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EXCERPTS
Habits of the Heart

, Robt. Bellah

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 conceited 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-

comfortable 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.

For many of those who talked to us, the family seemed to reinforce the importance of self-reliance as the cardinal virtue of individuals. The idea we have of ourselves as individuals on our own, who earn everything we get, accept no handouts or gifts, and free ourselves from our families of origin turns out, ironically enough, to be one of the things that holds us together. Like other core elements of our culture, the ideal of a self-reliant individual leaving home is nurtured within our families, passed from parent to child through ties that bind us together in solitude as well as love.⁷

Leaving Church

The self-reliant American is required not only to leave home but to "leave church" as well. This may not literally happen. One may continue to belong to the church of one's parents. But the expectation is that at some point in adolescence or early youth, one will decide on one's own that that is the church to belong to. One cannot defend one's views by

saying that they are simply the views of one's parents. On the contrary, they must be particularly and peculiarly one's own. Traditionally, Protestant piety demanded that a young person experience a unique conversion experience of his or her own, even while specifying more or less clearly the content of that experience. More recently we have come to expect even greater autonomy.

Again, though such ideas may be more widespread today, they are hardly new in America. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson is even more concerned with intellectual and religious independence than he is with economic independence. He writes, "The highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato and Milton is that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men but what they thought. A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages." Emerson assumes that his fellows accept his own confidence in the individual soul: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string."⁸

Today religion represents a frame of reference for the self as conspicuous in its absence as in its presence. To be sure, more than nine out of ten Americans "believe in God," surveys report, and four out of ten attend church regularly.⁹ Joe Gorman, for one, still takes his family faithfully to Mass every Sunday, lingering afterward to greet his fellow-parishioners and chat with the pastor. But relatively few middle-class urbanites described themselves to us as "children of God, created in his image and likeness, bound by his commandments, and inspired by his love. Liberalized versions of biblical morality tend to subordinate themes of divine authority and human duty to the intrinsic goodness of human nature, since "God does not make junk," as a liberal pastor puts it. They also underscore the power of human choice and the possibility of self-acceptance, since "you are a child of the Universe," in the widely quoted formula one ecology activist, Cassie Cromwell, who is also a Unitarian, cited as part of her credo:

BE GENTLE WITH YOURSELF. You are a child of the Universe no less than the trees and the stars. You have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be. And whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace in your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world.

We have looked at various ways Americans today separate out their ideas of the self from family, religion, and work, and how they seek lifestyle enclaves to find the self-expression missing from the rest of their lives. We have also seen how their forebears left their homes, churches, and careers in order to begin again. Breaking with the past is part of our past. Leaving tradition behind runs all the way through our tradition. But how is such a separate self to be shaped and grounded? Do we have answers today that correspond to those provided by Winthrop's God, Jefferson's nature, Franklin's progress, and Whitman's poetic feeling? Almost everyone who talked with us spoke of "values" in reply. Some of them, like Joe Gorman, make no bones about what those values "really" are and should be for everyone. Those who don't know better need to be told, like children, "Shut up and listen!" Those who do know need to pitch in to stem the chaos and "cooperate with each other for the good of the community." Others, like Wayne Bauer, return repeatedly to "this value question" to emphasize that we should be "helping one another and working together" instead of seeking our own success. Margaret Oldham is more conscious of the fragile basis of her "values." "It really sort of comes down to the authority I say I give my values . . . all those sorts of goals I've set up for myself, that kind of motivate me and tell me which way to go, what to avoid."

If the self is defined by its ability to choose its own values, on what grounds are those choices themselves based? For Margaret and many others, there is simply no objectifiable criterion for choosing one value or course of action over another. One's own idiosyncratic preferences are their own justification, because they define the true self. Brian Palmer explains his drastic shift from obsession with work to devotion to family by saying that he just got more personal satisfaction from course B than from course A. The right act is simply the one that yields the agent the most exciting challenge or the most good feeling about himself.

Now if selves are defined by their preferences, but those preferences are arbitrary, then each self constitutes its own moral universe, and there is finally no way to reconcile conflicting claims about what is good in itself. All we can do is refer to chains of consequences and ask if our actions prove useful or consistent in light of our own "value-systems." All we can appeal to in relationships with others is their self-interest, likewise enlightened, or their intuitive sympathies. In therapy, for example, Margaret would "try to get them to come to the realization that they're probably causing the other person a whole lot of pain and then ask, 'Do you think you ought to do anything about that?'" If confronted with a person whose values "I really couldn't tolerate," Margaret concludes, "I wouldn't see them in therapy." Where sympathy or already-congruent values are not enough to resolve moral disagreements between ourselves and others, we have no recourse except to withdraw from them.

In the absence of any objectifiable criteria of right and wrong, good or evil, the self and its feelings become our only moral guide. What kind of world is inhabited by this self, perpetually in progress, yet without any fixed moral end? There each individual is entitled to his or her own "bit of space" and is utterly free within its boundaries. In theory, at least, this civil and psychic right is extended to everyone, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or value system, insofar as their exercise of this right does not infringe on the right of others to do likewise.