



For the Love of Our Many Lives

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As a young student graduating from college and entering a world of independence and freedom, I am forced to consider my life options while simultaneously being compelled to reflect on the past. Although no one can be a direct product of society, nor can one completely separate oneself from the influences of society. Therefore, it is necessary to trace the root causes of certain major decisions I have made in my life, and to learn how these decisions have affected me and my goals.

Looking at economic status and social class is often the best way to begin to divulge into the inner workings of oneself. Important personal relationships have also had a dominant influence on who I am and who I have become. The question, whether these relationships led me onto a path that I chose or they pushed me onto a path which was deemed most fit, will be explored. In addition to various relationships that influence my identity, it is of primary importance to also analyze the lack of relationships in my life, and the roles I adopted as a result. These roles are roles not resulting from autonomous choice, but rather resulting from the society in which I was raised. In this paper I hope to uncover the often-subconscious effects of society and its relations, hoping to “link private and public; present, past, and future; and the life of an individual to the life of society and the

meaning of the cosmos” (Bellah et al. 83). Only through deep inner analysis, while simultaneously examining the environments of the past and the present, can one truly understand oneself.

I was guided off for my first semester freshman year to a university whose social working and cultural identity was far from what I was accustomed to. The combination of the estranged culture with the social environment of my family and the various corresponding identities, led to one of the most affective decisions of my life. I was also searching for self-definition as an individual:

The obvious point of similarity is the emphasis on the independence of the individual. As we have seen, self-reliance is an old American value, but only one strand of the complex cultural weft we have inherited. The expressive culture, now deeply allied with the utilitarian reveals its difference from earlier patterns by its readiness to treat the normative commitments as so many alternative strategies of self-fulfillment. What has dropped out are the old normative expectations of what makes life worth living. With the freedom to define oneself anew in a plethora of identities has also come an attenuation of those common understandings that enable us to recognize the virtues of the other (Bellah et al. 48).

I was also in a period of life when I was supposed to define myself using the relations I had already established, while integrating my perceptions of the character of people I was to meet in the future.

At the age of seventeen I was to begin a journey for which I had been preparing for what seemed like my entire life. Choosing which college to attend was painstaking enough, but once I had chosen the road, the

process seemed easy—the road to independence, freedom, fun, to what was supposed to be the best four years of my life, and subsequently the University of Wisconsin. For a permanent resident of New York, Wisconsin may seem both geographically and ideologically distant. The choice to attend a school such a grave distance from my home in New York was part of my child-like desire to flee from home, aided by the ability to travel such a distance relatively easily. With the advancements of the technological age that we live in, distance did not seem as serious as it truly was. I had perceived the family to be only a phone call away, or a click of the mouse away in cyber space, but the emotional distance turned out to be an eternity. This misconception of the effects of time, space, and distance are a result of the global society in which we live. The false promises of the information age and its lack of true communal identity led to my decision to attend University of Wisconsin. The practical circumstances surrounding my eventual enrollment in Binghamton University (SUNY) and the pattern of events which led to it will be explored later. But for now, let us revisit how I was sent off¹ to the University of Wisconsin for an education that only lasted three long and horrible weeks.

Luggage checked, tickets in hand, and parents kissed good-bye, I am off. I am on my own, and am alone. The stark realities, which I had previously chosen to ignore, began crashing down. I am not going to see my family for at least three months when I fly home for Thanksgiving, for a period of only four or five days. My grandfather is in the hospital, waiting for death to relieve him of his earthly struggle. The negative thoughts are flooding my head, thoughts that have come and gone many times before. Somehow it is real now. I can no long-

1. The fact that I use the words “sent off,” rather than “set free,” or “bound for exploration” displays a sort of negative sentiment, which occurred in that devastating time.

er attend to the realities I had constructed in my head. I can no longer live the life I had dreamed of, one that I had capriciously instilled. I am going across the country to a place where I do not know a single soul. Why could I not go to a school closer to home? Why could I not go to school where I would feel more secure, or is there such a school out there? Why couldn't I have gone to school where the guilt of unnecessary out-of-state tuition costs weren't plaguing my every move? Why am I so selfish? Am I ruining my relationship with my little brother? How can I build a relationship when I am only home for holidays? These questions once obtained answers in my mind with ease and simplicity. The moment the workings of the world away from the familiar society and everything I knew changed, I could no longer rest in the answers that I had conveniently created to ease and subdue my worries. These questions needed resolution and the harsh reality of their importance no longer allowed for solutions that were imposed on my mind by the society I grew up in.

The particularities of the events during these three weeks are really not of primary importance. The unresolved questions, which encompass and govern my reflective thoughts on these three weeks, are of principal concern. I want to uncover the justifications I created in my mind during the time at the University of Wisconsin about my decision to leave after only three weeks and return home, thus abandoning my acquired conceptions of college life.

I did have some kind of notion of running away. “Clearly, the meaning of one's life for most Americans is to become one's own person, almost to give birth to oneself. Much of this process, as we have seen, is negative. It involves breaking free from family, community, and inherited ideas” (Bellah et al. 83). I was going to be free, and far away from the emotional and psychological powers of my parents. However, that very distance was what may have

caused my inability to remain situated in Wisconsin. I wanted to construct my own identity, recognizing that the person I was until that point was the person that my family, my community, and American society had made. "Viewing one's primary task as 'finding oneself' in autonomous self-reliance, separating oneself not only from one's parents but also from the larger communities and traditions that constitute one's past, leads to the notion that it is in oneself, perhaps on the relation to a few intimate others, that fulfillment is to be found" (Bellah et al. 163). Attending university was always something that was planned in my future. It was never seen as an option, nor was it a mandatory burden. It was in my future perpetually before I was even conceived (in the minds of my parents); its very existence was never under question. This assumption of a role, a specified plan for my life, led to a path that I was not really ready for—not on my own terms and expectations.

I expected challenging courses for which I would work hard and succeed. I expected a social life and four-year education that would be passed by in what would seem like an instant. I did not want to go to the University of Wisconsin. I wanted to go to the University of Wisconsin's reputation, and constructed an ideal that I held close in my heart as a justification for choosing to attend. This construction of an ideal, rather than confrontation with reality, was in large part a result of my upbringing, and the social relations forming my psychological mode of thought. My lack of identity and self-assurance led me not only to be a puppet of society, but caused me to cling onto anything that could define or justify who I was.

I was brought up in a typical upper middle class family, in a small suburban community forty minutes from New York City. The geographic location of this town is important because it allows one to construct a vision of the quaint little village

whose population was derived from occupational and monetary success. Most of the residents of this town commuted to New York City to a high powered, well-paying job with great respect according to the norms and criteria set by the American society. My upper-middle class family was typical in the sense that I was a typical member of a small community. I was a typical student going through the trials and tribulations of high school and the multiple transitions of friendships that it encompassed—atypical in retrospect, for these factors were precisely the cause of my relentless search for concrete definition. I may have looked and acted like a typical member of the small internal society, and held at one point values that were the same. These typical aspects of my identity were merely ways of blending in with the surroundings. I wanted nothing more than to be unnoticed, to not be special, to be just one like the many. It is necessary to explore the very nature of the town in which I lived, in which I made my life-affecting decisions, and the components that make this town a mini and inner society. By these I mean a society which is so small and perceived so internally revolving that all outside matters seem nonexistent, or at least unimportant. This is very much the essence of who *I* became.

I became a version of me, but a version that this mini society had prescribed. "[Cities] are fusions of markets, political authority and community. They assume distinctive shapes and styles in pursuit of economic and social aims defined by the polity and community" (Walton 124). I was not only myself, and whatever dreams, hopes, and beliefs I felt, I was also a representative of my family and more than that, a compensator for my family, a retributive force, a reconfirmation of the good which made up the family. My brother was not the example that the community sought to exemplify. Trailing in his footsteps would lead to a path of expectant failure, troubles

and victimization, but with the burden of my family's eminence I became the perfect little child according to prescribed standards—a mere construction of what would not only repel attention, defray any negative gossip, or caddy rumored nonsense, but if it attracted anything at all, would be positive reaffirmation of who the family were supposed to be, if anything at all.

This supposed role was applied to my family by this mini society itself, and was perceived in a completely subconscious manner. The perception of the family or the role I took on to reaffirm the goodness in the family was never explicitly stated, or even tacitly implied. "The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind. This is evident from the fact that the character and weight of that other, in whose mind we see ourselves, makes all the difference with our feeling" (Cooley 17). I took deeply to heart how I thought others saw me, and how others saw my family. This subconsciously persistent evaluation of who I am and what I was representing created the image of what I should be rather than the person I actually was.

Growing up in a neighborhood where you feel like you cannot be yourself before you have even discovered the true nature of this self is an obtrusive and strangling notion. My parents were not of the upper-middle class when they were growing up. My mother would be classified as poor, on welfare, beneath the poverty line with a single mom and six children. My father was not below the poverty line per se, but would definitely be defined as working class. My mother is a very smart woman, one able to work herself up the social ladder for what she dreamed she would provide for her family. My father, with the able help of my mother was put through college.¹ My parents have worked for everything they have established. They worked for a life

status they desired for their future family, to provide a life that they personally were not able to enjoy. "As evidence refuting the generalized upward-mobility and affluent-worker hypothesis began to accumulate, a more critical interpretation gained recognition. Class differences, it appeared, were large, persistent, and consequential for people's life chances—their opportunities in education, wealth and income, occupation, health and longevity, and moral standing" (Walton 147). Using precisely this mental state, my parents justified concluding that a family situated in a higher class would allow for a better life than one residing in the current working class status.

As Wallerstein writes in his analysis of historical capitalism, "Politics is about changing power relations in a direction more favourable to one's interests and thereby redirecting social progress" (Wallerstein 48). My parents, although not part of a conscious social movement, played key roles in the typical American dream of establishing a good foundation for family. They were born into one status, associated with certain opportunities and minimal expectations. As characteristic Americans they were not satisfied with their state and desired more both for themselves as individuals and for the family that they had envisioned. They defied the traditional societal expectations that defined their impoverished working class status by refusing to accept their roles in society, thereby climbing the social ladder and overcoming social obstacles in pursuit of more.

1. Again here on personal note notice the choice of words. Rather than "with the aid of my mother put himself through school," or "attended school," I write she aided him and "he was put through school," as if he was the inactive force in the arrangement. It was by the service of my mother that he was afforded the opportunity to get a college education. This clearly reflects my sentiment on my parents, and my perspective of their life together.

Knowing that my parents were not always of the upper-middle class caused an inner struggle in me. Was I to identify with the working class that was revealed in my parents at heart, or with those who were handed their middle class status and remained comfortably there, or perhaps even subconsciously with those progressing to a higher status within the middle class grouping? This struggle sheds light both on my decision to attend Wisconsin and on my decision to leave Wisconsin. I was grounded in-between two classes, and two very distinct identities. I refused to adhere to society's expectations and to only assume one identity—that being of the higher social class. Deep inside my identity, I felt more linked to the working class mentality and ideal. I brought this struggle with me to Wisconsin, causing me to question everything I did, and the purpose of my very existence.

I was in Wisconsin facing loneliness in a deeper way than ever before. I was beginning to understand who I was, and unfortunately was doing this through misery and depression. Correctly it is said that one can learn from his/her mistakes, but one can learn a great deal more from times of hardship or unhappiness. A lesson through sadness and depression often better illuminates what one truly values or wants out of life. It is no longer easy to accept the norms and values that society projects onto me. I am forced to question everything that is held before me, grappling and trying to secure some sense of purpose and assured identity. Not only was I separated from my family, and the society with which I was familiar, I was alienated from any sense of self. This process of alienation led me to a deep feeling of seclusion, a conscious rejection of society and its values, and inner alienation through persistent questioning of the self.

A great part of the psychological struggle attempting to lead the life I wanted so desperately to lead was due to my relation-

ship with my mother. "In most societies in world history the meaning of one's life has derived to a large degree from one's relationship to the lives of one's parents and one's children" (Bellah et al. 83). I never knew of a life separated from either one of my parents and consequentially did not have an identity apart from them. Why did I feel like I was betraying her, like I had left her behind? Why was every aspect of my life grounded in what I imagined was taking place at home? As Spencer Cahill explains, "Uncoupling applies to the redefinition of self that occurs as mutual identity unravels into singularity, regardless of marital status or sex of the participants" (Vaughan 1992: 151). Although Cahill's description specifically applies to married couples progressing through the different stages of dealignment leading most often to divorce, his description quite clearly accentuates the qualities and intensity of my relationship with my mother. In fact, it may be argued that through the lack of the husband role my father played, I compensated taking on those roles myself. Where my father ceased to make my mother happy, in companionship, laughter, and a friendly soul, I compensated. Unknowingly I began to adapt to my mother's needs to the extent where I subconsciously became responsible for her happiness.

What has already been revealed subtextually through the way in which certain descriptions were phrased in previous paragraphs of this paper is my view of the relationship between my father and mother, or lack thereof. "We have already seen how children must leave home, find their own way religiously and ideologically, support themselves, and find their own peer group. This process leads to a considerable amnesia about what one owes to one's parents" (Bellah et al. 82). I was responsible for the daily happiness of my mother, and felt a conflicting obligation to my father. Due to the distance of our separation, and the confusion of the life I was to lead, I was

plagued with guilt over what I owed my parents, and how I was to fulfill these obligations. I did not owe my mother acts to ensure her happiness, but since I possessed the ability to do so, it seemed like a betrayal, and a lack of personhood to do otherwise.

With obvious barriers in the relationship between my father and I, both the guilt for the out-of-state college tuition and my lack of playing the proper daughterly role led me to reevaluate my past actions. Being removed from the environment where the actions that defined our relationship took place, I was allowed a more objective view of the events. This objectivity, however, led me to misconceive previous experiences as bad daughterly acts, acts that a “good” daughter would not carry out. I saw the “good” daughter role abstracted from the circumstances surrounding the relationships in my family. However, an act can only be truly analyzed in both the context and with the relations of the corresponding people involved. The misconception of the daughter role that in my mind I had failed to play was quickly corrected upon returning home to the relevant circumstances and causal environment.

My relationship with my mother cannot accurately be explored without illustrating certain aspects of our roles within the family. In addition to all the traditional motherly roles as nurturer, provider, etc., my mother was a peacemaker and a happiness creator with regard to the hostile relationship between my father and brother. This peacemaker role, however, left my mother either ignored or unfulfilled. I saw it as my role to take on the character of perfect little child, thereby creating no additional disturbances in our family, while seeking to make my mother happy. The roles that I self-prescribed, “Help us recognize what we all do although often more implicitly. Whatever our definition of self, we must sustain it through the stories we tell one another and ourselves that are firm-

ly anchored in social relationships and ‘institutions’” (Irvine 33).

I could understand my mother and see her needs and desires in a way that my father refused to recognize. I could see in the most basic and insignificant ways how I could enhance her life even faintly, which is exactly what I strived to do. Ultimately this role manifested itself into a relationship more like best friends, partners in thoughts and feelings than a traditional mother-daughter relationship. We shared very common views on what was going on at home and were able to escape within each other what we couldn’t abandon in reality. This is not a relationship that I would revolutionize, but is something that became a bit of a burden when it came to planning my own life. By leaving my mother at home, I was being selfish. I was leaving her behind to wallow in unhappiness and misery, while I was out gallivanting, planning a life separate from that of my family. “As relationships develop, their participants acquire local definitions—friend, lover, teacher, supporter, and so on. To sustain the relationship requires an honoring of the definition—both self and other. If two persons become close friends, for example, each acquires certain rights, duties, and privileges” (Gergen 293). I felt as though I was neglecting my mother’s needs, and denying the role, which I had previously eagerly embraced. By moving onto a life which did not revolve around my home, and the unhappiness manifested there, I was not fulfilling the roles that I saw were my responsibility to fulfill. I betrayed my mother by leaving her behind, and jeopardized any goodness in our relationship that we had established.

If I endangered my relationship with my mother I would be left with nothing. I would be absolutely alone, having no other emotional and moral support in my life at that time. This is where the lack of relationships comes to play an important factor in uncovering the self behind all my actions

and beliefs. If I had had some sort of alternative mechanism, a person who served as a backbone other than my mother, my betrayal of leaving to create my own life would not have been so devastating. I would not have felt the responsibility for her happiness as severely and would not have extracted such a dependent need for her support and love, created through habituation. I do not mean to argue that it is wrong to desire the love and support of one's mother, but to become so deeply dependent on it that you structure your life decisions accordingly is misleading and a misconception that I must uncover.

I viewed my mom as having a need equal to the need I carried for her in the relationship that we established. What I did not realize is her unique role of a mother, before that of a friend. What my mother wanted for me first and foremost is for me to be happy. Perhaps her short-term desires might have been revealed in missing me, or wishing I were home, but her long-term motherly goals were simple. I did not see it as such, and felt an obligation to be there for my mother, as I would like to have thought she would be for me. Again, this reveals my presupposition of a relationship between two equals. Through this description it seems as though it is a relationship between two autonomous persons who choose the role freely, as in a marriage for example. Our relationship was not an autonomous contract between two individuals, but a unique relationship between mother and daughter. We were not of equal status, equal life experience, or equal responsibility. The rights and duties that we held with respect to each other were not meant to be equal. It was the role that I subconsciously accepted because it was the one aspect I could control. I could not stop the negative things that were going on beyond my individual sphere, but I could make the situation slightly better by compensating for my mother in every way that my father and brothers neglected to live up

to.

I made the decision to leave the University of Wisconsin with the force of my mother's wishes behind me. I had her validation/authorization as backing—justification otherwise seemed insignificant. "At present, many Americans' concerns are not addressed by our dynamic social fabric. People feel alienated, left out and cut off, and with good cause—they've been separated from responsibility for the actions of a system they were told was designed to respond to them" (Gates xxi). I was expecting an easy transition to an unfamiliar world comprised of the expectant role a student should play without the burden of blatant responsibility. Nevertheless, the state and society did not respond or cater to my desires as I had hoped, which left me to be alone tumbling down a spiral of crushed expectations, and horrid reality. To leave Wisconsin was not an idea that I devised, nor was it a decision that I made independent of my society and familial relationships. I wanted to fulfill the obligations to my family beyond all else, and felt that going home would be the easiest way they could be established. I did not want to struggle attempting to define the person that I was, and found that the answers to my questions were not easily accessed. Going to the place where all things are familiar, where less comes into question, and the things that are questioned have an easy societal answer, seemed best.

I failed to view the relationship between my mother and I as a unique entity of a larger world-system. As John Walton (1993) explores the lives of many different people showing how they are all interconnected, I failed to apply such interdependence in my view of life. I was secure in my little sphere of community and internal relationships among family, but I did not realize the magnitude of these relations within the world-system. I was not able to conceptualize the future of a life of many relationships, interactive, interdependent,

outside of the life that I knew in my family. I did not view the world as a community in itself, where my role can be self-determined (arguably to a certain extent). I saw my role in life only in terms of my family, and the immediate effects my actions and decisions had on them—"The general public may lack the knowledge of how our world is changing, the world system is nevertheless a matter of daily experience" (Walton 289). With a broader understanding of the world, and the relations between both nations and peoples, I can more accurately portray my role in that world as an independent actor confined by the societal definitions constructed in the society in which we live.

I have also learned from my previous experience in Wisconsin that "In the absence of any objectifiable criteria of right and wrong, good or evil, the self and its feelings become our only moral guide" (Bellah et al. 76). Through analysis of my time in Wisconsin, I realize that I must view myself as a part of a complicated web of interconnected lives, rather than an absolutely autonomous individual seeking for definitions irrespective of those around me. Through acknowledging the obstacles in the relationships I have with my family, I can more accurately view my role, and construct the life that I want to live given my family and these pre-established relations. Through questioning the purpose of my life and its real effect on the world, I now also realize why "Americans tend to think of the ultimate goals of the 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" (Bellah et al. 22).

This paper does not attempt to calculate the ultimate success of American society, but does portray a struggle of one product of society in her attempts to vali-

date her actions, giving them some sense of moral or worldly worth. However, this quest for individual identity and life value must be understood with foremost thought yet with caution—"We believe in the dignity, indeed the sacredness, of the individual. Anything that would violate our right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make our own decisions, live our lives as we see fit, is not only morally wrong, it is sacrilegious. Our highest and noblest aspirations, not only for ourselves, but for those we care about, for our society and for the world, are closely linked to our individualism" (Bellah et al. 142). Only through acknowledgment of the importance of the role of society, while keeping society under constant scrutiny, can individual happiness be achieved.

My most crucial mistake in my time in Wisconsin was creating idealized expectations of what was supposed to happen, and the person that I was supposed to be, irrespective of the various elements and circumstances which controlled my journey. "Backward looking considerations of blame responsibility are a woefully inadequate guide to forward-looking questions of the proper allocation of tasks at hand" (Schmidtz 154). Although I am still searching for concrete identity and clarity, I realize that I am part of an ever-changing world where my identity can only be constructed in terms of an interconnected web. No specific act can be attributed as a sole cause, nor can any single aspect bear blame entirely—rather, each act in all of our lives is a unique pattern of individual and societal influences.

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