

Preface

Robert Bellah, et al
Habits of the Heart
 Preface & Chap 1

the most important value, they were particularly concerned with the qualities of character necessary for the creation of a free republic.

In the 1830s, the French social philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville offered the most comprehensive and penetrating analysis of the relationship between character and society in America that has ever been written. In his book *Democracy in America*, based on acute observation and wide conversation with Americans, Tocqueville described the mores— which he on occasion called “habits of the heart”¹—of the American people and showed how they helped to form American character. He singled out family life, our religious traditions, and our participation in local politics as helping to create the kind of person who could sustain a connection to a wider political community and thus ultimately support the maintenance of free institutions. He also warned that some aspects of our character—what he was one of the first to call “individualism”— might eventually isolate Americans one from another and thereby undermine the conditions of freedom.

The central problem of our book concerns the American individualism that Tocqueville described with a mixture of admiration and anxiety. It seems to us that it is individualism, and not equality, as Tocqueville thought, that has marched inexorably through our history. We are concerned that this individualism may have grown cancerous—that it may be destroying those social integuments that Tocqueville saw as moderating its more destructive potentialities, that it may be threatening the survival of freedom itself. We want to know what individualism in America looks and feels like, and how the world appears in its light.

We are also interested in those cultural traditions and practices that, without destroying individuality, serve to limit and restrain the destructive side of individualism and provide alternative models for how Americans might live. We want to know how these have fared since Tocqueville's day, and how likely their renewal is.

While we focus on what people say, we are acutely aware that they often live in ways they cannot put into words. It is particularly here, in the tension between how we live and what our culture allows us to say, that we have found both some of our richest insights into the dilemmas our society faces and hope for the reappropriation of a common language in which those dilemmas can be discussed.

Taking our clue from Tocqueville, we believe that one of the keys to the survival of free institutions is the relationship between private and public life, the way in which citizens do, or do not, participate in the public sphere. We therefore decided to concentrate our research on how private and public life work in the United States: the extent to which private life either prepares people to take part in the public world or

How ought we to live? How do we think about how to live? Who are we, as Americans? What is our character? These are questions we have asked our fellow citizens in many parts of the country. We engaged them in conversations about their lives and about what matters most to them, talked about their families and communities, their doubts and uncertainties, and their hopes and fears with respect to the larger society. We found them eager to discuss the right way to live, what to teach our children, and what our public and private responsibilities should be, but also a little dismayed by these subjects. These are important matters to those to whom we talked, and yet concern about moral questions is often relegated to the realm of private anxiety, as if it would be awkward or embarrassing to make it public. We hope this book will help transform this inner moral debate, often shared only with intimates, into public discourse. In these pages, Americans speak with us, and, indirectly, with one another, about issues that deeply concern us all. As we will see, many doubt that we have enough in common to be able mutually to discuss our central aspirations and fears. It is one of our purposes to persuade them that we do.

The fundamental question we posed, and that was repeatedly posed to us, was how to preserve or create a morally coherent life. But the kind of life we want depends on the kind of people we are—on our character. Our inquiry can thus be located in a longstanding discussion of the relationship between character and society. In the eighth book of the *Republic*, Plato sketched a theory of the relationship between the moral character of a people and the nature of its political community, the way it organizes and governs itself. The founders of the American republic at the time of the Revolution adopted a much later version of the same theory. Since for them, as for the Americans with whom we talked, freedom was perhaps

encourages them to find meaning exclusively in the private sphere, and the degree to which public life fulfills our private aspirations or discourages us so much that we withdraw from involvement in it.

With a small research team and a limited budget, we decided to concentrate our research on white, middle-class Americans. Apart from the fact that we could not cover all of the tremendous diversity of American life, there were several theoretical reasons for our decision. From Aristotle on, republican theorists have stressed the importance of the middle classes for the success of free institutions. These classes have traditionally provided the active public participation that makes free institutions work. In addition, the middle classes have been peculiarly central in American society. As we will argue in chapters 2, 5, and 6, America from the beginning has been a society in which the "middling condition of men" has been of primary importance, and for the past hundred years or so, the middle class, in the modern sense of the term, has so dominated our culture that neither a genuinely upper-class nor a genuinely working-class culture has fully appeared. Everyone in the United States thinks largely in middle-class categories, even when they are inappropriate. Concentration on the middle class thus made a great deal of sense for our purposes. Nonetheless, we did interview a number of working-class men and women, some of whom appear in this book, and more than a few of those who appear had working-class parents. Though we were able to include considerable ethnic diversity, we were not able to illustrate much of the racial diversity that is so important a part of our national life.

In order to get at the nature of private and public life, we decided to undertake four research projects, each carried out by a different member of our group, projects that would focus on a representative form of private or public orientation in the United States today. In thinking about private life, we decided to study love and marriage, one of the oldest ways in which people give form to their private lives, and therapy, a newer, but increasingly important, way in which middle-class Americans find meaning in the private sphere. In thinking about public life, we decided to study older forms of civic participation such as local politics and traditional voluntary associations as well as some of the newer forms of political activism that have grown out of the political movements of the sixties but operate "within the system."

Each of the field researchers chose particular communities, groups, or sets of individuals who vividly illustrated his or her particular focus. Where possible (more often in the public than in the private components of our study) interviews were supplemented with participant observation. The fieldwork was carried out from 1979 to 1984 and involved in-

terviews with over 200 persons, some of whom we talked to several times and many of whom we observed as they participated in community activities or events. We do not claim that we have talked to "average" Americans or that we have a random sample. We have read a great many surveys and community studies, enough to know that those to whom we talked are not markedly aberrant. The primary focus of our research was not psychological, or even primarily sociological, but rather cultural. We wanted to know what resources Americans have for making sense of their lives, how they think about themselves and their society, and how their ideas relate to their actions. For this purpose, focussing on representative issues in representative communities seemed the best choice. We have talked with people about problems of American life in which we all share, allowing particular individuals struggling with particular challenges to uncover the possibilities and limits of our cultural traditions.

Ann Swidler, whose focus was on how the private realm of love and marriage gives shape and meaning to people's lives, interviewed men and women in several suburban neighborhoods in and around San Jose, California. The area is one of rapid growth, particularly because of the electronics industries of "Silicon Valley." Those she interviewed came from all parts of the country. Few were native Californians. They were either middle-class or from relatively prosperous blue-collar families. Most were mature adults (their ages ranged from twenty-seven to fifty-five, but they were predominantly in their thirties and forties), coping with the realities of love, marriage, and family life in modern society. Most were married, and somewhat fewer than half had been divorced. Among the latter, about half had remarried. Most of those she interviewed had children. Through some of those she interviewed, Swidler learned of Marriage Encounter, participated in a weekend sponsored by the movement, and interviewed a number of those for whom this movement was significant.

Steven Tipton explored another dimension of private life by interviewing therapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists of various stripes in a major Southern city and in the San Francisco Bay area. He took part in classes and clinical supervision with doctoral students training as clinical psychologists, and he attended case conferences of psychologists working in private practice and in a public mental health clinic. He also interviewed Protestant ministers and seminarians engaged in psychotherapeutic approaches to clinical pastoral education, in which he participated. Finally, he interviewed a range of clients seen by these practitioners to discover how the experience and outlook of psychotherapy affected their self-

understanding and their view of social commitments and relationships in work, love, and public life.

Richard Madsen attempted to understand how Americans become involved in public life. To this end, he studied two communities, one a town not far from Boston, founded over 250 years ago, and the other a suburban area near San Diego that has been settled only in recent decades and is still largely unincorporated. Both communities were largely middle-class, but the Boston suburb had many blue-collar families. Madsen focussed on voluntary associations (YMCA, Rotary Club, Junior Chamber of Commerce, and others) and on local politics. He interviewed people about their sense of the communities in which they live, the reasons for their civic involvement, and the extent to which that involvement gives meaning and purpose to their lives. In the course of pursuing civic-minded voluntarism, he studied not only routine activities but several intense controversies that erupted while he was in the field.

William Sullivan attempted to get at the meaning of public life through a study of two political organizations, the Institute for the Study of Civic Values, which does community organizing in Philadelphia, and the Campaign for Economic Democracy, which has its greatest influence in Santa Monica, California. These two groups are both indebted to the political movements of the sixties for their dedication to political organizing in bringing about social change. Both have become involved in electoral politics, and their leaders have recently been elected to local or state offices. Sullivan interviewed leaders and members of these groups in an effort to understand their visions of the larger society and the changes needed in it, as well as to see how they have integrated their public activities with their private lives. Both groups are largely middle-class, but the Philadelphia group has been effective in working-class and minority neighborhoods.

Much as our book draws on the four research projects described, it is not simply a report of that research. We have learned from years of reading, reflection, and conversation with many who were not formally subjects of our research. Four of us are sociologists by training; one of us, Sullivan, received his degree in philosophy. We have all been deeply influenced by social science and social philosophy and seek to continue the traditions of social reflection that have nurtured us. A brief Appendix explains our position.

The people who let us into their homes and talked to us so freely during the course of our study are very much part of the authorship of this book. Their words appear in almost every chapter.² They made us think things we never thought before. But we have tried to make sense

not only of what we saw and heard in our research but also of what we have experienced as lifetime members of American society. The story we tell is not just the story of those we interviewed. It is also our own.

We have not organized the book as a report on the four separate projects. Monographs by the four field workers will provide that. Almost every chapter here draws from all four projects. The first two provide an introduction and orientation to the study as a whole. Chapter 1 consists of four portraits of individuals, drawn from each of the four research projects, who represent different ways of using private or public life to find meaning in contemporary America. Chapter 2 provides a historical sketch and, in particular, a description of the four major traditions that we believe have been important in the self-interpretations of Americans. Chapters 3 through 6 deal with private life, going from ways of thinking of the self to marriage, the family, and other forms of personal relationship, including therapy. Chapter 6 sums up the American ideology of individualism and suggests some of the alternatives to it in our society. Chapters 7 through 10 deal with public life. Local politics, civic volunteerism, and the larger meanings of citizenship and religion are discussed in chapters 7 through 9. Chapter 10 considers several successive historical stages of interpretation of the national society and how these relate to the views of those with whom we talked. In a concluding chapter, we try to sum up the implications of our research for the future of American society.

In an ambitious and lengthy research project such as this one, there are inevitably many whose help was crucial and many to thank. Richard Sharpe, then of the Ford Foundation, was responsible in 1978 for the initial suggestion that led to the formulation of the project. Major funding came from the National Endowment for the Humanities, a federal agency that supports research in such fields as philosophy, history, literature, and the humanistic social sciences. Matching grants came from the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation. We are grateful to NEH and the two foundations for their generosity and support. In addition, Ann Swidler and Robert Bellah would like to thank the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for fellowships. Swidler used her fellowship year, 1982-83, in part for research for this book. Bellah used his fellowship year, 1983-84, in part for the final rewriting of *Habits of the Heart*.

An advisory committee, consisting of David Riesman, Renée Fox, Ralph Potter, and Robert Coles, gave us theoretical insight and methodological guidance during the early years of the project. They met with us frequently and some of them, particularly David Riesman, shared their reflections on our research in writing. Michael Maccoby, S. N. Eisenstadt, and Alasdair MacIntyre attended our research meetings on occasion and gave us their suggestions. Many other colleagues and friends

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Introductory

The Pursuit of Happiness

Brian Palmer

Living well is a challenge. Brian Palmer, a successful businessman, lives in a comfortable San Jose suburb and works as a top-level manager in a large corporation. He is justifiably proud of his rapid rise in the corporation, but he is even prouder of the profound change he has made recently in his idea of success. "My value system," he says, "has changed a little bit as the result of a divorce and reexamining life values. Two years ago, confronted with the work load I have right now, I would stay in the office and work until midnight, come home, go to bed, get up at six, and go back in and work until midnight, until such time as it got done. Now I just kind of flip the bird and walk out. My family life is more important to me than that, and the work will wait, I have learned." A new marriage and a houseful of children have become the center of Brian's life. But such new values were won only after painful difficulties.

Now forty-one, his tall, lean body bursting with restless energy, Brian recalls a youth that included a fair amount of hell-raising, a lot of sex, and considerable devotion to making money. At twenty-four, he married. Shouldering the adult responsibilities of marriage and children became the guiding purpose of his life for the next few years.

Whether or not Brian felt his life was satisfying, he was deeply committed to succeeding at his career and family responsibilities. He held two full-time jobs to support his family, accepting apparently without complaint the loss of a youth in which, he himself reports, "the vast majority of my time from, say, the age of fifteen to twenty-two or twenty-three was devoted toward giving myself pleasure of one sort or another." Brian describes his reasons for working so hard after he married quite simply. "It seemed like the thing to do at the time," he says. "I couldn't stand not having enough money to get by on, and with my wife unable to contribute to the family income, it seemed like the thing to do.

the lowest form. But the fact that my boys chose to live with me was a very important thing to me. It made me feel that maybe I had been doing something right in the parenting department."

Although his wife had left him, and he later found out that she had been having an affair, Brian's period of reflection led him to rethink his role in the relationship. "Being a compulsive problem solver, I analyzed the failure. I don't like failure. I'm very competitive. I like to win. So I went back and reexamined where the thing broke down and found that I had contributed at least 50 percent and, depending on the vantage point, maybe 99 percent of the ultimate demise of the institution. Mostly it was asking myself the question of why am I behaving in such and such a way. Why am I doing this at work? Why was I doing this at home? The answer was that I was operating as if a certain value was of the utmost importance to me. Perhaps it was success. Perhaps it was fear of failure, but I was extremely success-oriented, to the point where everything would be sacrificed for the job, the career, the company. I said bullshit. That ain't the way it should be."

The revolution in Brian's thinking came from a reexamination of the true sources of joy and satisfaction in his life. And it is particularly in a marriage to a woman very different from his first wife that Brian has discovered a new sense of himself and a different understanding of what he wants out of life. He has a new sense of what love can be. "To be able to receive affection freely and give affection and to give of myself and know it is a totally reciprocal type of thing. There's just almost a psychologically buoyant feeling of being able to be so much more involved and sharing. Sharing experiences of goals, sharing of feelings, working together to solve problems, etc. My viewpoint of a true love, husband-and-wife type of relationship is one that is founded on mutual respect, admiration, affection, the ability to give and receive freely." His new wife, a divorcee his own age, brings four children to their marriage, added to Brian's own three. They have five children still living at home, and a sense of energy, mutual devotion, and commitment sufficient to make their family life a joy.

In many ways, Brian's is an individual success story. He has succeeded materially, and he has also taken hold of the opportunity to reach out beyond material success to a fuller sense of what he wants from life. Yet despite the personal triumph Brian's life represents, despite the fulfillment he seems to experience, there is still something uncertain, something poignantly unresolved about his story.

The difficulty becomes most evident when Brian tries to explain why it is that his current life is, in fact, better than his earlier life built around

I guess self-reliance is one of the characteristics I have pretty high up in my value system. It was second nature. I didn't even question the thing. I just went out and did it." Brian and his wife came to share very little in their marriage, except, as he thought, good sex, children, and devotion to his career. With his wife's support, he decided to "test" himself "in the Big League," and he made it, although at great cost to his marriage and family life. "What was my concept of what constituted a reasonable relationship? I guess I felt an obligation to care for materially, provide for, a wife and my children, in a style to which I'd like to see them become accustomed. Providing for my family materially was important. Sharing wasn't important. Sharing of my time wasn't important. I put in extremely long hours, probably averaging sixty to sixty-five hours a week. I'd work almost every Saturday. Always in the office by 7:30. Rarely out of the office before 6:30 at night. Sometimes I'd work until 10:30 or 11. That was numero uno. But I compensated for that by saying, I have this nice car, this nice house, joined the Country Club. Now you have a place you can go, sit on your butt, drink, go into the pool. I'll pay the bills and I'll do my thing at work."

For Brian's wife, the compensations apparently weren't enough. After almost fifteen years of marriage, "One day I came home. In fact, our house was for sale, and we had an offer on the house. My wife said, 'Before you accept an offer, you should probably know that once we sell this house, we will live in different houses.' That was my official notification that she was planning to divorce me."

The divorce, "one of the two or three biggest surprises of my life," led Brian to reassess his life in fundamental ways and to explore the limits of the kind of success he had been pursuing. "I live by establishing plans. I had no plan for being single, and it gave me a lot of opportunity to think, and in the course of thinking, I read for the first time in many, many years. Got back into classical music for the first time since my college years. I went out and bought my first Bach album and a stereo to play it on. Mostly the thinking process of being alone and relating to my children."

When his children chose to live with him, Brian found himself forced to shift his sense of himself and his priorities in life. "I found that being a single parent is not all that it is cracked up to be. I found it an extremely humbling experience. Whereas I go into the office in the morning and I have a personal secretary and a staff of managers and a cast of hundreds working for me, I came home and just like every Tom, Dick, and Harry in the world, I'd clean up garbage after these three big boys of mine. I'd spend two hours preparing and cleaning up after dinner, doing laundry, folding clothes, sweeping the floor, and generally doing manual labor of

single-minded devotion to his career. His description of his reasons for changing his life and of his current happiness seems to come down mainly to a shift in his notions of what would make him happy. His new goal—devotion to marriage and children—seems as arbitrary and unexamined as his earlier pursuit of material success. Both are justified as idiosyncratic preference rather than as representing a larger sense of the purpose of life. Brian sees himself as consistently pursuing a utilitarian calculus—devotion to his own self-interest—except that there has been an almost inexplicable change in his personal preferences. In describing the reasons for this change, he begins, “Well, I think I just reestablished my priorities.” He sometimes seems to reject his past life as wrong; but at other times, he seems to say he simply got bored with it. “That exclusive pursuit of success now seems to me not a good way to live. That’s not the most important thing to me. I have demonstrated to myself, to my own satisfaction, that I can achieve about what I want to achieve. So the challenge of goal realization does not contain that mystique that it held for me at one time. I just have found that I get a lot of personal reward from being involved in the lives of my children.”

American cultural traditions define personality, achievement, and the purpose of human life in ways that leave the individual suspended in glorious, but terrifying, isolation. These are limitations of our culture, of the categories and ways of thinking we have inherited, not limitations of individuals such as Brian who inhabit this culture. People frequently live out a fuller sense of purpose in life than they can justify in rational terms, as we see in Brian’s case and many others.

Brian’s restless energy, love of challenges, and appreciation of the good life are characteristic of much that is most vital in American culture. They are all qualities particularly well-suited to the hard-driving corporate world in which he works. When Brian describes how he has chosen to live, however, he keeps referring to “values” and “priorities” not justified by any wider framework of purpose or belief. What is good is what one finds rewarding. If one’s preferences change, so does the nature of the good. Even the deepest ethical virtues are justified as matters of personal preference. Indeed, the ultimate ethical rule is simply that individuals should be able to pursue whatever they find rewarding, constrained only by the requirement that they not interfere with the “value systems” of others. “I guess I feel like everybody on this planet is entitled to have a little bit of space, and things that detract from other people’s space are kind of bad,” Brian observes. “One of the things that I use to characterize life in California, one of the things that makes California such a pleasant place to live, is people by and large aren’t bothered by other people’s value systems as long as they don’t infringe upon your

own. By and large, the rule of thumb out here is that if you’ve got the money, honey, you can do your thing as long as your thing doesn’t destroy someone else’s property, or interrupt their sleep, or bother their privacy, then that’s fine. If you want to go in your house and smoke marijuana and shoot dope and get all screwed up, that’s your business, but don’t bring that out on the street, don’t expose my children to it, just do your thing. That works out kind of neat.”

In a world of potentially conflicting self-interests, no one can really say that one value system is better than another. Given such a world, Brian sets great store by one basic principle—the importance of honesty and communication. It is through communication that people have a chance to resolve their differences, since there is no larger moral ideal in terms of which conflicts can be resolved. “Communication is critical not only to a man-and-woman relationship, it is the essence of our being on this planet in my opinion. Given open communication and the ability to think problems out, most problems can be solved.” Solving conflicts becomes a matter of technical problem solving, not moral decision. Lying, which would interfere in a critical way with the ability to communicate accurately and resolve interpersonal conflicts, is thus wrong, but, even here, wrongness is largely a matter of practicality—it doesn’t pay. “The bottom line of my personal value system applies to the way I conduct business. My predecessor was characterized as a notorious, habitual, and compulsive liar, and that’s a difficult act to follow. That’s probably one of the reasons that led to his demise—that his lies were catching up with him and he left before the walls came tumbling down.”

Not lying is one of the major things Brian wants to teach his children. “Why is integrity important and lying bad? I don’t know. It just is. It’s just so basic. I don’t want to be bothered with challenging that. It’s part of me. I don’t know where it came from, but it’s very important.” Brian says “values” are important, and he stresses the importance of teaching them to his children. But apart from the injunction not to lie, he is vague about what those values are. “I guess a lot of them are Judeo-Christian ethics of modern society, that certain things are bad.” Even the things that may be “absolutely wrong,” such as killing, stealing, and lying, may just be matters of personal preference—or at least injunctions against them exist detached from any social or cultural base that could give them broader meaning.

Are there some things that are just absolutely wrong? “I don’t think I would pontificate and say that I’m in a position to establish values for humanity in general, although I’m sufficiently conceded to say that if the rest of the world would live by my value system it would be a better place,” Brian says. The justification he offers is simply, “I’m quite com-

fortable with my values." Yet values, in turn, continually slip back for Brian into a matter of personal preferences, and the only ethical problem is to make the decision that accords with one's preferences. His increased commitment to family and children rather than to material success seems strangely lacking in substantive justification. "I just find that I get more personal satisfaction from choosing course B over course A. It makes me feel better about myself. To participate in this union of chaos to try and mold something, this family situation—and maybe it's because of this bringing two families together—is a challenge. Believe me, this is a challenge. Maybe that's why it fascinates me. Maybe that's why it's important to me."

Despite the combination of tenderness and admiration he expresses for his wife, the genuine devotion he seems to feel for his children, and his own resilient self-confidence, Brian's justification of his life thus rests on a fragile foundation. Morally, his life appears much more coherent than when he was dominated by careerism, but, to hear him talk, even his deepest impulses of attachment to others are without any more solid foundation than his momentary desires. He lacks a language to explain what seem to be the real commitments that define his life, and to that extent the commitments themselves are precarious.

Joe Gorman

Joe Gorman would probably call Brian Palmer's ideas about success childish. Joe lives three thousand miles from San Jose and has never met Brian. But talking about people in his own town whose lives seem totally focused on individual success, as Brian's once was, he says they are "trying to be kids again." For Joe, being like a kid means lacking an appreciation of one's responsibilities to one's family and one's community. It means thinking primarily about what you can get out of your family and community rather than what you should give them. For Joe, success means achieving the goals set by your family and community, not using your family and community to achieve your own individual goals.

Joe Gorman is about the same age as Brian Palmer, but unlike Brian, who has moved to many different communities in his search for personal success, Joe has always lived in the small town where his father and mother have spent most of their lives: Suffolk, Massachusetts, a community of fewer than 20,000 people, about a half-hour's drive from Boston. Suffolk was founded in 1632, and about six months before one of us interviewed Joe Gorman, the town celebrated its 250th anniversary. Joe

had taken charge of organizing the celebrations, although he had not originally been asked to do so. During the early phases of planning the anniversary festivities, the town manager appointed a committee of locally prominent townspeople that did not include Joe. But the problem was that practically none of its members had much experience in planning such a complicated event. To make matters worse, according to Joe, about half of them were more interested in getting their names in the paper than in doing much work. As a result, the first event in the long series of planned anniversary celebrations had been a fiasco—a large community dinner with only enough food for about half of the people who showed up. Joe Gorman knew that he had the ability to organize the celebrations successfully, and he felt a kind of duty to do whatever he could to help. So he got himself on the committee and became, in fact if not in name, its head.

Under Joe's direction, the anniversary celebration turned out to be a grand success. The festivities stretched out for nine months. There were parades, concerts, a carnival, athletic contests, dinners, dances, and educational religious services, all well attended and smoothly organized. The fundamental meaning of the celebration was expressed for Joe in the slogan: "We are doing it together." As he put it, "That's so important—to work to get as many people as possible active." Another key theme was the importance of the family. The inspiration for many of the events came from the fact that that year had been proclaimed by the United Nations to be "the year of the family." For Joe, the highlight of the festivities was a softball tournament in which each team was made up of members of a different extended family. "We had eight clans—eight big families from Suffolk—in the tournament. In one of them some people came clear from Connecticut just to play softball on the side of their family. You know, for me the best time of the whole celebration was standing there back behind the bleachers after the softball games with members of the families that had played and talking with them about their families and drinking champagne. That to me was the ultimate. During the games between the clans, on many occasions, lots of people showed up besides the players to watch the game and see how people in the families were doing."

Another of the most inspiring events of the anniversary celebration was a day given over to the town's senior citizens. "We told people that this was their chance now to come together and see the people who had contributed to this town. They had an afternoon on the Common where they sold baked goods and made an awful lot of money." The whole series of anniversary celebrations was "so successful that the first thing that people said after it was over was, 'Why can't we have one every year?'" Accord-

ingly, the town fathers decided to have an annual celebration and made Joe Gorman the head of the committee for the next year's celebration.

In Joe's vocabulary, *success* is a very important word. But throughout our conversation with him, it was consistently applied not to any status he had gained for himself or even to any accomplishment he had realized by himself. *Success* rather applied to the experience of togetherness the community had created partially through his efforts. "We had a lot of hassles [in organizing the anniversary celebration] and a lot of complaints that we had to deal with before we got it all rolling. But when it was over, the town was totally in favor of it. And even most of those people who had been opposed to various things came up to me and said that they were totally for having it again this year. So it was a great event, a great success, and it really brought the town together. If it's successful again this year, we're going to have it year after year. It was a great success. It was great for the community. But I didn't do it. The Suffolk family did it. Yes, it's the Suffolk family, and I love being a part of it."

This is not to say that Joe does not care about receiving personal rewards for his work within the community. What he considers to be one of the greatest events of his life happened to him several months after Suffolk's anniversary celebrations were finished. He was named Good Guy of the Year in Suffolk and a huge celebration was held for him by the business and civic leaders of the town. "It was a complete surprise for me. They got me to cooperate in it by telling me that they were putting on a benefit for someone else, one of my co-workers at the factory. It was really embarrassing because I was getting after some people thinking that they weren't doing enough in preparation for this celebration for this co-worker, and then I showed up and it was for me." Joe was immensely gratified at this expression of community affection. But it was important for him that it came as a surprise—that he experienced it as a reward he had not consciously worked for.

Besides enjoying the prestige the community has "spontaneously" given him, Joe also receives an income from his efforts on behalf of the community. It is, in fact, part of his profession to be a community "good guy." He is director of public relations for one of the large manufacturing companies located in Suffolk. Like most such companies, the firm that employs Joe wants to maintain good relations with the townspeople, and to do this it contributes money to community recreation programs and other charities. It is part of Joe Gorman's job to help his company decide how best to help the town. Even though much of it happens to be part of his job, however, Joe's community service work clearly remains a labor of love. He has been offered promotions to positions in his company's head office in Houston, but he has refused them. For him,

his position in the community is more important than his status within his company. As he sees it, he works so hard for the town because he is a "natural citizen" of Suffolk. "I was born here. My father set up the athletic program at Suffolk High. Friendship alone with the people would keep me here. We will always stay here. It is my home."

Unlike Brian Palmer, therefore, Joe Gorman does not decide the proper goals that would constitute a successful life on the basis of current "priorities." The goals are given to him by the traditions of his family and community. Yet Joe's solution to the problem of discovering adequate goals in life is a solution that raises problems of its own.

The Suffolk Joe loves so much—the community of civic-minded, interlocking families rooted in two hundred fifty years of tradition—does not really exist. Three-fourths of Suffolk's present population have moved in within the past twenty-five years. Most of them are not deeply involved in the life of the town. If five hundred out of the town's nine thousand registered voters show up for a town meeting, that is considered a very good turnout. The work life of most Suffolk residents separates them from the town. Their jobs are in Boston or in one of the industrial parks surrounding that city. Even when they happen to work in Suffolk, they work in one of the factories located in the town's industrial parks—factories that are frequently parts of multinational conglomerates. They live in Suffolk because it happens to be conveniently located for them and the housing prices there happen to fit their budgets. Many of them readily admit that they really would prefer to live in one of the more affluent towns in the area, but stay in Suffolk because they could not afford a house in a wealthier community. Such people do not think of Suffolk as their "family," but only as a convenient suburb. They probably looked on the town's anniversary celebration as a set of quaint festivities—pleasant diversions for a weekend afternoon, not rituals expressing something important about the meaning of their lives.

To affirm the importance of Suffolk's traditions, Joe conjures up a fictitious golden age of the town that has been corrupted by modern developments. The spirit of this age can be recovered, he believes, and the task of recovering it can validate one's present life. "Behind what I'm doing is one of my hidden motives. I would like to see Suffolk get back to that type of atmosphere where fifteen people could get together, form a baseball team, go down to the park, don't need a uniform or anything like that, play some ball and just have a good time. Nowadays to do that sort of thing, people demand uniforms and leagues and regulations and so forth. They don't trust each other. But this other, older kind of spirit is what you need."

The spirit of spontaneous, trustful conviviality Joe remembers hav-

brations, the town erupted in an angry fit of local chauvinism. The town Housing Authority had been trying to provide low-cost housing for elderly citizens. To build this housing, it needed funds from the federal government. The Department of Housing and Urban Development finally offered Suffolk a grant of \$5,000,000 to build such housing—but it stipulated that to qualify for the grant, the town also had to build a small number of low-cost housing units for poor families. Many townspeople feared that such units would be occupied by blacks and Cubans from Boston. In an intensely emotional town meeting, they rejected the HUD grant and voted to establish recall proceedings to remove the town officials who had applied for it. Townspeople appealed to the unity and integrity of their tradition-rooted community to justify segregationist policies.

Joe Gorman did not approve of the rejection of the HUD grant. There is a fundamental generosity to his character that makes him uneasy about the fear of minority groups that many townspeople feel. Yet his nostalgic desire to return to a mythical past provides little help in understanding how Suffolk might work out its contemporary problems and almost no framework for thinking about Suffolk in the context of the larger society.

Margaret Oldham

Margaret Oldham is a therapist, not unlike those Joe Gorman accuses of having undermined discipline in the family and the schools. Raised in a stable, solidly middle-class home, Margaret would nonetheless say that Joe's concept of the well-lived life is unrealistic and fails to take account of the realities of human nature and modern social life. People vary tremendously in their values and experiences, she would say, and all you do if you stick rigidly to your own standards is cut yourself off from others. Tolerance for others and a willingness to learn from new experience are important to Margaret, and their relative absence in the tightly knit, homogeneous community Joe longs to recreate would make it both claustrophobic and ultimately too undemanding for her. It would be too much like trying to stay forever in the comfort of the womb rather than coming out into the bright light of day. She places individual fulfillment higher than attachment to family and community.

Margaret, a composed woman in her early thirties, has a strong sense of discipline and has achieved an outstanding academic record and pro-

ing experienced as a boy has been lost, he thinks, partly because the town's newcomers have been corrupted by the atmosphere of Boston, the big city. There is dissension in local politics because "people coming from Boston are so interested in payoffs and so convinced that the politicians are corrupt." They are also concerned only about their own private investments in the town rather than the public good. "One of their concerns is that their houses were new and they wanted them to have all the proper facilities and they wanted to make sure that their investment in them was protected." But besides the corruption that comes directly from the experience of life in the city, there is also a more subtle kind of decay, spread by the modern educational system. "It's like people are trying to be kids again. It used to be that parents would discipline their kids and tell them what to do. But now in school you have all these specialists, these psychologists, who analyze the kids and say the kids need this and need that and the parents don't give the kids discipline and become like kids themselves. Kids need discipline, but instead they get these psychic jobs done on them."

The past was almost certainly never as relaxed and innocent as Joe nostalgically remembers it, however, and even if it had been, it would be totally unrealistic to try to return to the past by isolating the town from the city and eliminating the influence of modern psychology from the school curriculum. Joe's vision of the good life, seemingly rooted so firmly in the objective traditions of his community, is in the end highly subjective. Perhaps he has to hide his hopes of returning to the good old days because even he realizes that most of his fellow townspeople would find them faintly ridiculous.

Moreover, even if Joe Gorman's vision of a good society could be realized, it is not at all clear that Joe would want to live in it. "We need more family ties, more closeness as a family group," Joe says. "I grew up in a family in a neighborhood of nine houses, and all the people in those houses were relatives, cousins. The big thing for us was Labor Day weekend. At that time, all the family would get together for a huge picnic. It was wonderful." But Joe no sooner paints this nostalgic picture of family unity than he backs away from it, affirming the need to separate himself from his family. "As kids grow up, they have to go their separate ways. So now I've become more separate from my family. I think that's needed. The way I've done it, I pick my time to get together with them. But it's important that we be by ourselves, too."

And, finally, a dangerously narrow conception of social justice can result from committing oneself to small town values. For instance, just two months after the culmination of Suffolk's 250th anniversary cele-

person I know how to be according to my lights, then something good will happen. I think in a lot of ways living that kind of life is its own reward in and of itself." Like Brian Palmer, Margaret takes "values" as given, "whatever they might happen to be."

Margaret wants to work hard at her profession, to help people, and to give and receive love in her personal relationships, including her marriage to a bright, successful engineer. But she does not think the happiness of a fulfilling life can be won without a realistic willingness to make the effort and pay the costs required. For example, you have to be willing to give to make a relationship work. What many of her clients want instead, she thinks, is an ideal relationship in which they will be loved completely without having to do anything in return. "This is the person who is going to be there to talk to, to go somewhere with them, or, you know, a person who's just going to be there and is going to understand them. Most people don't want to have to tell you how they feel. They want you to divine that. That would be perfection. Someone who would understand them so thoroughly that they would never have to say a word and just always be there for them and who would just make them feel really secure and really, oh, not alone." What people need to accept is that it is their responsibility to communicate what they need and what they feel, and to realize that they cannot expect someone else magically to make them happy. "People want to be made happy, instead of making themselves happy."

Margaret's counsel of a sober maturity fits her role. As a therapist, she cannot solve people's problems but can only help them achieve greater self-understanding so that they may deal more realistically, and perhaps more fruitfully, with life and better realize their personal preferences. She understands that human relationships require give-and-take, that you must work hard for the satisfactions you expect in life, and that you are ultimately responsible for your own life. But this clear-sighted vision of each individual's ultimate self-reliance turns out to leave very little place for interdependence and to correspond to a fairly grim view of the individual's place in the social world. Self-reliance is a virtue that implies being alone. "I do think it's important for you to take responsibility for yourself, I mean, nobody else is going to really do it. I mean people do take care of each other, people help each other, you know, when somebody's sick, and that's wonderful. In the end, you're really alone and you really have to answer to yourself, and in the end, if you don't get the job you want or, you know, meet the person you want, it's at least in part your responsibility. I mean your knight in shining armor is not going to meet you on the street and leave messages all over the world trying to find you. It's not going to happen."

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fessional success. Indeed, she feels that one of the most important things she learned from her parents was the value of hard work—"not just work, but taking pride in your work and being responsible for your work and doing it as well as you possibly can and doing a lot of it." She also attributes much of her strong sense of responsibility to her parents, who raised her "with a lot of respect for other people and their property and their rights." But she has parted company with them in one crucial sense. "I don't think it's important to be quite that moralistic, quite that rigid," she says. "I think that I accept people the way they are more than either one of my parents has ever been able to do." Her tolerance for other people makes it easier for her to get along with a variety of people than it was for her father. Her interest in other people and her capacity to accept them is critical to what makes life interesting for Margaret, particularly in her work as a therapist in a large Southern city. "I got into psychology mostly because I was just really curious about people and what made them tick. And I was interested in why people did the things they did and why they didn't have the same ideas I did. I had a lot of friends who were intelligent people who were flunking out of school and getting into a lot of trouble and I always wondered, why? What was the motivation? What was causing them to make the kinds of decisions that they made in their lives?"

Being challenged by a variety of people different from herself is a continuing source of stimulation. As a therapist she has an "eclectic background"—interactionist, Gestalt, Rogersian," she explains. It is the diversity of ideas and psychological experiences that makes life in her chosen field interesting. "If you're any kind of therapist at all, you're out there on the line all the time and you learn things from all your clients and you grow a lot yourself. Doing therapy is almost as good for me as it is for my client, so I do get a lot of that sort of reward. I think just being exposed to different people's thoughts and ideas and problems and finding out, you know, what their lives are like just sort of opens up new kinds of ideas. Every time I got a client for a while, I would totally rethink my view of the world because a client would come with all these different ideas and sort of innocently challenge things that I consider to be very basic in life and I have to go home and think about it for a while."

In Margaret's view, the most important thing in life is doing whatever you choose to do as well as you can. Summing up her sense of the meaning of life, she says: "I just sort of accept the way the world is and then don't think about it a whole lot. I tend to operate on the assumption that what I want to do and what I feel like is what I should do. What I think the universe wants from me is to take my values, whatever they might happen to be, and live up to them as much as I can. If I'm the best

Accepting personal responsibility is, then, acting like an adult, not childishly expecting other people to solve one's problems for one. But it is also simply a necessity for getting along in a world in which other people either cannot or will not help you, in which no one can make you feel "not alone," because in the end you really are alone. Margaret's image of the world sharply limits the demands she feels people can make upon one another, even in the closest, most committed relationships. Even bonds of marriage and parenthood don't overcome the isolation that is ultimately the lot of each individual: "I'm responsible for my acts and what I do." Asked whether she was responsible for others, she replied, "No." Asked whether she was responsible for her husband, she replied, "I'm not. He makes his own decisions." What about children? "I . . . I would say I have a legal responsibility for them, but in a sense I think they in turn are responsible for their acts." In relationships, as in the wider social world, "everybody likes to get their own way." So the only way to run a relationship is to strive for "fairness"—that is, "not one person making all the sacrifices or one always giving—having a relative balance between what's the giving end and getting your own way."

Since, however, there is no wider framework within which to justify common values, all one can ask from others is that they do the work of communicating their needs clearly, and one must in turn try to be clear about one's own needs and desires. If other people don't meet your needs, you have to be willing to walk out, since in the end that may well be the only way to protect your interests. The inability to make legitimate demands on others becomes an even more severe problem when one steps out of the face-to-face personal world where one may be able to negotiate differences and assure fairness through direct communication. In the world of politics, for example, the hope of cooperative effort toward common ends is necessarily disappointed: the person who thinks in terms of the common good is a "sucker" in a situation where each individual is trying to pursue his or her own interests. "Everybody wants to be on top and get their own way. It's like in a relationship. When I think about government policies, I guess I don't want them to cut off all aid to research in psychology unless they do some other things too that should be done. I mean, I don't want to be the only one who suffers. I don't want to be the only sucker. I don't want to be the fall guy for people who are not doing their part."

So while Margaret Oldham has a vision of individual fulfillment that involves deep self-knowledge, wide tolerance of differences among people, and a mature willingness to accept responsibility for one's own life, she, too, is caught in some of the contradictions her beliefs imply. She is responsible for herself, but she has no reliable way to connect her own

fulfillment to that of other people, whether they be her own husband and children or the larger social and political community of which she is inevitably a part.

Wayne Bauer

Wayne Bauer would probably agree with Margaret Oldham's insistence on the need of the individual to make a psychic break with family conventions and the limitations of tradition. Wayne is a community organizer who works in California for the Campaign for Economic Democracy. He is in his middle thirties now and considers his present outlook on life to be a product of the 1960s. "During the sixties we saw a dream, we had a vision. And we had a belief that things could be much better, on many levels," he says. "I mean, it was a time of personal growth as well as political change. And what was exciting about that is that the personal change was what would be leading into a very significant political change in the country." Personal change involved a break with one's family. "A lot of us were raised either in working-class or middle-class backgrounds and believed that there were certain things that you did with your life. The status quo. You know, what your father did. How he lived his life. You go to high school, you go to college, get married, settle down, have a family, get a respectable position in society. And I think that what we had seen in the sixties was an emptiness that we saw in our families, that this was not what we wanted for ourselves, that we wanted something better."

Wayne's break with his family and quest for "something better" came in 1965, when he was seventeen. He had joined the Marine Corps. "I had come from a background of John Wayne, you know, American patriotism. This whole kind of facade of what we were all about as the American people." After boot camp he was stationed at Camp Lejeune and would come up to New York City on leave. "Nineteen sixty-five was when NYU marched and burned the draft cards and all of a sudden there was a political awareness and these people were letting their hair grow a little longer and putting earrings in their ear. And this was a real shock to me. I mean, I didn't understand this. I was in the Marine Corps." During this time, some friends of his who had gone to college in New York began to argue with him about the Vietnam War. "And after this went on, to make a long story short, for about three or four months, I realized that my best argument held no weight. And what happened was, all of a sudden, my view of who I was and my environment was

shattered. It was like looking in the mirror and having the whole thing shattered on you and seeing all your values, all your beliefs, everything you thought was real just kind of crumble. And it left me without any values and it also left me in a position where I had this terrible feeling of loneliness that there was no one I could go to for help. All the people that I had trusted, I feel, essentially, they had lied to me."

Upon receiving orders to go to Vietnam, Wayne went AWOL, assumed an alias, spent eight years leading an underground life travelling around the country, eventually surrendered to the military in 1972, spent four months in a military stockade, but was spared a court-martial and, finally, released by the Marine Corps with a general discharge. He returned to his parents, found them totally uncomprehending of his understanding of life, and moved from New Jersey to Venice, California.

But Wayne's break with the conventions of family and community—the conventions that remain so important for people like Joe Gorman—did not end, as it did for Margaret Oldham, with a retreat into a preoccupation with profession and private life. If he knew her, Wayne would criticize Margaret Oldham for her lack of appreciation for issues of social justice. It was through radical politics that Wayne glued the shattered mirror of his life back together again. After he made his break with his past, "morality became a question to me. It's sort of like I wanted to put everything back together again with more durable material, one that would stand the strain." Political activism became that durable material. "Watching politics is watching civilization struggle and evolve, and it's very exciting, but it's also much more personal because it's your struggle to evolve into this picture, into this historic picture somehow." In the mid-seventies, Wayne was living in a Spanish-speaking neighborhood of Santa Monica and got involved with some of his neighbors in a dispute with their landlord. "I felt very much that they were being oppressed; they were being taken advantage of. These goddam landlords used immigration like a gun at their head and these people live in this constant state of fear. I had a very good feeling. I really liked these people, they were great people."

His tenant-organizing work led him into involvement with the Campaign for Economic Democracy. "I feel good about what I do. I feel that the work I'm involved in is directly affecting other people in beneficial ways. It's again this value question. You can spend all your time in seeing how many material goods you can get together and how much money you can make or you can spend it helping one another and working together. You know, we can adopt any type of system that we want, let's say it was socialism, communism, or what have you, but the system that we adopt isn't going to mean anything unless we can educate the people to

think differently and to be different. And I see what I do as sort of an educational thing in the community, that what I do when I organize tenants is to take care of an immediate crisis that they have. But really what I do is give them a sense of power about their own lives."

When they have power over their lives, each individual will have a greater sense of efficacy, the marvellous feeling of personal growth Wayne himself has felt. "They've never made their ideas public, never shared their ideas, always felt impotent, that they couldn't affect anything. I see them coming out feeling like, well, hell! we affected something. Then the next step is to show them that there are all kinds of things that they can do in society, things they can create. And all they have to do is work as a collective to do it, to agree, to be able to agree to disagree, and then come up with some kind of consensus. Oh, it's a tremendous thing. I mean, it's very beautiful to see and very exciting to be a part of because what you're seeing is kind of an evolution of consciousness."

But what specific kinds of things should these newly liberated people create in society? Here Wayne becomes strangely inarticulate. They will make society "better," he says. But what does he mean by "better"? "I'm probably not the best person to ask," he says. Even in his area of specialty, tenants' rights, he has only vague notions of what kinds of social arrangements for providing housing tenants would work out if they had the same amount of power as their landlords. "I have a right to live in this community as long as I'm not breaking the law or damaging things—and it's a very touchy question because it deals with private property and other people's rights, investment rights—but I think you can affect that, you can control that situation, that he can make a reasonable amount of money and you can live a reasonably good life—I guess. God! I'm not being very clear."

Wayne thus has a much better idea of what he is against than of what he is for. As a result, the idea of justice that provides such a powerful focus for his life's commitments is weak in substantive content. When he speaks of justice, he talks about individual rights and legal and political systems that would give everyone a fair chance of asserting them. The language he uses provides little conception of the ways in which scarce goods should be distributed in a complex society when different individuals fairly offer competing claims to those goods.* Yet he describes his own involvement in political activism as having broadened his sense of responsibility.

*The interviews with Wayne Bauer on which our discussion of him in this chapter is based were carried out in 1980. Since then his ideas about distributive justice and public policy have clarified considerably. In June 1983 he was elected to the Santa Monica Rent Control Board.

commitments. In the language they use, their lives sound more isolated and arbitrary than, as we have observed them, they actually are.

Thus all four of the persons whose voices we have heard assume that there is something arbitrary about the goals of a good life. For Brian Palmer, the goal of a good life is to achieve the priorities you have set for yourself. But how do you know that your present priorities are better than those of your past, or better than those of other people? Because you intuitively appreciate that they are right for you at the present time. For Joe Gorman, the goal of a good life is intimate involvement with the community and family into which he happens to have been born. But how do you know that in this complicated world, the inherited conventions of your community and your family are better and more important, and, therefore, more worthy of your allegiance, than those of other communities and families? In the end, you simply prefer to believe that they are better, at least for you. For Margaret Oldham, the goal of a good life is liberation from precisely the kinds of conventions that Joe Gorman holds dear. But what do you aim for once you have been liberated? Simply what you yourself decide is best for you. For Wayne Bauer, the goal of a good life is participation in the political struggle to create a more just society. But where should political struggle lead us? To a society in which all individuals, not just the wealthy, will have power over their own lives. But what are they going to do with that power? Whatever they individually choose to do, as long as they don't hurt anybody.

The common difficulties these four very different people face in justifying the goals of a morally good life point to a characteristic problem of people in our culture. For most of us, it is easier to think about how to get what we want than to know what exactly we should want. Thus Brian, Joe, Margaret, and Wayne are each in his or her own way confused about how to define for themselves such things as the nature of success, the meaning of freedom, and the requirements of justice. Those difficulties are in an important way created by the limitations in the common tradition of moral discourse they—and we—share. The main purpose of this book is to deepen our understanding of the resources our tradition provides—and fails to provide—for enabling us to think about the kinds of moral problems we are currently facing as Americans. We also hope to make articulate the all-too-inarticulate search of those we have described in this chapter to find a moral language that will transcend their radical individualism.

Although we have based our reflections about American traditions of moral discourse on conversations with over 200 different Americans, the major themes of our book are already contained in the four stories of life quests with which we began this chapter. Those key themes are re-

Wayne has gradually reentered the Roman Catholic Church, drawn by the example of a priest who has attempted to apply the insights of the Latin American "theology of liberation" to conditions in the United States. He has also begun seriously to consider a legal career, in which he could devote himself to public service law. In spite of these moves to give more substance and direction to his political concerns, his political vocabulary at best does a partial job of explaining and developing his own sense of justice and responsibility. As we shall see, his problem is a typical one for Americans, conservative, liberal, and radical alike.

Different Voices in a Common Tradition

Brian, Joe, Margaret, and Wayne each represent American voices familiar to us all. The arguments that we have suggested would take place among them, if they ever met, would be versions of controversies that regularly arise in public and private moral discourse in the United States. One of the reasons for these differences is that they draw from different traditions, which will be described in the next chapter. Yet beneath the sharp disagreements, there is more than a little consensus about the relationship between the individual and society, between private and public good. This is because, in spite of their differences, they all to some degree share a common moral vocabulary, which we propose to call the "first language" of American individualism in contrast to alternative "second languages," which most of us also have.

Each of the individuals that we have described in this chapter is drawn from one of the four research projects on which the book is based. We are less concerned with whether they are average than with the fact that they represent the ways in which Americans use private and public life to make sense of their lives. This is the central issue with which our book is concerned. Brian Palmer finds the chief meaning of his life in marriage and family; Margaret Oldham in therapy. Thus both of them are primarily concerned with private life. Joe Gorman gives his life coherence through his active concern for the life of his town; Wayne Bauer finds a similar coherence in his involvement in political activism. Both of them have integrated the public world deeply into their lives. Whether chiefly concerned with private or public life, all four are involved in caring for others. They are responsible and, in many ways, admirable adults. Yet when each of them uses the moral discourse they share, what we call the first language of individualism, they have difficulty articulating the richness of their

ally questions: how are we Americans to think about the nature of success, the meaning of freedom, and the requirements of justice in the modern world? Our conversations with our fellow citizens have deepened our conviction that although we have to rely on our traditions to answer those questions, we will have to probe those traditions much more critically than we are used to doing if we are going to make sense of the challenges posed by the rapidly changing world in which we live.

Success

As we noted above, Americans tend to think of the ultimate goals of a good life as matters of personal choice. The means to achieve individual choice, they tend to think, depend on economic progress. This dominant American tradition of thinking about success does not, however, help very much in relating economic success to our ultimate success as persons and our ultimate success as a society.

A century and a half ago, when most Americans still lived in small towns and worked in small businesses or on family-owned farms, the requirements of economic success were perhaps more easily reconciled with understandings of success in family and civic life. In that context, running a profitable farm or business would often have required a reputation for being a good family person and a public-spirited citizen, the meanings of which would be defined in terms of the conventions of one's local community. In Joe Gorman's story, we can see a relic of the way in which the requirements of success in one's job might have encouraged one to define the success of one's life in accordance with the conventional wisdom of one's small town.

But only a small percentage of Americans now work in small businesses in small towns. Most of us work in large public or private bureaucracies. To be a success at work means to advance up the hierarchy of such corporations by helping the corporation make a good profit. But how is this kind of success related to a more fundamental kind of success in life? Even Joe Gorman now works for a large national manufacturing corporation, and he can play such an extraordinarily active part in his community because it fits in with his job as a public relations man for his corporation. If Joe's corporation should ever decide to move its Suffolk factory away from New England to a cheaper labor market, or if the company should offer Gorman an exceptionally good promotion to work at its Houston headquarters, Joe may yet face serious difficulties reconciling the requirements of economic success with his loyalties to his home town.

Someone like Brian Palmer has, of course, already encountered such difficulties. We have seen him wrestle with the question of how to integrate his ambitions to climb the corporate ladder with his desire to have a good family life. This caused him problems, not only because the pressures of work sometimes kept him from spending adequate time with his family, but, even more subtly, because the way of thinking about success that helped him move up the corporate ladder was inappropriate for adequately comprehending the goals of a good family life. And although Brian at least recognizes the problems of integrating a successful work life with a good family life, he seems blithely unconcerned with the wider political and social implications of his work.

Throughout this book, we will be wrestling, together with Brian Palmer and many others, with this question of how to think about the relationship between economic success in our centralized, bureaucratized economy and the ultimate goals of a successful private and public life.

Freedom

Freedom is perhaps the most resonant, deeply held American value. In some ways, it defines the good in both personal and political life. Yet freedom turns out to mean being left alone by others, not having other people's values, ideas, or styles of life forced upon one, being free of arbitrary authority in work, family, and political life. What it is that one might do with that freedom is much more difficult for Americans to define. And if the entire social world is made up of individuals, each endowed with the right to be free of others' demands, it becomes hard to forge bonds of attachment to, or cooperation with, other people, since such bonds would imply obligations that necessarily impinge on one's freedom. Thus Margaret Oldham, for example, sets great store on becoming an autonomous person, responsible for her own life, and she recognizes that other people, like herself, are free to have their own values and to lead their lives the way they choose. But then, by the same token, if she doesn't like what they do or the way they live, her only right is the right to walk away. In some sense, for her, freedom to be left alone is a freedom that implies being alone.

For Margaret, as for others influenced by modern psychological ideals, to be free is not simply to be left alone by others; it is also somehow to be your own person in the sense that you have defined who you are, decided for yourself what you want out of life, free as much as possible from the demands of conformity to family, friends, or community. From this point of view, to be free psychologically is to succeed in separating oneself from

the values imposed by one's past or by conformity to one's social milieu, so that one can discover what one really wants. This was precisely the transformation Brian Palmer experienced. He came to feel that the success he had been seeking was a false goal that didn't meet his own needs, so he pushed it aside, feeling it an assertion of freedom to be able to step back from the demands of his company and fulfill his own vision of happiness. The difficulty, of course, is that this vision of freedom as freedom *from* the demands of others provides no vocabulary in which Brian, Margaret, or other Americans can easily address common conceptions of the ends of a good life or ways to coordinate cooperative action with others. Indeed, Brian points out that one thing he likes in California is the freedom people have to do what they want as long as they stay within the walls of their own houses and do not impinge on others. Implicit here, of course, is an image of self-sufficiency, as if Brian will, on his own in the context of his own small family, be able to imbue his children with "values" independently of what his neighbors are doing behind the walls of their own homes. The larger hope that his freedom might encompass an ability to share a vision of a good life or a good society with others, to debate that vision, and come to some sort of consensus, is precluded in part by the very definition of freedom Brian holds.

Joe Gorman and Wayne Bauer both value democratic as well as personal freedom. But even their more political and social definition of freedom—not freedom to be your own person so much as the freedom cherished in a democracy, freedom to speak out, to participate freely in a community, and to have one's rights respected, is highly individualistic. As a traditional American patriot, Joe Gorman deeply cherishes the American ideal of freedom, even though in many ways it is precisely the ideal of freedom that makes his dream of a united Suffolk family impossible to achieve. The success of Suffolk's family spirit depends, as he has discovered, on the willingness of a few people like himself to volunteer freely to sustain community life with their own efforts. Yet he recognizes that very few people in Suffolk are willing to undertake the burdens of shaping community life, and that a man like himself is therefore likely to become exhausted, repeatedly finding himself the only volunteer.

Even more, it is the freedom Joe Gorman values—freedom of each person to live where he wants, do what he wants, believe what he wants, and, certainly, do what he can to improve his material circumstances—that makes community ties so fragile. The freedom of free enterprise makes Suffolk a bedroom community to which the residents are attached mainly by housing prices, while economic opportunities tempt most of its native sons and daughters away. The ideal of freedom Joe Gorman holds most dear makes it difficult even to discuss the question of how a just economy or a good society might best be developed in

modern circumstances. For Joe, freedom and community can be reconciled only in the nostalgic dream of an idealized past.

While Wayne Bauer holds what he would conceive to be social and political ideals radically different from those of Joe Gorman, he is if anything even more committed to the American ideal of freedom. He would, of course, be willing to limit the freedom of large corporations, but his guiding ideal is simply to restore what he sees as the lost freedom of everyone else. He wants to help give people back a sense that they are effective and can exercise some control over their own lives. But his passionate commitment to economic and political democracy turns out to be strangely without content. He can envision freedom from what he sees as current forms of economic exploitation, but that freedom is, for him, a virtual end in itself. The legacy of freedom is still the right of each person to feel powerful, to be free to strive after whatever he or she happens to want. Wayne's political vocabulary, despite its socialist patina, is forged from authentically American ore. He waxes passionately about how the freedom of individuals is limited by current economic and political arrangements, but he, too, has difficulty finding a way to think about what a more cooperative, just, and equal social order might look like. Like other Americans, he thinks of freedom very much as freedom *from*—from people who have economic power over you, from people who try to limit what you can do or say. This ideal of freedom has historically given Americans a respect for individuals; it has, no doubt, stimulated their initiative and creativity; it has sometimes even made them tolerant of differences in a diverse society and resistant to overt forms of political oppression. But it is an ideal of freedom that leaves Americans with a stubborn fear of acknowledging structures of power and interdependence in a technologically complex society dominated by giant corporations and an increasingly powerful state. The ideal of freedom makes Americans nostalgic for their past, but provides few resources for talking about their collective future.

Justice

Our American traditions encourage us to think of justice as a matter of equal opportunities for every individual to pursue whatever he or she understands by happiness. Equal opportunities are guaranteed by fair laws and political procedures—laws and procedures applied in the same way to everyone. But this way of thinking about justice does not in itself contain a vision of what the distribution of goods in a society would end up looking like if individuals had an equal chance to pursue their inter-

ests. Thus, there could be great disparities in the income given to people in different occupations in a just society so long as everyone had an equal chance of getting a well-paid job. But if, as is now becoming painfully apparent, there are more qualified applicants than openings for the interesting jobs, is equal opportunity enough to assure justice? What of the socially disadvantaged for whom a fair race is to no avail since they are left well short of the starting line?

Our society has tried to establish a floor below which no one will be allowed to fall, but we have not thought effectively about how to include the deprived more actively in occupational and civic life. Nor have we thought whether it is healthy for our society to give inordinate rewards to relatively few. We need to reach common understandings about distributive justice—an appropriate sharing of economic resources—which must in turn be based on conceptions of a substantively just society. Unfortunately, our available moral traditions do not give us nearly as many resources for thinking about distributive justice as about procedural justice, and even fewer for thinking about substantive justice.

Even a self-styled radical such as Wayne Bauer has a difficult time going beyond notions of procedural justice. He is outraged because in Santa Monica the political cards have been stacked against poor tenants in favor of wealthy landlords. He wants to liberate tenants from this unfair system, to give them the same opportunities as rich people to exercise their wills individually. But he becomes confused when asked what kind of society, with what kind of distribution of wealth, the tenants should try to create once they have achieved a fair chance. There is, after all, not enough land near the coast in Southern California to accommodate everyone who would want to live there. If the mechanisms of the free market are not to determine who should live in places like Santa Monica, how should that determination be made? How, in short, should scarce resources be distributed in the new social order created by liberated tenants? What would a just society really look like? To answer such questions, Wayne would have to do more than think about the fair procedures that should be created to give individuals the ability to exercise power over their own lives. He would need some sense of substantive goals, some way to think about distributive justice. But here his cultural resources fail him, as they do most of us.

We now turn to the traditions that have shaped our language and our lives for what they may tell us about our present predicament.



2 *Culture and Character: The Historical Conversation*

To an American reader, the individualism that pervades the four lives described in chapter 1 may at first glance seem not to have anything to do with cultural tradition, but simply to express the way things are. Yet when we look more closely, we see that there are subtle differences among our four characters. There are different modes even within the vocabularies of each individual. Brian Palmer, for example, was at one time in his life single-mindedly devoted to career success, sacrificing everything to attainment of that goal. Later, he came to value quite different things—classical music, books, relationships, the immediate enjoyment of life—and left behind his total devotion to career. Both these modes are individualistic, but they are rooted in different traditions and have different implications. We propose to call the former mode “utilitarian individualism” and the latter “expressive individualism.” Joe Gorman and Wayne Bauer combine their individualism with somewhat different languages of civic responsibility. Margaret Oldham holds a more sharply formulated version of Brian’s individualism.

These differences derive from a historical past of which none of our characters is entirely aware. In our forward-facing society, however, we are more apt to talk about the future than the past and to imagine that the differences between us derive largely from a conflict of current interests. Yet even in the debate about our future, our cultural tradition, in its several strands, is still very much present, and our conversation would probably be more to the point if we were aware of that fact.

So long as it is vital, the cultural tradition of a people—its symbols, ideals, and ways of feeling—is always an argument about the meaning of the destiny its members share.¹ Cultures are dramatic conversations about things that matter to their participants, and American culture is no exception. From its early days, some Americans have seen the pur-