What Really Matters

Living a Moral Life Amidst Uncertainty and Danger

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With affection and admiration
and best wishes

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Introduction

What Really Matters chronicles stories of ordinary people and what matters most to them, in normal and extraordinary times. It is a book about moral experience and how individuals and groups come to grips with danger and uncertainty. We tend to think of dangers and uncertainties as anomalies in the continuum of life, or irruptions of unpredictable forces into a largely predictable world. I suggest the contrary: that dangers and uncertainties are an inescapable dimension of life. In fact, as we shall come to understand, they make life matter. They define what it means to be human. This is a book about people who, in the midst of such challenges, are trying to live a moral life.

The phrase "moral life" can be ambiguous because *moral* can be used in two different senses. In its broader meaning, the word *moral* refers to values. Life, in this sense, is inevitably moral, because for each and every one of us, life is about

the things that matter most to us. Just carrying on our existence, negotiating important relations with others, doing work that means something to us, and living in some particular local place where others are also passionately engaged in these same existential activities—all this is, by definition, moral experience.

But this meaning of *moral* is not synonymous with *good* in an ethical sense. The moral experience that people share could be far from good, even malign. The values that we express and enact can be inhuman. Think of a local community that scapegoats or oppresses a minority, or one that supports slavery, child prostitution, violence toward women, or other abuses. Here one's moral experience could include complicity in terrible acts, just as ordinary men and women were caught up in perpetrating the Shoah or racial slavery. Normal and shared moral experience of this sort is so troubling precisely because what looks so wrong from the outside (or from the victim's perspective) may not look that way from the inside, from the perspective of collaborators and perpetrators. That is why, in this first sense, what is moral needs to be understood as what is local, and the local needs to be understood to require ethical review (scrutiny from the outside and from those on the inside who challenge accepted local values).

In its more focused meaning, *moral* refers to our sense of right and wrong. When we say we want to live a moral life, we mean one that embodies our own moral commitments. We can imagine a certain way of conducting our lives that seems right: we can feel responsibility for others, and act on those feelings; and we can respond to trouble and those in trouble in a way that makes us feel we are doing good in the

world. We expect that other people in very different locales would agree that these acts are moral in this second sense, and even if we do not receive approbation from others, we feel ashamed if we act in a way that goes against this core impulse to do the right thing.

Those who seek to live a moral life may develop an awareness that their moral environment, in the first sense, is wrong. They may respond with criticism, protest, and personal efforts to do the right thing, no matter how great the odds against them being effective and how likely it is that their choices will have negative consequences for them. Many will not rock the boat, and their interior, moral life will reflect the problems with moral experience surrounding them. This is how people come to collaborate publicly with unethical policies, in spite of their private reservations, and later on develop feelings of guilt and misplaced loyalty, while others stay in denial for a lifetime. Of course, there are other people who seem tone deaf to moral sensibility, who appear to be unmoved by feelings for other human beings. We shall see that moral life is closely connected to the idea of ethics, by which we mean we aspire to values that transcend the local and that can guide us in living a life.

Can we learn anything from the stories of people who have tried to live moral lives in very different settings, amidst particular kinds of dangers and uncertainties, that can help us do the same? Is it really feasible to try to live in a way that runs against the grain of the moral environment that surrounds us? When there is real uncertainty about what to do and when the level of danger is high enough to threaten what really matters to us, what kinds of decisions do we make?

Ordinary experience frequently thrusts people into troubling circumstances and confounding conditions that threaten to undo our thin mastery over those deeper things that matter most, such as our self-esteem, intimate relations, or religious values. Divorce, the death of a loved one, injustice and discrimination, dead-end jobs, unemployment, accidents, chronic illness, artistic failure, alienation from faith community: any of these common calamities can break our grip on what we hold dear, and destroy our sense that we are in control of our fate.

A surprising number of American families go into bankruptcy, about one in every seventy-five households this year, and a very large number just barely avoid it, constantly living on the edge of financial insecurity. A middle-aged executive in New York has a heart attack and is unable to continue working. His disability creates a new and dangerous financial reality for his wife and young children and causes him to question the meaning of the life he has built. A young Bostonian loses her job as a software developer and cannot find a new one; her sense of self plummets, and she becomes depressed and suicidal. A struggling working-class African American family in New Orleans loses its beloved only son in Iraq, and months later their third-generation family home is destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. The boy's father, a recovered alcoholic, refuses to seek a substitute for the rehabilitation program he has participated in for several years and goes on a binge of drinking. A liberal, professional Palestinian husband and wife, both educated in Paris, are shocked by the horror of a brilliant daughter, a high school honor student, killing herself and others as a suicide bomber at an Israeli bus stop and leaving behind a video in which she rejects secular

values and commits herself to the fundamentalist religious ideal of jihad. These are but a few illustrations of the danger and uncertainty that surround us and could strike us at any time. Readers will doubtless be aware of others close to their own lives. On an even larger scale, the evening news reminds us regularly of natural and man-made disasters that can overturn life at a moment's notice. Tsunamis, earthquakes, and hurricanes can destroy whole cities and kill or uproot hundreds of thousands of people. Failed or corrupt states in Africa or Asia, famine, or civil war visit misery on countless others. Terrorist attacks in New York, Madrid, London, or Jerusalem unleash horror in the midst of the most prosperous cities. A rash of deaths from avian influenza raises the specter of pandemic disease that could touch anywhere on the globe.

But immediate threats to a comfortable existence come at a much more intimate level: within our own bodies. For all of the medical breakthroughs of the last fifty years, for example, most people are aware that many health problems are incurable and that most of us will face the pain and limitations of chronic conditions. Even a short list feels too threatening to think about: diabetes, heart disease, ulcers, multiple varieties of cancer, asthma, lupus, hepatitis, kidney failure, osteoporosis, Alzheimer's. Not to mention that time itself saps our energies, disfigures our bodies, and increasingly slows and muddles our thought processes. And death, a silent haunting of our days, waits for each of us.

Even in the absence of tragic events or disabling illness, people struggle steadily throughout their lives to hold on to those things that matter most to them, things such as status, jobs, money, family ties, sexual intimacy, sense of order and

self-control, health, life itself, and also religious commitments, political arrangements, and all sorts of culturally and personally specific agendas. This daily struggle can be fierce and desperate because it is inevitably unequal. There is a powerful, enervating anxiety created by the limits of our control over our small worlds and even over our inner selves. This is the existential fear that wakes us at 3 a.m. with night sweats and a dreaded inner voice, that has us gnawing our lip, because of the threats to what matters most to us.

WE EMPLOY A VARIETY of strategies to deal with the profound sense of inadequacy and existential fear bred by the limits of our control. There is outright denial with feigned nonchalance. There is, for those who can afford it, a comfortable boredom laced with escapism: "Forget about life for a while." There is, for a happy few, an irrepressible good humor. There is fatalism, as voiced by Harvey Deaton, a survivor of the terrorist bombings in London on July 7, 2005, to the *New York Times:* "If your number's up, your number's up." And there is the hormonal surge of youth, searching for physical challenges from bungee jumping to other extreme sports—substituting the frisson of immediate but containable risk for the far grimmer reality of distant but uncontrollable perils.

Magical belief in technological supremacy over life itself is yet another classic American cultural coping response, as is facing only problems that reach the crisis level one at a time. And financial advisors, insurance salespeople, surgeons, psychological counselors, security experts, and many other professionals have a vested interest in selling the comforting but fundamentally misleading notion of certainty about control over human

affairs. "Risk management" is yet another society-wide myth that is punctured every time catastrophe—from hurricanes to epidemics—strikes us unprepared. These cultural responses work by deluding us as to the nature of the human condition.

Given the manifest shakiness of our lives, what is surprising is that we act, think, and write as if we were in control of ourselves and our world. It is our assiduous denial of existential vulnerability and limits that is extraordinary in American culture. Much of our society, of course, is founded on a myth of self-control (Jefferson's perfectibility of man), mastery of the environment (taming the frontier), beneficence of our social order (the city on the hill), and denial of human limits, including the ultimate one, death itself. Our pervasive consumer culture is founded on another myth of control—the belief that we can solve our problems through the products that we purchase. Politics and the entertainment industry likewise hold out the promise of easy solutions that minimize the reality of danger and uncertainty. But although such cultural myopia may reach its extreme here, it is not just American capitalism that underwrites denial. Socialist societies find it equally unacceptable to take too dismal a view of the human condition and its possibilities. Even most mainstream religious traditions today have moved away from earlier visions of the precariousness of the human condition to embrace at least some aspect of the big lie. It is as if modernity itself were predicated on fostering this fiction, a falsehood at the center of global culture.

YET IN TIME most of us are forced by the sheer recalcitrance of the world and the appreciating fragility of the body to face

up to the size of the odds against us. We often camouflage it by humor and irony, which seek to keep the dark reality of it at a distance, and we muddle through clinging to the basic common sense that on any given day we are likely to make it home safely. Of course, we need to do some amount of self-blinding just to function. If one had to review each day the "thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to," in Shakespeare's words, one might never get out of bed. In that sense, denial of how chaotic and unstable life really is would seem necessary and healthy. Yet when the denial becomes so complete that we live under what amounts to a tyranny of not seeing and not speaking the existential truth, it becomes dangerous itself. This is what makes the closest and deepest experiences of catastrophe, loss, and failure so terrifyingly unsettling. We puncture the bubble of illusion and cannot find our footing. We become disoriented because we see the world in so new and fierce a way.

This is not to say that our lives are nothing but a sequence of defeats and miseries. Each of us knows triumphs from time to time. Especially among those whose resources (financial, educational, and social capital, as well as health and emotional well-being) offer greater protection against the exigency of threatening life events and the wearying pressures of existence, aspiration and successes are realities. And especially when we are young, life offers many joys and delights. Deep investment in family, work, friendships, creative opportunities, and the building of futures makes it easy to forget the grim burden of threat and loss. When we are young, we also simply don't have enough of those crucial experiences of bereavement, anxiety, and failure to teach us the bleaker side of

existence. Neither heroes nor monsters appear in most lives. But over time most of us come to know at first hand the trials that make living such a serious business. Most victories such as job promotion, financial success, and seeing a creative project realized are transient and limited in extent. Lives can be rich with beauty and happiness—and in well-off countries or neighborhoods many people enjoy both—yet as one ages ostensible good fortune is often tempered, if not overbalanced, by disappointments, unfulfilled hopes, and the indignities of aging. Beyond the immediacy of a joyous occasion, the periodic yet magical feeling of ebullience, and even long-term happiness and the sheer distracting routine of one darn thing after another lies what the great American psychologist and philosopher William James called "genuine reality." And it is life's trials—bad luck, suffering, and even calamity—that teach us endurance and acceptance of genuine reality.

Today, our view of genuine reality is increasingly clouded by professionals whose technical expertise often introduces a superficial and soulless model of the person that denies moral significance. Perhaps the most devastating example for human values is the process of medicalization through which ordinary unhappiness and normal bereavement have been transformed into clinical depression, existential angst turned into anxiety disorders, and the moral consequences of political violence recast as post-traumatic stress disorder. That is, suffering is redefined as mental illness and treated by professional experts, typically with medication. I believe that this diminishes the person, thins out and homogenizes the deeply rich diversity of human experience, and puts us in danger of being made over into something new and frightening: individuals

who can channel all our desires into products available for our consumption, such as pharmaceuticals, but who no longer live with a soul: a deep mixture of often contradictory emotions and values whose untidy uniqueness defines the existential core of the individual as a human being. When this happens, the furnishings of our interior are no longer the same; we are not the same people our grandparents were, and our children will not be the kind of people we are. Several of the cases in this book reveal this disturbing trend. The fear seems to be pervasive that if we admit what our condition is really like, we will fall apart, both as individuals and as a society.

But after three decades of doing psychiatry and anthropology, I don't see any convincing evidence that facing up to our human condition leads to paralysis and pathology. Quite the opposite, as the stories in this book illustrate: seeing the world as dangerous and uncertain may lead to a kind of quiet liberation, preparing us for new ways of being ourselves, living in the world, and making a difference in the lives of others. Surprisingly, confronting the deepest fears can mean giving them up and asking critically why we ever allowed ourselves to be so morally and emotionally shackled.

Many of the highest attainments of civilization have come from those who have had the courage to peer unflinchingly into the darkness of reality. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, the Western literary genre of tragedy has wrested remarkable wisdom from the encounter of human beings with the fierce and unyielding way things are behind the façade of convention. Just to think of Antigone or Lear is to understand how we have been enriched by this countervailing force. Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son*, which appears on the cover of this

book, is a beautiful painting, yet its beauty is saturated with a sense of suffering and loss at the heart of life. Rembrandt's work links the aesthetic tradition with religion as perhaps the most powerful means by which we build ethical meaning out of adversity and failure. This is also much of the substance of the Book of Job and the Gospels, as well as the texts and rituals of Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, and many of the world's folk religious traditions. They reveal the truth about how easily our sense of comfort and order is shaken and how hard we have to struggle to maintain our identity and cultural worlds in the face of profound suffering. Yet it is in that struggle—as Antigone, Lear, and Rembrandt's figures so poignantly illustrate—that we find the meaning of our humanity.

THIS UNBLINDED PERSPECTIVE on life is voiced by many people I have met in research and clinical settings over the years. Thus, one informant, who at the time was a fifty-two-year-old unemployed executive in New York City with serious coronary artery disease, put it this way: "You grow up in [American] society and you kind of get lulled into the view that you are protected, things are easy. You can take life easy. Then something happens, and . . . you come to see just how dangerous things are. I've had it happen several times in my life, so I should be prepared. But the only preparation is to be wary . . . all the time. That's why over time you stay very attentive to things at work, in the neighborhood, even in the family. Even in your body. I've been laid off after twenty years with one firm. I've been in a bad, bad car accident. I've experienced the death of a daughter to suicide related to drugs. And now

my heart problems. The world is a dangerous place. Maybe even more dangerous than I'm willing to admit."

Another research interviewee, this time a sixty-eight-year-old Chinese intellectual in Beijing in the 1990s, reflecting on his life experience in a very different cultural environment, told me: "My grandfather told it to my father during the warlord period. My father told it to me during the war with the Japanese. And I told it to my son and daughter during the Cultural Revolution. He understood it, but what could he do? He was murdered. Even in these prosperous times I'm sure my daughter tells my granddaughter: Be careful! Be very careful! Times change. History changes. The world is not the same. But social life is always very dangerous."

Those who have lived through the sort of experience these men speak of have felt life transmute into something new and different, something not altogether understandable or desirable; they have felt danger and uncertainty in their bones. A seventy-five-year-old French academic, responding to a question about what he had learned by living through the German occupation of France, through the immediate postwar period with its cultural movements of existentialism and abstract expressionism, through the student protests and extreme political polarization of the late 1960s, then through the era of unbridled commercialism and centrist political and cultural blowback of the 1980s and 1990s, with its anti-immigrant and antiglobalization populist movement, and finally through the new time of Islamist terrorism, ruefully observed: "This is a strange world, Arthur! You cannot predict what is ahead. I feel, like many of my circle, more and more estranged by what is happening. It is like I am watching one disaster after an-

other unfold. This world of ours is a very dangerous place. If you can lift your ideas beyond the ordinary and see the way the world is and what we are and who we are becoming, you cannot honestly say to yourself . . . you understand what is happening. It is . . . you feel alien, or rather the world feels that way. That way and frightening."

"Oh, come now, it's always been bad . . . if you look deep into it," interjected his wife of forty years, a painter and daughter of Holocaust survivors. "Isn't that so? So we just look away like the plowman in Auden's *Museé des Beaux Arts*. If you look under the rug of civilization, where it's dark and wicked, we are fierce and terrifying. You need to face that to discover the possibility for creating something better," she whispered.

These very different individuals from quite different societies insist that modern culture contains a big lie. By failing to acknowledge the omnipresence of hazards, we maintain a false image of who we are. And if we are misinformed about who we are, then how can we prepare for where we are headed and what lies ahead? I hold, as do the protagonists of these three vignettes, that if we can learn to face genuine reality, we can live better. That is the purpose of this book.

I do not mean to suggest that confronting genuine reality means seeing only the worst of experience. Joy, exuberance, and fulfillment are just as real as the darker and more perilous moments upon which I am focusing our concern. Love and hope are not negated by loss and threat; if anything, they become better understood and more deeply cherished. It is the sentimentality of Hollywood (and Bollywood) films with their happy endings that look truly misleading when placed against the truth of experience. The artists I spoke of earlier,

who explore the depth of tragedy, show us just how precious and hard-won are our real victories. Look again at Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son:* the reunion of the father and son is suffused by a glow of true joy, which is all the more radiant because of the years of pain plainly etched on the old man's face. Living a life embraces positive and negative conditions, and indeed is a story of how they come together. Enlightenment about genuine reality should not demoralize us; it gives meaning to our small triumphs and daily pleasures.

The fact that selves and world can be reworked in response to hazard and insecurity, and that they are worth remaking, in spite of their limits, is what makes aspiration so important. To experience the limits of living and the inevitability of being checked in everyday practice is not to be defeated or to despair in ethical, religious, or aesthetic ways. Ethical, religious, and aesthetic work remakes the actual practices of ordinary life, forging new synergies between values and emotions, so that individual and collective significance, transcendence, and the sense of ultimate order and control come to animate who we are. It is precisely when an individual, a family, or a community is threatened by catastrophe that people turn to religion for explanation. They seek support for their deepest values, succor for the existential feelings of loss and dread, and revival of hope. Religious rituals, and relationships with coreligionists and religious leaders, do just this. They revivify what really matters. Failure and catastrophe empower religion; religion, in turn, empowers people faced with adversity to overcome self-doubt and fear of failing, and to act in the world. Is it surprising that the current period of Christian reawakening and evangelical fervor in-

tensified in the wake of September 11 and America's global war on terrorism? There is also a downside to religious responses to existential threats of catastrophe. We know that suicide bombers include many whose religious zeal in the face of what they perceive to be a threat to Islamic values calls them to their destructive acts, and dangerous religious passions also motivate hatred and killing amongst Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and Jews who mix fundamentalism with nationalism.

Culture expresses our sense that there is a special essence to all that is human, and therefore that each of us is individually exceptional. Consider the large-scale cultural processes in Europe and America that followed the devastation of the world wars and the Shoah. Creative movements that united aesthetics and ethics went on to reframe human meanings through modernism, existentialism, abstract expressionism, Holocaust literature, and other literary and artistic movements. These created new ways of making sense of our chaotic and destructive world. They found value in people's individual lives at a time when a huge question mark hung over established cultural forms, calling into doubt their legitimacy and relevance. Even if the tone of the works was bitter, the mode ironic, and the ethical stance one of an isolated person facing a dehumanized void, the very process of creating beauty and order out of pain and suffering reinvested the world with human meanings. In this sense, these artistic and ethical creations rebuilt the world. Even in our complex era, when cultural energies in secular society have come to emphasize salvation through the body and its desires, there is a reimagining of who we are and where we are headed that

revitalizes, once again, core existential values. You may find your way in being reborn to another world under the evangelist's tent; I may find mine in this world, planing the sea in my powerboat; we both may appreciate abstract paintings that resonate with our sensibility of what worlds are possible. Yet in existential terms these are simply different ways of aspiring to and actually creating order out of disorder and beauty out of jeopardy, new realities of meaning to sustain and recharge our hope in life.

For many, the most unsettling awareness of our times is the threat of anonymity. When we consider the small and forgettable quality of our private lives, we fear for the significance of our individual selves, our close connections, and our local communities. Does it really matter that we were here at this time? Will anyone remember us after we go? We fear an absence of our presence. Once again, our sense of being special is expressed and affirmed by religious, ethical, and aesthetic activities, which connect our private world to the larger one. That interior world is where we feel vitally alive and our lives convincingly carry unique significance for loved ones, shared communities of faith or artistry, and, not least of all, ourselves. And that is how we prevent cynicism and nihilism that would otherwise paralyze social commitments and individual initiative; that is how we nurture humor, optimism, and the common sense that we will somehow muddle through; that is how we preserve an enduring taste for life. Whether this cultural response is profound or shallow is less important than that it renews our sensibility to life itself. It allows us to savor our mundane existence. Instead of a gray grimness that arises when we coldly contemplate disen-

chanted human ends and discover just how much we can endure, we can revel in the thrill of color and sound, the charm of taste, the exhilarating lightness of touch, the rightly acclaimed mystery of love.

My point is that acknowledging the always unequal struggle between where the world is taking us and where we aspire to go does not at all mean accepting a glum perspective; rather, it involves developing a deeper and more fine-grained appreciation of what the moral experience of communities and the moral life of the individual are about, and why both are so important. Within this broader moral context, we want to know what we can learn to help us live a life. For this reason, it is especially instructive to examine the gray zones where the separation between acts that sustain a moral life and inhuman ones that destroy it is thin, because these zones of the most troubling moral experience show just how difficult it is to live.

In the course of our individual lives, moral and emotional experiences can change us so greatly that we are not the same people we were earlier: life, with all its transformations, has restyled us at the core. So, what is the core? Who are we? We need to get away from the idea of an unchanging human nature that resists all the myriad changes around us, like steel piers holding up a bridge in deep, rough water. That image holds for bridges but not for people. The countervailing image that arises in the mind is from the New England coast, where my family and I spend summers on the Gulf of Maine, above a large tidal river about two miles from the Atlantic Ocean. It is sometimes placid, sometimes very rough in these waters. Here the shoreline has a prima facie consistency, rocky ledges

and rock-strewn beaches; if you are a serious boater, you have to be cautious, no matter your knowledge of hazards well marked on charts and your GPS. Owing to the tidal conditions and occasional great storms, things that have a seeming permanency—rocks, underwater obstacles, channel-marking buoys—can shift, sometimes substantially enough for a local lobsterman with two decades' experience of the water to run a thirty-two-foot lobster boat aground. If you regularly watch the shore, you see that it is under almost constant change, albeit within limits set by the local geology and hydrology. So with the self, the soul. The limits are set by the principles and empirical reality of biology and psychology. The self is moored by the neurobiological hardwiring of rude sentiment and the rough genetic scaffolding of personality. But there also are moral and affective currents constantly at work changing the self's topography. Neurotransmitters create rough sensations of pain and anger. Remorse, regret, and other complexes of emotions and values are strongly influenced by interpersonal relations and meanings that contribute to the building of the subtle and elaborated sensibilities that constitute who we are. And culture, politics, and economics transform each of us—if not from day to day, then from year to year as jobs change, careers transmute, families undergo growth and collapse, marriages rise or fall, and the large historical forces that shape the destiny of nations and influence entire populations roll over our lives, grinding, wearing away, shifting, breaking, making us let go and move on.

Danger arises when our most deeply held values and emotions are threatened or lost. And people themselves become

even more dangerous when they feel that these things are at serious risk. Then they are frequently prepared to do anything and everything to protect and defend what really matters. In these moments of intense pressure, the self can be reshaped: the most placid and pacific person can become violent, can participate in oppression or crimes against humanity. Pogroms against Jews, from the Middle Ages up until the great Russian pogroms of the 1880s that drove hundreds of thousands of Jews to emigrate to America, not infrequently took this character. Fear of social disorder and major political change, laced with rumor, targeted a stigmatized "other" for destruction. A deadly epidemic, some other public catastrophe, and political dissension so threatened the local population and the central authorities that the Jews became a handy scapegoat. The Shoah—the genocide of European Jewry—can also be seen in these terms: ordinary Germans accepted the Nazis in order to stave off the Soviet menace and as part of the devil's bargain tolerated the Nazis' war against the Jews.

The willingness of ordinary Serbs and Croats to participate in the mass killings of Bosnian Muslims also can be traced back to the same social dynamic: a real danger threatening the moral order—in this instance, the breakup of the nation-state into warring ethnoreligious groups—is associated directly with the other group or indirectly blamed on them. This leads to the second-order, and often more deadly, danger of the threatened group either actively carrying out or passively acquiescing to the destruction of the people perceived as the source of that threat. The existential message is chillingly clear: we will do all that needs to be done to protect our way of life and ourselves, and if we perceive a serious threat, we will

engage in violence as a preemptive strategy or even a kind of anticipatory revenge.

We can glimpse this social logic in the ways we Americans have responded to the September 11 attacks on America with the follow-on war on terrorism and the Iraq war. The toppling of the Taliban and the destruction of al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan made sense to many Americans, as did the international hunt for terrorists and their sources of funding. But the invasion of Iraq, its occupation, and the subsequent deadly mix of insurgency and civil war there suggest that we have gone too far and created just the kind of violent overresponse that I have pointed to as a second-order and greater danger. We seem to have a newfound certainty that vengeance is right, no matter how many thousands must die to avenge our national tragedy and affirm our national myth that we are making the world safer. We also have become so preoccupied by our fears of internal insecurity and hidden enemies that we have been willing to limit or actually abrogate constitutional safeguards of the very rights we preach as most sacred. Seen from this perspective, our quest for homeland security, our desire to mete out justice through vengeance, and our concern for global social control seem to matter more to us than our commitments to rights, legal procedure, and even the global democratization we proselytize so robustly. The last looks more and more like a fig leaf camouflaging those fiercer commitments.

As we continue to pursue these policies, which many Americans view as morally justified, we are accused by millions of Muslims of conducting a war on Islam, and by millions of Europeans and Asians of making the world more danger-

ous. Islamic communities provide moral support to young Muslim men and women whom we call terrorists and they call holy warriors and martyrs. Suicide bombers view their own horrific actions as morally just, and so do members of their networks and communities. So here we have a contest between radically different moral justifications.

If we step beyond our own taken-for-granted commitments and those of our adversaries, it is clear that the moral vision and commitments of terrorists, including suicide bombers, are utterly unethical and antihuman. But it should be equally apparent that our own lived values as outlined above, and as represented in how we behave in the world, are problematic as well. Neither moral position is acceptable. Both are perilous. To move beyond them we must advance an ethical approach that seeks to transcend local commitments and yet at the same time is locally applicable. To be effective at the collective level, such an ethical approach, I argue, must also work for the individual who is seeking to build a life. That is one of the things I seek to explore in this book.

The chapters that follow set out stories of the struggles to live a moral life of men and women I have encountered in my professional career as an anthropologist, psychiatrist, and China scholar as well as through personal friendships. Like the rest of us, these individuals have found themselves caught in particular circumstances and in cultural conditions where the things that matter most to them have been challenged by what is at stake for others or for society. For example, a former decorated soldier, now decades into a successful legal career, looks back on the atrocities he committed in the Pacific war and sees indelible evidence not only of his own moral failings

but of society's hypocrisy in being unwilling to recognize that war is about turning ordinary men into killers. Once the transformation has occurred and violence is unleashed, society turns its back on the moral life of the perpetrator. The central tension between one person's ethical aspirations and society's moral reality extends for this angry middle-aged man into a conflict with his psychiatrist about what depression and its treatment are about. Is tragedy a disease requiring an antidepressant medication? Is a lifetime secret of having committed a terrible abuse a medical problem or a moral one? Are there moral disorders and moral therapies? Are remorse, regret, and repentance, not just symptom relief, the appropriate healing outcome for facing up to moral failure?

A liberal Protestant minister who is barely able to control his own sexual impulses experiences the selling of sex in the media and on the streets as an existential threat to moral responsibility, his own and his adolescent parishioners'. The fundamental conflict between religious aspiration and sexual reality (society's and his own) is experienced first as the conversion of guilt into excruciating bodily pain and afterward as the transfiguration of pain into the holy. His story will lead us through an exploration of living a life in the uncharted territory between religion and medicine. And a Chinese physician and intellectual confronts the political perils of the Cultural Revolution as a direct threat to his ideals, his family, his career, and his own life. He comes to understand, in the radically different era of economic reform, that an ethos of compromise, acquiescence, and readiness to deceive and exploit create a world in which living a moral life is intensely difficult as well as risky.

While the circumstances and conditions and outcomes diverge, all of the protagonists in the chapters that follow are caught up in moral experiences that define what it means to be human, forcing them to confront who they are but also provoking them to come to terms with who we all are, what our shared humanity is all about—albeit with an intensity that makes their life narratives arresting. I write these cases to illustrate how malleable moral life is, for individuals and groups—and to show just how central jeopardy is to our worlds and ourselves.

Can studying the experiences of a few individuals shape our responses to the challenges we will have to face? Because many of the challenges I review seem unmasterable, what is the implication for how we face them?

The answer is just that: we need to begin by surmounting our own denial and affirming our existential condition. Such crises and limits cannot be mastered, in the sense of conquered. They are to be understood and responded to as ethical, religious, and aesthetic challenges. Getting a handle on what really matters for us requires a self-critical stance toward our emotions and values in which we try to step aside from (or, really, outside) our taken-for-granted world and sense of self. No easy thing, but it can be done. Seeing ourselves in this way, we can ask the hard question: does what really matters for us contribute to an adequate or good life? If the answer is no, we obviously are in for a tough time of trying to remake our commitments and realign them to those surrounding us in our local world. If the answer is yes, then we still need to discover what the obstacles are to achieving an adequate life, and which (if any) of them can be surmounted. Even when

the answer is that these barriers are the existential limits we face, the possibility is there to live creatively and morally. Even under threat to our core meanings, we can, for instance, first do no harm to ourselves and others. We have seen how first-order dangers, those forces outside ourselves that threaten what matters most to us, create second-order dangers, the threat within ourselves that in defending what we value we violate our humanity. Breaking this cascade can be a powerful way to transform ourselves and even our worlds—for example, by ending cycles of revenge, or by controlling anger turned inward into self-injury. By opening up a space of critical self-reflection on our world and ourselves, we can prevent ourselves and others from becoming worse people under the pressure of changing conditions. We can protest and resist a dangerous moral ethos in our families, workplaces, and communities, and even if we are unsuccessful at changing our local worlds, which is not unlikely, we can keep our moral practices in line with our sense of what is right. And that is indeed something worth struggling for, something that can transform others as well.

In several of this book's stories, the lesson is that squarely facing failures in life is as important for our worlds and the others in them as it is for our own self-esteem. We are morally responsible for ensuring that others understand the social injustice our worlds routinely create, including what we have brought about through our own actions. And we are also responsible for doing something about injustice.

In one story, we learn how AIDS transforms a mother and artist from a "taker" into a "giver," and we thereby see how existential crises caused by a health catastrophe can create a

new moral life. In another of the book's cases, we learn how a formerly quiet intellectual moves out of the library into the public world of others' pain and suffering, so as to undo the very moral conditions that made him famous, but which he has come to understand are the cultural basis for political and medical disaster. The lesson is not one of standard heroism—there is no victory—but a kind of negative heroism or antiheroism that may not change the world but helps make clear to others what needs to change if the world is to be a less unjust and desperate place. That antiheroism legitimates, at the same time, alternative ways of living in the world that offer new and different personal answers to the question of what an adequate life is. Heroic acts that change society are rare and more often than not meretricious fictions, whereas protest and resistance as well as perturbing and disturbing the status quo are, at best, the most ordinary people like us can achieve.

THESE CHAPTERS point to a new way of conceiving of ethics. *Ethics*, a set of moral principles that aspire to universal application, must be seen in a context of *moral experience*, which is always changing and usually uncertain, in order to provide a more adequate vision of values in society and how to respond to their clash and change. Taken alone, ethics, such as principles of virtue and justice, can be irrelevant to our local worlds, just as local moral experience, such as discrimination and oppression carried out in the interests of the dominant group, as in the American South in the era of segregation, can be unethical, even downright evil—and can render people unable to criticize their own conditions. I examine efforts to

unite the two, moral experience and ethics, in the stories of actual individuals' lives. Individuals' efforts to live a moral life in the particular circumstances of moral experience can lead them to formulate ethical criticism of those circumstances as well as to aspire ethically to values that go beyond the local reality and seek universal support. This new framework for examining actual lives shows us who we are and who we can be in response to some of the more disturbing value questions of our era.

I include in these accounts an autobiographical chapter about times in my life when I too faced the issues of moral imagination and responsibility highlighted in the other chapters. This effort at self-knowledge signifies that the author cannot claim a position that is outside the local context of societal changes and moral struggles. I too have my own story to tell about moral experience and trying to live a life, as does each of you.

What we see in these stories, I believe, is not nearly so much the moments of intensive moral reflection that philosophers emphasize but rather what anthropologists and social historians, biographers and psychotherapists so often describe: the insecurity of moral life and the terrible inadequacy of our usual fumbling efforts to change or fully comprehend who we are and where our world is taking us. Yet, in the midst of it all, we make a life. So how does that happen? How do we deal with the world and build ourselves as moral agents? This is the existential core of each chapter that, I suggest, lies beneath cultural difference, social diversity, and personal uniqueness. This is what matters most to me. This is the book's claim to truth.

9

Epilogue

Narratives can haunt. What haunts our memories is more than images and words, but the actual world of experience that stands behind them. The self-harassed man I call Winthrop Cohen was haunted by what he did as a soldier in the Second World War. For over four decades he could not transform the undermining memory from a secret narrative of atrocity to a public confession of remorse and regret. And he haunted me with his terrifying testimony of murdering an unarmed Japanese military doctor who was caring for a wounded soldier. He punished himself thereafter with unwanted elaborations of the dreadful deed in dreams and fantasies. There were moments in our therapy where I was truly disturbed by the uncanny feeling that the ghost of the dead doctor was with us in my office, a silent witness, remembered as a face, arms rising, and a crumpled bullet-ridden body, as Winthrop Cohen took the scene apart and put it together again,

and in so doing took himself apart and remembered who he was, refusing any mask, telling and retelling the murder as both originating event and timeless present, a deed that could not be gotten over or passed through. Winthrop Cohen relived his past each day with astonishment, grief, and horror.

Winthrop Cohen insisted that I must not explain away the haunting scene, mask who he was, or justify what he did. Instead, I had to step into it and relive it with him, and not as distancing pathology, but up close in the choke and sting of normal moral experience. It would take me decades to free myself from the self-protection of professional explanation to hear what he was saying. This is also what life is, he importuned. Don't say it is inexplicable but technically solvable. See it for what it is and feel ashamed for who we are.

Still, Winthrop Cohen's demand for absolute authenticity, his lifelong loyalty to the despairing deed, and his unwillingness to protect himself or me from its ethical haunting is what I mean by aspiration in defeat. Just as Idi and Bill Burt aspired in the midst of occupational defeats for a better level of human existence and Sally Williams turned her own experience of drug abuse and AIDS into advocacy and activism in order to do some good in the world, Winthrop's penance through depression was meant to do more than flagellate himself as punishment. He was acknowledging something inherent in human conditions and protesting. Winthrop meant for both of us—all of us, really—to feel remorse and regret to such a discomforting extent that we would have to change who we were and what we did or charged others to do in times of war.

Winthrop Cohen, like the Reverend Charles Jamison, insisted there is a divided world and a divided self. The world

of actual moral experience (what we are capable of doing) and the world of idealized ethical reflection (what we are socialized to aspire to or to not do) are separated for him by an unbridgeable chasm between what can be said and what must not be spoken. In the former, the space of ethical deliberation, we address justice, for example, while operating in an unjust world, and in the latter, the space of everyday moral experience, we go about doing what we have to do to get on with the practical tasks of living, and in so doing end up practicing injustice. Danger, fear, and power characterize actual moral experience. They too infrequently are acknowledged and addressed as simply crucial in the world of ethics.

The self, for Winthrop Cohen, is similarly divided. In his dualistic model, a critical, reflective consciousness vies with a passionate practical agency. The reflective self offers reasoned justifications for our actions. Yet those actions—what we actually do in living—are as much based in passion and willfulness as in reasoned choice. The thoughtful justifications are often excuses, made up after the fact, for things that we do that explode from within like surges of uncontrollable anger. The passion-laden, practical self is caught up in what I have called our local moral worlds, what William James called genuine reality. The reflective self is caught up in ethical deliberation and aspiration.

For Winthrop Cohen the actual worlds of moral experience and the practical, practicing self are filled with pain, anger, uncertainty, and disappointment. Of course, he would readily admit, they are also places of exuberance, ambition, and struggle. The ethical world and the reflective self, for him, are comforting and comfortable islands of optimism, hope,

and certainty. That's the way the world is, the way we are; look upon it and despair, admonishes Winthrop Cohen. And in his unappeasing criticism, we can almost hear the tone of Old Testament prophets railing against the too easy acceptance of the reality of evil and the hypocrisy of holding self-justifying ideals that we know are not intended to practically address that evil.

I find this bifurcated vision, which seemingly matches the idea of actual moral experience and imagined ethical aspiration that I have introduced in the case studies, deeply disturbing, as it is meant to be, yet also misguided. For there is space for critical self-examination, responsible action, and moral transformation in the divided world and in the divided self. Idi's story and the narratives of Dr. Yan, Sally Williams, and W. H. R. Rivers illustrate the bridging of real world, actual self, and ethical space. Ethical imagination and responsibility can, indeed must, be grounded in the turbulent waters of moral experience. Even in the most desolate and isolating moral landscape there is a place for criticism, protest, and practical efforts for change. And yet, in spite of its dualism, Winthrop Cohen's unsparing vision is an antidote to the easy lies of nationalistic sentimentality and commercial propaganda that would have us believe in a cultural scenario of an absolute divide between polar opposites: good guys and bad guys, heroes and monsters. The capacity to divide world and self may make life more bearable, because we can have our cake and eat it too: we can recognize the moral and political dangers in living and claim that we stand apart from them in a space of our own idealized intention. This way there is no requirement for moral responsibility or for ethical reflection

to confront limits, failures, overreactions, and other practical dangers in ordinary moral experience. It misrecognizes what is most troubling in experience.

What really matters to us is simultaneously what is most optimistic and what is most ominous. Winthrop Cohen changed himself, and he changed me. His protest had the potential (albeit limited) to change others and even his world. That the world has not changed that much is illustrated by atrocities committed in the Abu Ghraib prison during the second Iraq war. That the world can still be changed is illustrated by the public uproar, political condemnation, and legal responses to that most recent abuse. Learning to value the defeated aspirations of antiheroes and to see their potential for remaking moral imagination and responsibility is one way that we can transform what is most dangerous in what matters most to us into something better for us and for our world.

I see Yan Zhongshu, at the very moment when revenge on his still dangerous nemesis was at hand, inexplicably turning away to create an entirely different and frankly better moral reality. What does that tell us about experience? There was and is no victory for Dr. Yan; in fact, his eventual departure from the hospital and exile from China amount to a species of defeat. Yet within that story of disappointment, betrayal, and loss, there is something else that cannot be defined only as defeat. There is self-critique, protest of the local moral world and its dangers, and the potential for transformation. Failure, seen this way, is not entirely negative; it even can be creative.

Of course Yan Zhongshu's presentation of self was meant to impress me, and it did. Speaking in the safer context of the United States to an American China scholar already identified

as interested and supportive of the moral resistance of intellectuals to political violence, Yan knew what kind of spin to his story I would find laudable. Assuming the moral high ground is a conversational strategy that Chinese employ when building a network of connections, and Dr. Yan was drawing me into his network. I can't be sure there weren't aspects of his experience that reflected other values, ones he could or would not openly express. Yet he himself claimed to be both victim and collaborator. He talked of things he had to do to survive that he deeply regretted. He impressed on me that over the course of his life he came to the dismaying understanding that his family's history of collaboration with those in power, resistance against which had motivated him to stay and work in China, was not only the norm but quite possibly all that could be done in bad times. No hero, no victory, no self-serving myth here, in this dark vision of our lives. Change under these politically oppressive circumstances would be of necessity infrequent, limited, and not for the best.

In Reverend Jamison, the possibility for transformation shifts from the local world to the self, and in a peculiarly American way through the self to God. Here the body is the site of a decisive struggle in which emotion and spirituality transfigure shame into salvation, pain into "a good, a very good thing." Imre Kertész, the 2002 Nobel prize winner for literature, himself a Hungarian survivor of the Holocaust, writes in *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* that "on account of the pain I live some sort of truth." What truth that might be for Reverend Jamison surely has something to do with his desperate need for self-control, which in turn opens a strange possibility for religious conversion and hope.

Still, his victory over unacceptable sexual impulse is transitory, an alarming triumph that has to be won anew each day. There is another sense in which this embodied ritual of forgetting and sublimating unwanted sexual feelings into sufferable pain is a kind of despair in overcoming. Reverend Jamison once told me that what made it all powerfully convincing for him was that each time he was not sure that it would be effective, that transcendence would occur.

In several of his books, *Victory* and *Lord Jim*, for example, Joseph Conrad features a protagonist who when first faced with a life crisis requiring effective action in the world fails utterly to master the existential challenge. Later on, after living a life circumscribed by this core failure, the hero is presented with another crisis requiring a decisive deed, and, facing down the fear of repeated failure, he triumphs in such a way that both he and the world are changed. I once felt that this kind of heroic action could explain how certain individuals so successfully tackled serious illness experience that in place of expected disablement they seemed to have miraculously achieved what I then called a supernormality. I would now argue with that earlier conclusion; I am more suspicious of the orchestration of heroic images.

An antiheroic interpretation seems a better fit with Jamison's case. What for Reverend Jamison is "a good, a very good thing" is for the vast majority of chronic pain patients needless suffering. The omnipresent advertisements for medications tell us that we need not endure any discomfort whatsoever. With the sole exception of "no pain, no gain" in the discourse of sport, pain in our society is a thoroughly bad thing.

But this is not how it was perceived and responded to in earlier historical eras or in greatly different cross-cultural settings. The local worlds of Europe beginning in the first centuries of the Christian era witnessed a deep, massive cultural revaluation of pain and suffering, a culture in which these experiences were religiously valued and even individually sought after. Pain and suffering created a new and special channel of communication with the holy, a means of achieving salvation.

Reverend Jamison's understanding of his own predicament by itself is unable to prevent the fierce demands of intruding sexual feelings. And his understanding is much more psychologically elaborated than the prayerful reflections of early Christian saints on their own pain and suffering. Nonetheless, his insistence on the salvific quality of his pain would have received considerable cultural support in that earlier era. In this sense, Reverend Jamison is an anachronism whose moral experience is at odds with his age, calling into question what religion means as much as what pain means in America. Had Reverend Jamison experienced his pain as God's punishment, he would be just as anachronistic and just as at odds with our times. Pain in twenty-first-century America is supposed to be not sacred and salvific but secular and pharmaceutical.

Sally Williams's story turns on the transforming potential of serious illness. For many, such transformation does not lead to good ends. Exhausted and diminished, patients often succumb to fear, loneliness, and desperation. And yet for Sally Williams and not a few others I have known, chronic illness can inspire hope and creative acts of remaking one's self and one's network. A new Sally Williams emerged from awful

experienees of AIDS and drug abuse, and so did alteration in family relations, friendships, work as an artist, and her relationship to the public world of crises and policies. Sally's movement from doing for self to doing for others does not result in a melodramatic movie ending of health and happiness. Something more authentic to our uncertain and unmasterable human condition and to the long littleness, as Frances Cornford put it, and anonymity of living in mass society emerges from her story. There is in Sally Williams a quiet and never fully achieved nobility of failure.

In her painting too, Sally faced up to the fear that artists and writers need to overcome: namely, that there is some authentic thing in them that must be aesthetically expressed but that they have not succeeded in realizing in their works. W. H. Auden expressed the cold terror of this feeling in his poem "Thanksgiving for a Habitat":

> God may reduce you
> on Judgment Day
> to tears of shame,
> reciting by heart
> the poems you would
> have written, had
> your life been good.

W. H. R. Rivers brings us back from aesthetic to moral danger. Rivers succeeds in his multisided career in a political and moral climate of colonialism, racism, and jingoistic nationalism. His impressive influence on students, colleagues, and patients, as we have seen, owed a great deal to the virtues of

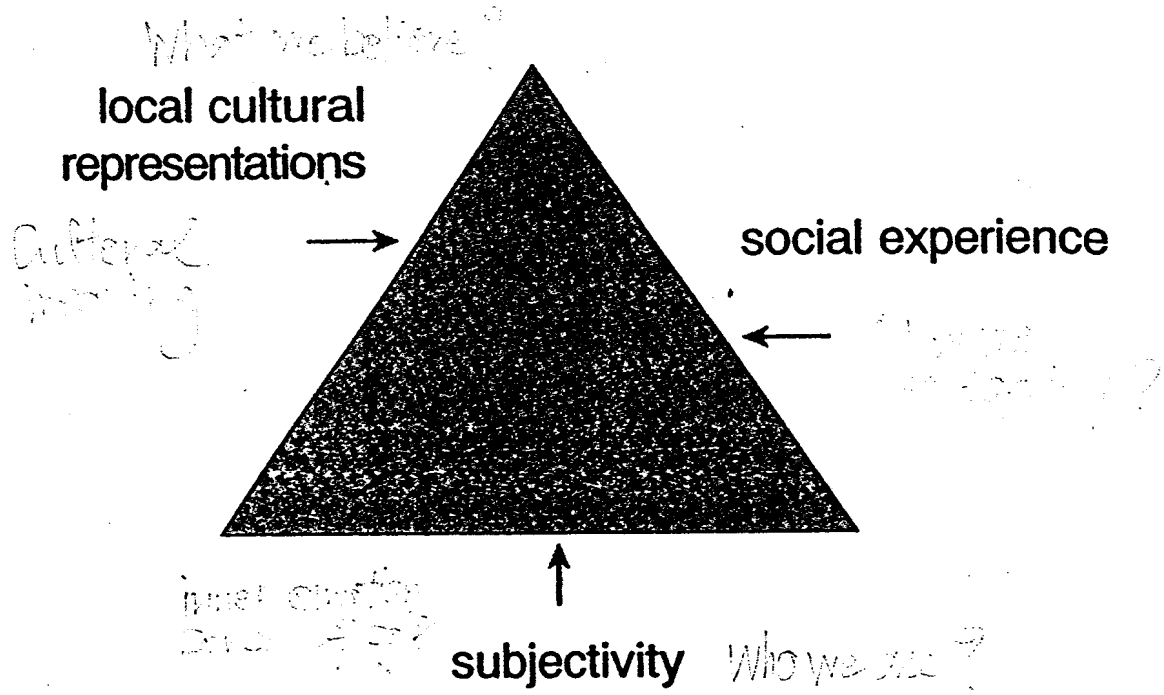
a moralistic and moralizing age, virtues that he himself embodied. Rivers's experience as ethnographer and military psychiatrist led him first to question this moral climate and later to criticize it as a destructive force that contributed to the deep cultural and psychological basis for the horrors of the Great War. His ethnographic method of intensive engagement with subjects' worlds, his psychotherapeutic strategy of helping his patients achieve a critical awareness so that they could revitalize their moral imagination and responsibility, and his political campaign of social reform aimed to undo the moral danger and to reconstruct moral experience in a more humanly promising direction.

I see Rivers struggling to de-moralize his times, to unmake what was seriously at stake in cultural norms and in inner emotional normality. Rivers understood that norms in the social world could come into the body. Cultural values could guide our gestures, our posture, and even our emotions and our sense of who we are in the direction of what the group regarded as good and desirable. Thereby, we become normal and moral human beings—normal and moral in the eyes of a particular group or society, that is. For Rivers, this normalizing or moralizing process could create truly dangerous patterns of personal actions, if the things that mattered most to the group and society were themselves dangerous. Hence British army officers in the trenches in France and Belgium experienced the normalization of trauma as courage (and the reciprocal pathologization of fear and loss as cowardice). They either perpetuated the futile slaughter or broke down. Either way, normalization could maim and kill. Norms and normality, Rivers concluded, had to be refashioned. The moral had

to be remade. Psychotherapy and political action could re-moralize the world and the person by transforming what was most at stake to serve the interests of peace and well-being. Re-moralization could break the vicious cycle of escalating danger so as to prevent the misuses and abuses of moral experience. Rivers never got to put a political action program into play, and he didn't live long enough to see the long-term outcome of his psychotherapeutic approach, so my interpretation runs well beyond the findings. It is enough to say that for Rivers moral critique and imagination and responsibility were the grounds for social reform and remaking the self, and the one required the other.

This book is concerned with how the large scale disorganized and disorganizing historical forces of politics and political economy transform our moral life. That transformation results from the interaction between three very different kinds of things: cultural meanings, social experience, and subjectivity (inner emotions and sense of self), as shown in the figure on the following page.

Large scale changes in political economy and political power, as are taking place right now in our highly globalized world, change the cultural meanings we take for granted and the collective experience we are socialized into, and with them the self also changes, so that what we believe, how we act together, and who we are as individuals also becomes something new. And that change extends to how we regard ourselves and others. The result is that suffering, well-being, and the ethical practices that respond to human problems are constantly changing as local worlds change and as do we, the people in them, become something new and different. I drew



CHANGES IN POLITICAL ECONOMY, POLITICS, AND GLOBAL CULTURE

The remaking of moral life

upon this new framework to make sense of life in our times. If we are truly interested in national security, we ought to be quite concerned right now about what we and our world are becoming; about the quality of our (and others') moral experience and ethical vision.

And yet at the same moment one must be aware of other global transformations such as the enormous flows of information (including ideas and values) over the Internet and TV on an almost minute-by-minute basis that enable people to be more critical of human conditions, empower them to resist threatening changes, and encourage their imagination of new and different moral realities. This two-sided moral quality of our current era—the one ominous, the other hopeful—is crucial to understand where our world is taking us and where we may be taking our world.

A troubling yet sobering follow-up on Idi's quietly effective but low-visibility career arose several years after her untimely death. I was attending a conference where I met two people (a European anthropologist and an American expert in humanitarian assistance) who had each worked in one of the countries in which Idi had served. Neither could remember her, and the European anthropologist may not have met her. The American at first got her confused with another woman. When I corrected his mistaken impression, he shrugged and with a wistful air remarked that there were many, many people like Idi who deserved to be better known and whose contributions in the aggregate made a difference, but whose individuality, while seemingly vivid and indelible, was inevitably lost amid the blur of faces in the slew of humanitarian assistance programs that started, ended, and were reinvented over time. He went on, in a distancing philosophical mood, to opine that all individuals in the field had to ask themselves repeatedly whether it really mattered that they had come or if it would have made any difference if they had not. Lost in his own reverie now, he asked, did it even make a difference in their own lives that they had been in this place at this time with this project?

I remember walking away from that encounter shaken, feeling both disappointment and bitterness. I determined then to stop procrastinating and write about Idi. But in so doing, I have watched my own remembrances undergo a metamorphosis from a heroic genre to an antiheroic one. It was fitting, I came to see, given the view of moral experience that had increasingly come to inhabit my thoughts, for Idi to have been mistakenly identified, forgotten, or never met. After all, Idi

was not the star of a movie, with all the celebratory, larger-than-life, dramatic qualities that role carries. As an ordinary person, she was, I had come to accept with regret, forgettable. She had achieved neither fame nor fortune; her circle of acquaintances, though lively and intense, remained small. After she departed Africa, a new generation of foreign experts had started new projects in shifting situations with different clients and partners. None of them had written or read the history of her work. And yet for me, perhaps because rather than in spite of these limitations, Idi will always represent what is genuine and best in us.

Saying as much makes me realize I am overstepping my warrant as witness and recorder of moral experience, as I did when I applauded a diminished Sally Williams's transformation through suffering from a "taker" into a "giver." I am moving from description to prescription, from the moral to the ethical, and that is probably unavoidable. What do these accounts tell us about how we should live?

First we need to get right what matters most to us. It doesn't hurt to try to peek beneath the layers of family, self, and setting and find the strands that connect to our present commitments. Hence, Idi was not unaware of the impetus for her parents' commitment to progressive politics, liberation theology, and works of reparation and restitution: her grandfather's collaboration with the Nazis and the selfish greed and hauteur of her mother's large haute bourgeois family. She also was not blind to the same influence on her career and life. Sally Williams realized her readiness not to be silent but to advocate for AIDS and drug abuse programs was intensified by her early experiences of a secret, unspeakable

world of family violence, alcoholism, and depression. In Bill Burt and Simcha Adler, and in later mentors, I came to see the absence of presence of my own father, and the pressing need for father figures in my own self-building. And this led to a further recognition of why I so urgently needed to be a mentor and healer to others, and perhaps also to why I initially searched for moral heroes.

This same process of autognosis, to use Rivers's term for becoming acutely self-aware of the forces that are shaping us and the directions toward which they are moving us, enables us to see how the bundle of contradictions, incompatibilities, mindless routine, and the bewildering inexpediency of one damn thing following another and of countless, cross-cutting personal projects resisting realization of our plans prevents us from examining too hard and too critically the deep existential structure of our lives. It just may not be possible to act in the world and at the same time admit fully the dangers around us and the limits to coping, and to accept our end not just in suffering and death but in the smallness, ill-suitedness, and forgettable quality to our lives and work. That is what makes moral experience so difficult and disappointingly human.

Eventually, we need to ask the question few of us ever want to address directly: what *should* really matter? In this book I am making the case for facing up to our existential condition as what really matters. Underneath the huge varieties of cultural meanings, social experiences, and subjectivity, there is a shared condition of being human that centers on experiences of loss, threat, and uncertainty. That is ground zero in our moral lives. Yet my career as a psychiatrist and anthropologist convinces me that there can be no single thing that matters most

for each of us or for all of us. The differences, as these chapters show, can be striking. But as troubling and uncertain as it is to come to terms with what matters in the actual conditions of our worlds and our lives, I have come to believe that this is the way to be authentic and useful in crafting a life.

In his short story "The Middle Years," Henry James puts words in the mouth of a dying writer who is being tended to by a young physician who himself harbors a secret desire to be a writer. The writer means to mentor the doctor (both as healer and artist) by conveying a single truth about life and career: " We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and passion is our task." We are passionately anxious about doubt, I take it, because it threatens to undermine self-control, undo competence, and, in the sense of this book, dislocate and distort those aspects of moral experience that are most enabling while giving expression to others that can be truly dangerous. Doubt in itself—a feeling of uncertainty and a need to call things into question—is also what we must be passionate about because we must interrogate our moral life. Passion is our task because competence and even engagement without passion would never lead to the kind of commitment Idi made, or to Dr. Yan's transfiguration of vengeance into healing, or to any expression of our deepest sense of who we are and what we are about that ran against the grain of convention and conformity. Passion is absolutely required in the unequal struggle to master human experience, or else we would succumb to comforting self-illusions and the merely mechanical requirements of social life and ultimately to demoralization. A passion for doubting is a requirement of a moral life because we

need to bring an aspiration for ethics to bear on moral experience, and ethical enquiry and action are impelled when doubt is our passion and passion is our task. In yet another sense—namely, when passion means to afflict with suffering—Henry James's penetrating words resonate with our responsibility to take seriously the existential limits of our human condition. But it is just as important to understand that passion plays off joy, irony, and humor, which also are crucial qualities in getting through life.

How, then, to live? What to do? Those huge questions are foundational to ethics, religion, and political theory. They are not ones that I am prepared to answer with a specific prescription for living. I barely am able to muddle through; I have no such prescription. No one does, I contend. Still, what a lifetime of being with others in the messiness of moral experience has taught me is that simplistic distinctions between the objective and the subjective, the absolute and the relative, the right and the wrong, are no help and may even get us into deeper trouble. Nor is it at all sufficient to take up a position in which complexity, uncertainty, and undecidability negate the vexing questions themselves, covering over our own weaknesses and self-serving willingness to comply as long as we are comfortable and protected, as long as the future brings clean bathrooms and an air control system. That way leads to a hollowing out of passion and purpose, to cynicism and nihilism, and ultimately disables us and denies us the capability to change ourselves and our world.

Commitment to others, struggling to bring some good into our close-up worlds even while acknowledging that our coping skills are barely adequate, being passionate about projects

that build the self and others, being serious about critical engagement steeped in self-reflection and aimed to rework or stop moral processes that intensify danger, mobilizing aspiration in defeat and finding the courage and endurance even when experiencing the hollowness of victories not to completely despair—those are the kinds of things that, no matter their trite and conventional ring, still feel authentic and useful. The authentic and useful, especially in a time when commercial propaganda and the politically meretricious are so ubiquitous, are still something, as are kindness and decency—insisting, as Emmanuel Lévinas did, that the ethical precedes the epistemological, that acknowledgment and affirmation of the other precedes inquiry and enables a readiness for unexpected transformations, which do occur and can be revitalizing if seized hold of and properly directed. We must see moral experience for what it is: all that we have and all that we will ever have that defines our humanity and makes us and our worlds real.

Pablo Picasso © ARS, NY. Head of a Medical Student, (Study for Les Demoiselles d'Avignon) 1907. Conger Goodyear Fund, Museum of Modern Art, USA. *Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY*

I have long found arresting a painting of Pablo Picasso's titled "The Head of a Medical Student". The painting is of a face in the form of an African mask with one eye open, and the other closed. Medical students learn to open

one eye to the pain and suffering of patients and the world, but also to close the other eye—to protect their own vulnerability to pain and suffering, to protect their belief that they can do good and change the world for the better, to protect their own self-interests such as career building and economic gain. I would generalize the provocative poignancy of this picture to how we live our lives. One of our eyes is open to the dangers of the world and the uncertainty of our human condition; the other is closed, so that we do not see or feel these things, so that we can get on with our lives. But perhaps one eye is closed so that we can see, feel and do something of value. One eye, perhaps, sees the possibilities and hopefulness of who we are and where we are headed, while the other is shut tight with fear over the storms and precipices that lie ahead. Or, perhaps like all things human, it is about something else altogether, something else that mattered to Picasso, because when I look at others of his paintings that feature faces formed as African masks, one eye often seems closed—a perturbing matter of style or a disturbing matter of existential insight?

Bibliographic Note

To make this book accessible for the educated general reader, whose time for reading is limited and who almost surely doesn't want to get bogged down in excessive detail, I have written it without the scholarly scaffolding of footnotes and academic references to the research literature. But both because I am myself, as a researcher and teacher, somewhat uneasy about this absence and because there may be readers whose interests are piqued sufficiently to want to read further into this perspective on moral experience, I am setting out a short list of relevant works that form the research and theoretical basis for the positions I have advanced.

On the question of moral experience, the literature in philosophy, phenomenology, and social theory is large. I summarize key works—e.g., those by John Dewey, William James, Michael Oakshott, and many others—in the Tanner Lectures I delivered at Stanford University in 1998, where I also show how medical anthropology, social medicine, and cultural psychiatry offer research that underpins the theory I advance. See Arthur Kleinman, "Experience and Its Moral Modes: Culture, Human Conditions, and Disorder," in G. B. Peterson, ed., *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999), 20:357–420. (This scholarly essay also can be downloaded from the Web at www.tannerlectures.utah.edu.) A shorter version with more of a global health policy thrust can be found in Arthur Kleinman, "Ethics and Experience: An Anthropological Approach to Health Equity," in Sudhir Anand,

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Books are not the only, or even the main, source of knowledge about moral experience; films offer some of the most deeply arresting illustrations (as do plays and opera). In the hauntingly powerful Brazilian film classic *Central Station* (1998, Walter Salles Jr.), for example, Doña Dora, a working-class retired teacher who now lives by writing letters for illiter-

ate travelers passing through Rio's central train station—letters that she cynically either fails to mail or actually tears up—is so concerned with the limited income she realizes to support a lifestyle that frustrates her that she seeks to sell an orphan to operators of a ring that trades in children. Forced by a friend to confront the evil of what she has done, she frees the boy and accompanies him on a picaresque quest to find his absent father. In traveling by bus, pilgrims' van, and foot from Rio to Brazil's impoverished northeast, Doña Dora first loses her money, then her commitment, then the boy himself, only to undergo a religious and moral transformation that will take her and the boy to reunion with his adult brothers and then send her back, as a new, remoralized person, on the bus to Rio. I find this film illustrative of some of the key ideas in this book, for example, local worlds of suffering; the dangers of social experience, including our own participation in dangerous acts; the defeats and limits of everyday life; the possibilities of moral-emotional transformation for self and others; the place of moral responsibility and imagination in our lives; and the divided sense that where the world is taking us is both ominous and hopeful—the former requiring protest and resistance on our part, the latter readiness for change. I'm sure readers have their own list of such films. Others in my list include *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959, Alain Resnais); *Floating in the Air Followed by the Wind* (1976, Gunther Pfaff); *The Blue Kite* (1993, Zhuangzhuang Tian); *The Wall* (1998, Alain Berliner); *All About My Mother* (1999, Pedro Almodóvar); *It's My Life* (2001, Brian Tilley); *From the Other Side* (2002, Chantal Akerman); *Beijing Bicycle* (2002, Xiaoshuai Wang); *The Pianist* (2002, Roman Polanski); *Three Rooms of Melancholia* (2005, Pirjo Honkasalo).

Acknowledgments

This book has been many (too many) years in the making. I initially wrote several detailed historical and philosophical chapters meant to frame the life stories included here. I later decided those chapters were too academic for the book I wanted and needed to write, and so I put them aside. Nonetheless, I fear they were a burden to the final year of life of Joan Gillespie, my devoted friend and longtime assistant. For this I am regretful, but for the rare privilege of working with her, I will always be deeply grateful.

My current assistant, Marilyn Goodrich, picked up the threads and pieces and typed the entire manuscript into the computer, including multiple revisions and edits. I thank her wholeheartedly for her skilled work and warm and responsive personal style. I also acknowledge the contributions of several graduate student research assistants: Erin Fitz-Henry, Jesse Grayman, and especially Pete Benson, as well as assistance from Cris Paul.

The chapter on W. H. R. Rivers benefited greatly from some days spent in the Master's Lodge at Trinity College, Cambridge, England. For that opportunity I thank my colleague Amartya Sen, then master of the college. At Cambridge, the reference librarians at the University Library were good enough to help me access the relevant materials in the A. C. Haddon Collection on Rivers's life and intellectual career. I also benefited from discussions in Cambridge with Anita Herle and Sir Martin Roth.

I have presented earlier versions of the introduction and epilogue as well as the chapter on Rivers in a number of seminars: the Friday Morning Research Seminar in Medical Anthropology at Harvard; the Faculty Colloquium of the Department of Social Medicine, Harvard Medical School; the History of Psychoanalysis Dinner Seminar at Harvard's Faculty Club; Amherst College, Dickinson College, Williams College, the University of California at Berkeley, Stanford, Princeton, Columbia, the University of California at Davis, the University of California at Los Angeles, Case Western Reserve, Johns Hopkins, the State University of New York Downstate Medical Center, Mt. Sinai Medical School, University of Manchester, University College London, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, among other venues. I acknowledge with great thanks the importance of the responses of members of these audiences to the working out of the ideas in this book. I must acknowledge the assistance of a large group of colleagues and friends whose names are simply too numerous to list. They must each know how much I have learned from their responses to this work, and how much I value their support.

I had forgotten how difficult it is for an academic, and a highly specialized one at that, to write for a wide audience, projecting complex ideas and findings into the space of educated conversations. Tim Bartlett, Kate Hamill, and Peter Ginna have been extraordinary in facilitating clear and direct prose and an accessible message.

It is said that when he broke down psychologically in the midst of his studies of the workings of human societies, the great German sociologist Max Weber was asked why he spent so much time and put in such effort at understanding troubling human conditions. His answer supposedly was that he wanted to see how much he could endure. This project has been a test of my own endurance. Perhaps it has even been more than I could endure. That I didn't break down (though I came close) must be due to the great love and assistance I have received from my family, to whom I dedicate *What Really Matters.*

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