

What Really Matters

*Living a Moral Life
Amidst Uncertainty and Danger*

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Introduction

W*hat 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 war-lord 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 *Musée 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

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.

Winthrop Cohen

Winthrop Cohen represents for me the despairing idea that society can impose on us a way of living that unleashes our anger and aggression in a thoroughly inhuman way. He also represents for me the inspiring idea that the ordinary person over the course of his or her life can protest that unethical imposition and can even insist on devoting a life to remorse, regret, and repentance. Winthrop Cohen holds another crucial significance for me. His case pointedly asks how ordinary unhappiness and clinical depression differ. What does it mean for us and our world when the soul's tragedy is diagnosed as a mental illness and treated medically?

I met him in a clinical consultation more than twenty-five years ago. More accurately, I first met Mrs. Julia Richardson Cohen and her married daughter, Alexandra Frost—both tall, attractive, conservatively dressed, and worried. Winthrop had, at the last minute, backed out of accompanying them.