’s own culture, of positive and negative experiences with other cultures, of one’s prejudices, and having contact with other cultures.
2. Knowledge—developing an understanding of the elements of diversity, knowledge of the demographics of particular cultures, understanding the history of oppression and triumph of other cultures, awareness of the strengths of other cultures as well as their values, beliefs, and tools.
3. Skill—knowing how to engage, assess, and assist members of other cultures within the context of their daily lives, through methods and appreciations that respect, enhance, and summon cultural strengths and resources.
4. Inductive learning—on the basis of continuing experience in the domain of different cultures, and in dialogue with others, developing a vibrant and dynamic understanding and culturally competent practice (1999, pp. 29–41).

The beauty of other cultures and those hothouse borderland environments must not be lost, however. The lore, the myths, the rituals and ceremonies, the history, and the narrative structure of cultures (or their smaller units) are to be treasured and introjected into the very footing of one’s professional soul. How could this not move one?

His right wing opened
to the west

Feathers pointed North
Wind from the East
 over the dunes
 from the steadfast mountains
 making his feathers
 wrap around his sandy face
 like human hairs
 over a goddess's cheek.
The deep Blue of evening
Captured the sheen of feathers made.
This Turquoise wing cradles
 his white head
 and
 yellow beak
 as he spoke.

(Loren Straight Eagle Plume, cited in Hausman, 1992, pp. 40–41)

The eagle has a special place in the mythology of Native Americans who celebrate its power and its mystery. Isn't it more than a little ironic, even tragic, that the emerging United States, the oppressor of the indigenous peoples, appropriated the eagle for its own symbol?

Technology

We are in the midst of a mind-blowing mad ride on the developmental rollercoaster of technology, particularly information and communication technology. Of course, other technological eggs are hatched every day—biotechnology, for example. This particular eruption of technological development may be as shattering and transfiguring as the printed page. But, for those over the years who have issued cautionary tales about technology, the story is not the technology per se, but the assumptions that support it, the frames of mind that give birth to it, and the unforeseen consequences of employing it. Technology oozes into the world and inevitably makes a statement about who we are, who we can be, and who we should be. Consider the Internet, more particularly its recent development as a shopping mall. Ellen Ullman points out that part of the enormous success in commercialization of the Internet is a process called “disintermediation.” Creators of Internet shopping have removed all the intermediaries that traditionally have been a part of our daily commercial transactions—agents, brokers, and experts of various kinds: librarians, curators, disc jockeys, editors, intellectual analysts and critics; small retailers and salespeople; travel agents; real estate agents; and stockbrokers. “We are living through an

amazing experiment: an attempt to construct a capitalism without salespeople, to take a system founded upon the need to sell ever greater numbers of things to ever growing numbers of people and to do this without the aid of professional distribution channels” (2000, p. 32). In essence, this is the doing away of “the city in all its messy stimulation, to abandon the agora [mall] for home and hearth, where it is safe and everything can be controlled” (p. 32). Well, I can imagine many people who might say good riddance (I hate malls myself). But this has larger implications. The most profound is that it replaces the heady mix of culture on the streets and the democratic scuffling of politic life (if we don’t need shops and sellers, banks and brokers, museums and curators, we don’t need government and we don’t have to worry about the *vox populi*). The replacement is the lone ego, the solitary family, nestled in the home, who are encouraged—no, entitled—to have whatever it is that they want. This is a worldview that “reflects the ultimate suburbanization of existence: a retreat from the friction of social space to the supposed idyll of private ease” (Ullman, p. 33).

Every piece of technology, small or capacious, has messages, intents, and symbolic meaning embedded within. A surgeon’s scalpel is, whatever else it is, a message about how the body may be breached and about the relationship between patient and surgeon. It would not surprise me if the popularity of noninvasive, nonmedical alternatives to a variety of medical practices is based, in part, on the recognition, at some level, of the messages in many conventional medical/technical media.

Biotechnology has much in store for us as well. The Human Genome Project is designed to unravel the human genetic code. The project is close to completing its work (by 2003, two years ahead of schedule). The genome is the complete set of instructions for making any organism. It is found in every nucleus of every one of our trillions of cells and consists of tightly coiled threads of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) and other proteins, folded into structures called chromosomes. DNA consists of two strands wrapped around each other. Each strand has repeating linear units of nucleotides. There are only four nucleotides, and they are paired in a variety of different sequences between the two strands of DNA. Human beings have roughly 3 billion base pairs. A gene is a specific sequence of these base pairs, and these carry the information required for constructing the proteins that form the basis of all cells and tissues and organs as well as the enzymes required for essential biochemical reactions (such as neurotransmission). We may have 100,000 to 140,000 genes in our genome.¹

1. The Human Genome Project has essentially finished its mapping as this book goes to press. In addition, it appears that there are fewer genes than formerly thought—maybe as few as 50,000.

The Human Genome Project began in 1990 under the aegis of the Department of Energy and the National Institutes of Health as a \$3 billion, fifteen-year project to find all the human genes and to figure out the sequence of the 3 billion base pairs. The hope is that, in addition to the enormous scientific breakthrough this will involve, the knowledge gained can be used to prevent the occurrence of genetically predisposed illnesses, to improve the response of our bodies to environmental toxins and insults such as bacteria and viruses, and to improve how our bodies answer the challenge of disease and aging (Human Genome Project, 2000).

Clearly, the potential for misuse and escalating unforeseen consequences is enormous here. Leaders of the project claim to be aware of the potential risks and dangers as well as benefits and have a branch of the project (Ethical, Legal, and Social Issues) designed to deal with these concerns and possibilities. Laying bare the building blocks of life surely conjures up images of Dr. Frankenstein and the soulless replication of human life. On the other hand, it holds out the promise of the prevention of ills the human organism falls heir to and of understanding in great detail the relationship of organisms to their environments. Social workers are not too far removed from the impact of this project. Some social workers more recently have become engaged in screening for genetic disorders and counseling for families who have a member with a genetic disorder (which implicates the family, of course). More knowledge and more tools in this very sensitive and difficult area can only be helpful.

The social work profession needs to prepare its members to function skillfully and ethically in the brave new world that genetics is achieving: to consider the individual, family, ethical, legal, and societal ramifications of genetic technology and information; and to advocate for safeguards to protect against the abuse of that information and technology. (Rauch & Black, 1995)

The Global Village

There is something of a tendency for Americans to be provincial, and I suppose I am no exception. However, the fact is that we are, willing or not, enmeshed in a convoluted, reticulate web of global economic, political, technological, and social relationships that affect every aspect of our life. Three years ago, the Asian economies experienced a major financial crisis, and the effects of that echoed around the world and eventually reached Wall Street, plunging investors and experts into a panic of sorts. Only one year later, when Russia defaulted on its international loans and Brazil faced investor panic, United States financial markets fell as well (Greider, 2000).

On the other side of the ledger, poor, struggling countries of the world—and they probably outnumber those that have more stable or growing economies—daily experience disasters, environmental challenges, war, and conflict. Half of Africa's population, about 300 million people, do not enjoy basic health care or a safe water source. Some 25 million sub-Saharan Africans are infected with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Mozambique and other southern African countries face years of reconstruction and rehabilitation in the aftermath of storms and floods that did more damage than sixteen years of civil war (Edgar, 2000). Many poor countries are in serious debt to richer ones, such as the United States. Large debts and the interest payments on them are costly. In Tanzania, 40 percent of the population dies before age 35, yet the government has to spend nine times as much on debt repayment than it does on health care. The drug trade, which affects every country and has an intense impact on many families, rich and poor alike, is protected in many countries in part to relieve debt. Laying forests bare in order to plant crops that bring cash is in part driven by the need to repay debts. The decimation of forest land is a major contributor to global pollution as well as being a threat to many animal and plant species (Edgar).

The old saw "When a butterfly flutters its wings in Singapore on Wednesday, a storm breaks out in Seattle on Friday" suggests that even the smallest events in the universe may, through an ever-widening circle of perturbations, have large or unimagined consequences, eventually. The election of a pro-independence government in Taiwan, American corporate outsourcing of work to Malaysia, internecine warfare in Colombia, an outbreak of cholera in cyclone-racked east India, the decision of European countries to impose sanctions on Iraq all have untold reverberations everywhere. Involvement in "peace-keeping" missions around the world requires the United States government to divert money from education, health, and welfare to defense and arms buildup. Finally, the atmospherics of world geopolitics affect everybody. The continuing ruffle of war, genocide and wholesale slaughter, the enormity of the problems of global poverty, starvation, and disease create a sense that all is not well, the world is coming unglued. People begin to look only homeward, or despair of things getting better or, in the case of some, vow to work to make the world a better place in some small way.

Social work has an international dimension. There are social agencies and federations of agencies that act in the international field whether it be for refugee resettlement, international adoption of at-risk infants and children, or actual casework for families trying to resolve problems that involve more than one country (immigration and international adoption, for example). There are social welfare organizations that attend to the evolution of social policy and social development in foreign countries, such as the International Council on Social Welfare. As a matter of fact, social development has emerged not just as a planning strategy to help developing

countries but as a broad-based, collaborative, participatory approach to help strengthen the social and economic infrastructure of countries and regions struggling to improve the quality of life (Healey, 1995; Midgely, 1995). Although the rise of conservative policy and the heavy hand of monetarist organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have weakened social programs and diverted funds away from expenditures on social development, the idea of development continues to gain popularity in social work, social welfare, and in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (Midgely, 1995).

Organizations: Culture and Behavior

We all spend a significant amount of time every day in organizations: We work in them, we shop in them, we volunteer in them, we play in them; the decisions that affect almost every aspect of our lives are made in organizations. There are many ways to think about organizations, and there have been disciplines and fields of inquiry that focus exclusively on the nature and dynamics of organizations—their cultures and their structure, their humanity and their estrangement, their productivity and efficiency. Whatever else they are, organizations are complex and dynamic interactional mixtures of individuals, groups, leaders, tools, resources, missions, culture, and they have elaborate relationships with external environments. Because we live so much of our lives in organizations there has been, over the years, evolving attempts to understand them and mold them so that they are hospitable environments not just for productive work but for learning, interpersonal relationships, personal growth, and the maintenance and promotion of self-esteem. The basic idea seems to be that the extent to which an organization ignores the “human element” (Schutz, 1994) in its structure (hierarchy and laterality—patterns of the flow of communication as well as authority and responsibility), technologies, process, purposes, relationships, and culture may be the extent to which it cannot sustain organizational economies, efficiencies, and productivity or the learning, motivation, and satisfaction of its members (Schutz, 1994; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, Roth & Smith, 1999).

The organization of the future, whether an information technology corporation or a social service agency, cannot afford to create environments that prevent the learning and development of its members. The challenges from a rapidly changing human, social, and technical environment make learning the *sine qua non* of the modern organization. Human beings only learn and rise to challenges looming in external and internal environments, however, where there is inclusion in decision-making that is directly relevant to the work people do and the quality of organizational life; control and the opportunity for choice and, thus, a rising sense of competence and agency;

openness and honesty; trust; valid information; and continued consultation as a two-way feedback loop between administrators and staff to detect and control error and to shape the direction of change (Argyris, 1990; Schutz, 1994).

There are other elements of organizational life and culture (the norms, beliefs, values, tools, and rituals implicit or obvious in the organization environment and relationships) that affect, let's say, your performance and sense of well-being and belonging. Some think that the major focus of organizations should be on the nurturance of self-esteem in members (including clients or consumers). If self-esteem is the reflexive, motivational core of every human being, then this is the source of creativity, motivation, and productivity. Related to this is empowerment—when all are given a stake in making those decisions that are critical to their organizational roles and expectations—not just input but actual partnership in making decisions. And if people have a degree of organizationally nourished self-esteem, they will act ethically. Employees who do not feel valued, who are not given productive stakes in decisions and actions, are less likely to act from an ethical purview or in the organization's best interests. As a matter of fact, they may act against the organization (Argyris, 1990; Schutz, 1994; Senge et al., 1999).

Recall an organization that you have worked in. How did (or do) you feel and think about yourself in that organization? Are you respected, acknowledged, affirmed, involved? Are you told the truth? Are you encouraged to learn? Do you belong to a well-functioning and supportive team? Do you sense that people know who you are? Do you think that your self-esteem is protected and/or enhanced? If the answer is mostly yes, then how do these factors affect your performance and your sense of well-being? If the answer is otherwise, how are you affected and, in the end, if that is the case with co-workers too, what is the long-term effect on accomplishing the organization's mission? And what is the effect on the well-being of clients or consumers relative to your work? These questions are only meant to highlight the importance of any organization as a context for not just work or consumption but well-being and learning.

Context

We have talked often of context, often in broader terms—social institutions, culture, community, the environment. But we seem to be creatures who are enormously influenced in immediate, more intimate, social situations. Perhaps this comes from a past in which we only survived, as hunters or farmers, in small, cooperative bands. Who knows? Small changes in these immediate contexts can often bring larger changes in, say, behavior and

attitudes. Malcolm Gladwell (2000) makes this argument in his book on the little shifts that bring large changes. For example, he cites the significant drop in crime in New York City as resulting not from changes in employment rates or economic prosperity, although they may have played a role. Rather, he has us look at the changes a few people in a position to do so made in the immediate environment of many New Yorkers, potential criminals and victims alike. Replacing broken windows in neighborhoods, erasing graffiti on subway trains and buildings, arresting people on the subways who tried to beat the fares, and so forth, created an immediate social context that was more secure, more attractive, less chaotic, and seemingly anarchic. There have been many social psychological studies that reflect the same thing, such as Stanley Milgram's studies of obedience (in which people administered electric shocks to "victims" who couldn't memorize certain sequences in a so-called psychological laboratory. The subjects had no idea that the shocks were not real. Nonetheless, many went further than anyone expected in administering shocks of increasing strength.); studies of innocent bystanders (and altruism—will people help?); and Philip Zimbardo's mock prison study done many years ago. He and his graduate students "built" a mock prison in the basement of the psychology building at Stanford. He brought a group of normal, mature, intelligent young men into the prison. Through a coin flip he designated half of them as prisoners and the other half as guards. Subsequently, those selected to be prisoners were picked up by the police (real) at night in their dwellings and brought to the jail. What happened? Elliot Aronson (1999) cites Zimbardo in a statement Zimbardo prepared for the United States House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary in 1971:

At the end of only six days we had to close down our mock prison because what we saw was so frightening. It was no longer apparent to us or most of the subjects where they ended and their roles began. The majority had indeed become "prisoners" or "guards," no longer able to clearly differentiate between role-playing and self. There were dramatic changes in virtually every aspect of their behavior, thinking, and feeling. In less than a week, the experience of imprisonment undid (temporarily) a lifetime of learning; human values were suspended, self-concepts were challenged, and the ugliest most base side of human nature surfaced. (Zimbardo, cited in Aronson, p. 10)

Whatever one chooses to make of this, it seems clear that the power of a particular kind of intimate, face-to-face situation overwhelmed the sense of self, beliefs, and usual patterns of behavior. As social workers, we sometimes look to the big social picture to be the focus of change in the form of social

policy, statutes, and law, or we seek cause and explanation in major socio-historical shifts. These clearly play a part. But sometimes what makes a change, for the better as well as the worse, is a small shift, a little move, or modest development. Melvin Delgado (2000) reports on the dramatic changes that have come in neighborhoods on the basis of things like murals or community gardens. These are modest efforts that may pay big dividends. I once heard Terry Woodberry, the chief executive officer of United Way in Kansas City, Kansas, say that the four marks of a real neighborhood and community were hopeful housing stock (homes and apartments that looked cared for and tended to); symbols (a building, event, celebration, person, statue—who knows?) that draw people together and remind them of their common purpose and experience; good neighbor stories (plenty of stories of a neighbor helping another, for example—the importance being not the actual event but its retelling); and evidence of intergenerational relationships (adults and elders playing with children, talking with them, teaching them informally). These are all humble efforts. But they go far in creating the sense of security, purpose, promise, and worth.

SO WHAT IS THE GOOD LIFE, ANYWAY?

This book unfolded as it was written more than it was planned to become what it is. But there are some continuing themes, concepts, and assumptions I want to revisit as we think about what makes life worth living.

The Heroic and the Common

Many of the stories, vignettes, and exemplars in the book to me represent the appearance of the heroic in everyday life. Individuals, families, even communities accomplish the heroic every day, everywhere. And they do not do it at the expense of others or with borrowed existential authority and courage from a leader or figurehead or cultural hero. But to be heroic, to meet the challenges of life, individually and collectively, requires a fund of self-regard (no matter what your external circumstances); support (tangible or moral) of others; knowledge; faith and hope; a viable system of meaning; and a sense of purpose beyond mere self-interest or ego validation.

It would be hard to amass agreement about the elements of the good life or even the definition of what the good life constitutes. But, to me, at a minimum, the good life is that in which we are acknowledged, challenged,

instructed, respected, given the opportunity to follow a dream or hope, supported in the most tangible ways, and provided the encouragement to give to others and to participate in some sort of communal life that doesn't require the belittling of others. These elements occur in many ways, through the devices and language of many cultures, throughout all the years of our lives. Behind all of this is the tenacious struggle between the urges of selfishness and the call of selflessness; between the lure of pleasure and the demands of sacrifice; between the safety of isolation and the possibility of connection. These of course are not absolutes. We carry with us changing admixtures of these polar extremes and try to work out a meaningful moral calculus in the dailiness of life.

Some Elements of a “Life Worth Living”

COMMUNITY

Given the hardy strain of individualism in our society, the possibility of involvement and participation in a real community is difficult for some of us. But it is becoming increasingly true that it is in community, in connection and common endeavor with those around us, that we are most likely to find support, to enhance abilities, to pursue values and find purpose, to solve problems, to find health, and to play out and enhance meaning (McKnight, 1996; Peele, 1989). Ernie Cortes tells us that community is about relationship and connection, about people sharing their stories, creating a collective reality and common purpose (Crimmins, 1995). Community is also about plurality, the invitation to many voices to join the gathered chorus. Kenneth Gergen, in pleading for the requisites and benefits of a postmodern view in evaluating the promise of new technologies, says, “The greater array of perspectives brought to bear on proposals for progress and their repercussions, the more congenial the outcome to society (and the environment) at large” (1991, p. 238). Decisions made alone or in the confines of the corporation or the family, without the diversity of voices in the community or neighborhood or culture, are bound to be shortsighted and, sometimes, less than humane or liberating. In opposition, too often, to the community lies our increasing reliance on experts of various stripes to tell us what the good life is and how to live it.

RELATIONSHIPS AND CONNECTIONS: “THE MATRIX OF LIFE”

Relationships and connections are clearly a part of community. But more particularly, they reflect an enriched understanding of the self. We really do not have a language adequate to the task of understanding the self

as, basically, self-in-relationship-to-others. The reality of us is hammered out in our relationship to other selves, in intimate confines or more distant and communal ones. The constructionist take on this is that the moralities of everyday life, the terms of engagement and collaboration, will be negotiated in discourse with others. This view does not consign us to the slag heap of moral relativism. Our commitments instead and our relationship together will be negotiated (maybe renegotiated), and they will have a moral position or perspective. It is just that the underlying assumptions of that morality would not justify, in some absolutist way, the destruction of every other moral perspective. So we are born to meaning but that meaning is never the product of individual minds alone, but of relationships, antagonistic and advantageous alike. Catherine Keller writes, "Only a self forged in the image of an inner hardness, mistaken for integrity, could separate itself from the matrix of life" (Keller, 1986; cited in Gergen, 1991, p. 245; Gergen, 1994)

The relationships we develop or are given shape, in ways we cannot possibly predict, everything we bring to the world as biological organisms and members of the species. In addition, we add to that ongoing process or dialectic between body, mind, and context our own interpretations, stories, and plotlines. The result is, I think, a freeing up of self and the possibilities of self, a playful and interesting evolution of ideas, beliefs, relationships, commitments, borrowing from experiences here and there, taking on bits and pieces of old and new belief systems, immersing oneself into the beauties and intrigues of other cultures. A liberation of self, in this regard, implies a salient and serious moral duty, the taking on of prescriptions that honor the possibility in all human beings.

AGENCY AND EFFICACY

To be able to do, to be able to make things happen, to develop the resources and knowledge to live as well as possible given the challenges and constraints, the possibilities or foreclosures of your life space is one of the vehicles that drives people to the farther reaches of possibility. But such aptitude usually exists in a community of tools, resources, and supportive relationships as well as the opportunities for participation. In all the stories that we have recounted in this book, it seems reasonably clear that the richest ingredients of a life spent well are, in part, due to a welding of community involvement and the development of personal agency. The point here is that you cannot become, in any sense, efficacious without the nurturance, direction, and cultural equipment afforded by your interpersonal and symbolic environment. "Both community involvement and a sense of personal efficacy are central ingredients in young people's mastery of the world" (Peele, 1989, p. 273).

I suppose the message here is that we often think of agency and community as two different spheres of existence, each at odds with the other. In the lives of many residents of community-based projects our school is involved in, it is often only through involvement in collectively poignant endeavors that people discover admirable, dynamic, and useful aspects of themselves. Many of the individuals and families that social workers will see as clients or consumers will languish without the possibility of making a statement and creating a place in the community. For those who are oppressed, however, it is not enough to resurrect or strengthen skills and abilities to bring people together. There has to be a thorough understanding of the sources of oppression and work, hopefully with compatriots and sympathizers, to confront and challenge the grounds and the institutions and the perpetrators of oppression (Lee, 1994).

MEANING AND PURPOSE

I have made a big deal out of the pertinence and essentiality of making meaning. In a word, without meaning, without a central guiding sense of the world and one's (or one's groups') place in it, life is less vivid than it might be. If it were a movie or a novel, without meaning, central themes, or symbolic grounding, life would be a series of activities, obligations, terrors, wonders, surprises with no ligament, no sense of order, direction, or purpose. Meaning issues from our relationships with others, from our immersion in the words and rituals of culture, the messages of context. Meaning and, to a large extent, self are constituted by culture. It is a "communal tool kit" (Bruner, 1990) from which we collectively cobble together language, symbols, stories, values, and beliefs. This means that, in its most essential sense, meaning is communal and shared. From the very beginning of life, we enter into a more or less rich, more or less conflicted, more or less compelling web of understandings, instructions, reflections, narratives, and tools. We do not make our grand entrance as soloists. Rather, we are members of a company and, as such, our performance is negotiated, responsive, and dependent on the actions of others.

There is almost always a relationship between meaning and action, between what we say, what we intend, and what we do. In some ways, this conjunction is the essence of values, those commitments and preferences that ultimately add up to a path of life or ways of being. They are communal at heart. We don't make them up, although we might tinker with them, and as conditions change in the environment, there will be collective shifts in these commitments. That makes departures from the commonly understood relationship between these three so momentous: we are hard put to see any

“sensible” or “interpretable” relationships between what a person has said, done, and intended, and we often define such departures as insults to our values and morals. “Crazy” behavior, the “generation gap,” those stuck in a shifting borderland between cultures, rebels and activists—all might be seen as threats to the cultural canon. We might interpret their condition as pathological, criminal, or miraculous, but it still defies the cultural canon. It may be that those we see as geniuses are those who thumb their nose at values and norms but whose reckless venturing into alien intellectual, moral, or spiritual territory is beguiling, maybe even instructive. But it also might get them thrown in the slammer.

We are creatures who have come a long way from modest evolutionary beginnings. But the “great leap forward,” as noted before, was an increased cerebral capacity that led to self-consciousness, and because of our precarious position in the natural world, that reflexivity and awareness led to the initial stirrings of culture; and culture, our collective attempt to survive and make sense of the world and our place in it, became the human tool for survival.

In its most daunting configuration, social constructionism (meaning-making as the core of the human condition) calls us to understand that there is no final truth “out there” awaiting discovery. Every truth is situated in a social, interpersonal, historical welter of dialogues, relationships, and performances. All individual action and performance is, in its essence, situated in relationships and a communal setting. We seek not *The Truth*, but the truth of the collective (your family, your culture, your profession, etc.) as it struggles with grounding itself convincingly in the present, locating itself comfortably in the past, and projecting itself fearlessly into an unknown future. This makes being human, if nothing else, an enormous adventure and sobering responsibility.

CONCLUSION

This has been, as bell hooks once said about teaching, an endeavor marked by a heady and discomfiting mix of pleasure and danger. The pleasure comes from the exploration of ideas and the discovery of new propositions or schemes for grasping the human condition. It comes from trying to stitch together common understandings with theoretical ones, effusive conceptual frothings with the modest concoctions of individual stories. The danger is that you might get it wrong, that you misrepresent someone’s narrative, or that you misinterpret the intent of the scholar or the storyteller. My hope is that you have experienced the mystery and wonder of us, the astounding variety of us, and, most of all, the unrealized possibility of us.

The Final M and M Dialogue

MEREDITH: We have been at this a long time it seems.

MITCHELL: Yes, it has been quite a journey, although when I think of the things we didn't discuss, it makes me a little uneasy.

MEREDITH: Well, like you said at the outset—I think it was you—the idea of completely covering a topic as vast as human behavior and the environment is probably more than just a little bit of folly.

MITCHELL: Actually, I think you said that—just now.

MEREDITH: Okay. How should we end this?

MITCHELL: With a flourish; with panache.

MEREDITH: How about with great haste?

MITCHELL: All right. How about if you tell me some of the ideas or perspectives that have stuck with you? What are those things that made a difference to you, in some way?

MEREDITH: Well, I told you before that a lot of what we talked about, I took personally. I mean, I looked for ways that it applied to me, personally and professionally. Or it just hit me in a way that made me take notice. At the end of the discussion of male and female identity, there was a little grace note about a revision of the conventional wisdom that adolescent girls turn to mush in their teen years and boys get all the attention, glory, and do better generally than girls. According to this it is quite the opposite. Girls are doing quite well: their scores in all areas are rising, more and more are going to college while fewer boys are. When it comes to measures of having trouble, boys are way ahead, whether it's dropping out, getting kicked out, being a victim of violence, or just plain screwing up.

MITCHELL: Yes, that's right and some of the evidence is pretty damn' convincing. Even Carol Gilligan is studying the young male experience, and although she says they need more mothering, a lot of people point directly to the fact that many boys live without significant male figures of any kind in their lives and this is a critical difference. As a matter of fact, if you look at that statistic alone (one-parent, no-father families), according to Elaine Kamarck and William Galston, the relationship is so powerful that "it erases the relationship between race and crime and low income and crime." They were quoted in an article by Christina Hoff Sommers in a recent *Atlantic* article.

MEREDITH: Even though it strikes my feminist mind in a really discordant way, there is a part of my heart that thinks this is true. My boys and their buddies are the test case. I love them dearly, they are basically no trouble or at least not much, but I am the single mom with no man in her life and therefore no male authority or model in her boys' lives. And

I must tell you, at a distance, what I see, and from what I hear from my boys and other parents, a lot of boys have real problems in the classroom and the playground. Sometimes I think half of them have the ADHD diagnosis and are probably on drugs because of it. But when I hear about fights, or someone coming to school with a knife, or writing graffiti on the restroom wall, or getting kicked out of school, I almost always am hearing about boys. I don't know how long my boys can hold up.

MITCHELL: Let's be clear here about two things. One, you seem to be an admirable parent to me. You've got insight, you care, and you are there for the boys. Two, most single-parent families manage to do just fine, or even more than fine. Friends, values, and beliefs, who knows what all help, but it is the basic determination to practice good parenting that is at the core.

MEREDITH: Well, thanks for that. But I have an idea here I want to try out. You talked about the male culture, or what what's-his-name called the male chorus.

MITCHELL: Frank Pittman.

MEREDITH: Right. Anyway, I wonder if for some boys the male chorus rushes in when dad leaves. Without a father, maybe the melody of that chorus becomes louder and louder. And there is no counterpoint to it. Moms just may not be as convincing as dads about alternatives.

MITCHELL: That could be. A very interesting idea. I guess we would also want to know how mothers do become a convincing alternative. Do they have other men in the lives of their boys—uncles, granddads, coaches, ministers? Or are they just really attuned to the needs and tendencies of their boys?

MEREDITH: I think it must be some of both. My brother, even though he lives in a different city, visits quite a bit, calls the boys, remembers their birthdays and Christmas and I think that helps a lot. Also, they did have a dad for a while and he was, what? Okay as a dad. And I am really determined to be the best of both parents that I can manage.

I have another interest or, I guess, question here. As we have talked I have been struck by the continuing flow back and forth between, you know, strengths and resilience on the one hand, and then trouble or bad stuff or what you called evil on the other. Sometimes, I find it difficult to bridge this gap in my head. I'll read the paper or listen to the news and it is all murder, rape, war, slaughter, abuse, accidents, natural disasters, you name it, if it's awful it'll be on there. Oh, occasionally, there'll be a story about a good Samaritan or someone who survived a really difficult situation with great courage, but the horrifying seems to get the big play.

MITCHELL: I couldn't agree more. I guess one corrective is to cancel your subscription to the paper and throw your remote in the trash. But, short of that, I would say, what do you see when you look around you? At yourself, at your kids, your family and friends, your neighbors? How do you define the people you know, for the most part?

MEREDITH: Well, even though I am a worrywart, I do tend to see people, to define them in terms of their virtues or capacities, at least now more so than I used to.

MITCHELL: And because you do that, do you see strengths and assets where some others might see only limitations and deficits?

MEREDITH: Well, I don't want to speak for others, but I do see stuff, for example, that my brother—who is a great guy—doesn't see; he always sees the spinach caught between the teeth. He thinks I am kind of naïve. But I do know bad or dangerous things when I see them but compared to the good and sometimes amazing things I see now, they constitute just a little part of my life. Even when my mom was going through her depression and all, I marveled more at her resolve to get out of it. When my grandmother got sick, I was saddened by her deterioration but how my granddad took care of her and how she eventually gave in to his care was way more important to me.

MITCHELL: Well, you also talked about this in relationship to your field placement as I recall.

MEREDITH: Yes, I did. I still have trouble with all the labeling and negative assessments that we hand out. I mean it might not be so bad, but we don't balance it much with an acknowledgement of people's competence. I think I told you I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of the people we see were homeless. Well, we did have a consultant in, an expert on homeless families and he confirmed my suspicions. So now we are attending to some families with the specific intent of finding out if they are homeless and when they are, making that a part of our work. But what we are doing is assuming that these people, mostly mothers and their kids, are really messed up, that they are homeless because they have a lot of personal and interpersonal deficits. I read an article the other day about a woman who actually does brief strengths-based feminist therapy with homeless women in a shelter,² and one of her points was we do emphasize the problems they have had or do have—with drugs, abusive partners, anxiety, whatever—but we fail to listen to the story, acknowledge the strengths, and work toward empowerment

2. The article Meredith refers to is "A short-term approach to intervention with homeless mothers: A role for clinicians in homeless shelters," by Joan Goldberg in *Families in Society*, March-April, 1999.

through connections with others, reviving their hopes and getting them the resources they need.

MITCHELL: I cannot tell you how important it is to honor and dramatize, if necessary, the capacities and resources that people have. It does not mean that you ignore their frailty, the mistakes they made, the moral failure and loss of nerve that may have wrecked themselves and others. As a matter of fact, I wonder if, in some small way, a part of our morality isn't the weighing, even a daily adding up of success and failure, possibility, and shrinking from obligation and responsibility. The father who takes the bottle in secret, does he at some moment, maybe before the first of a wave of anxiety-numbing sips, think about what he is doing to himself, his children, his spouse, his place in the cosmos?

MEREDITH: Really, I don't really think that people think about the cosmos a lot. But my uncle Bob, a terrific guy—funny, charming, a joy to be around—drank a lot, off and on. I mean a lot. I never thought that he ever thought about it much. He could drink a lot and still be the alluring uncle who cooked ribs on the grill and made everyone feel comfortable in his house. Although now I wonder if his wife, Nancy, was ever comfortable with these get-togethers. But I do remember one time, we were over at the house. It was the end of a long evening and I'm sure he had a lot to drink, and as my mom and I got up to leave and say our good-byes, he said, "I wish you well"—he always said that—and then he said, "Alcoholic toxicosis really fucks up your morning." I was mortified because of his language, but now I think he just had a moment of clarity or guilt or something and he had to wrestle it to the ground.

Before we go, I do have one other concern. I am really struggling with some of the biological/genetic forces that you laid out and how they interact with family or culture, race, and ethnicity. And gender. I have the sinking feeling that all those factors pale when compared to the force of our biology. Especially the stuff around mating. I frankly bristled at that. As a social worker, I am working with families where jealousy, affairs, uneven and unfair male and female contributions to the family make big problems. Is this all just an effect of naturally selected gender differences?

MITCHELL: No. I can understand how you might think that. I guess maybe I overdo it because I think social work students do not have much interest in biology. But meaning, culture, circumstance, spiritual beliefs, even personal determination can override some, and sometimes quite a lot, of our biological inheritance. But it is important to remember that we cannot go on pretending that the body (brain) and the mind (and spirit) are different realms of experience. We must do better at understanding how they are involved in the complex play of everyday

experience and consciousness. The soul and consciousness are grounded somewhere in our being; without our history as an organism, they would not be possible. But the soul and consciousness, the mind (and its derivatives like meaning and culture), have a persistent and variable relationship with the body, sometimes muting and directing that which we feel is biologically immutable. A soothing word or touch can tame, for a while, a wildly and erratically beating heart.

MEREDITH: I think I understand what you mean. But as a social worker I must do a lot more to really bring that body, mind, environment—and soul—perspective to my work.

MITCHELL: We do have to go. I can't tell you how much these talks have meant to me. I can only say that I will always treasure them. Some students always bring to the sometimes really tough job of being a student, a parent, or an employee a respect and energy for and honesty about the process of learning that makes me a little ashamed. Sometimes I think I sit in a classroom and pontificate and maybe don't really live up to the ideals and ideas that I espouse.

MEREDITH: In the end maybe none of us do very much, but those who care really try—don't you think? You tried. I tried. What more can you ask?

MITCHELL: For a teacher, nothing. Thanks.

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