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Excerpt

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*Part I*

Personal sociology

You must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work:  
continually to examine it and interpret it. (C. Wright Mills 1959: 196)

## 1 Descent and return

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### 1948–1954

In my earliest memories, my parents were godlike. Their words and their silences governed my actions and defined my world. As they held, warmed, bathed and fed me, love brightened their faces and their familiar scent; my father's sweat, my mother's hair and lap. Because theirs was my only love, theirs was also my only reality; but in their absence I had experiences they neither accepted nor explained. Alone in the dark, my fears defied their certainties. Sounds in the garden were robbers coming to harm me and I felt the pain of long sticks they poked through the window and under the sheets. When my four-year-old self found the courage to run to their bed for comfort, they were angry. They denied my experience and firmly took me back to my room and I knew it was better to put up with its terrors than risk the loss of their love. Life was also full of private joys. One summer day, a steamroller came to our street. My older brother, five, led me barefoot across the newly spread tar as we popped the membranes of its black bubbles. Control was intoxicating; the small explosion I created could change fragments of the world. 'Tar' and 'asphalt', my brother's words, rolled delightfully around my mouth. I was connected with him and with nature, an inheritor of technology and language. I was godlike too.

My body, however, was a problem from the start. If I failed to 'do a motion in the trainer' my mother would push a rubber tube up my anus and fill my bowels to bursting point with soapy water until I lost control. Her father, a doctor, prescribed daily cod liver oil. I had to eat everything on my plate, however much I gagged, or stay at the table for hours after everyone else had gone. Congealed uneaten vegetables accompanied me in jars to the homes of my friends. In our house, children earned dessert by enduring the first course and even that was withheld when, as punishment for bad table manners, we were sent to our rooms. Temper tantrums, the ultimate loss of control, were punished with smacks to our bare buttocks. It was the style of the times. Anger and shame lodged so deep inside me

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that I lost them. Instead, I stole sweet foods and gobbled them behind my hands, in dark corners.

My father was a Congregationalist minister, which defined my status and how I should behave. Religion held all the answers and religion meant Dad. He was the young and charismatic General Secretary of the Australian Council of Churches and although he was not attached to a parish, I often heard him preach. The first time I sat with my mother in the front pews, I stared up at the pulpit and frowned. My father wore a black robe and a forked white collar and joined his hands in dramatic prayer. He smiled down at me but I did not smile back. After the service I asked: 'Daddy, why were you wearing your dressing gown and a feeder?' Already, I had doubts about the ceremonies of the church. My father was clearly not God, since God always welcomed and forgave you, but his special relationship to God seemed to give greater authority to his truths and made it more difficult for me to believe in any others I might encounter or devise.

**1954–1960**

Our move to Europe when I was six took us to new cultures early enough for my brothers and me to learn the pleasures and the discomforts of diversity. Against the immigrant tide, we travelled for five weeks by ship to our new home in Geneva for my father to join the staff of the World Council of Churches. Our first European port of call was Naples, where my parents bought granitas at a sidewalk café and we were allowed a taste. My mother's was lemon slush – bliss on a burning day of strange new smells – but my father's was coffee and not for children, so coffee granitas joined all the other adults-only mysteries for which I longed. On our way back to the ship, we stepped into a vast basilica. There were candles burning under high vaults, people dipping their fingers in holy water and magical frosted-glass cases with coloured statues of the Madonna, lit from within. She shone like a fairy princess and I was filled with yearning. My parents, anxious not to miss the gangplank, shepherded us out of this sacred place into the dust, wind and glare of the piazza. As they struggled with my younger brother's stroller on the unfamiliar cobblestones, they exchanged private smiles and said 'Mmmm; very Italianate' and I knew they didn't approve of what we'd just seen. My religious impulse became immediately suspect. For years after this, when confronted with anything ornate, I would say decisively 'Mmmm; very Italianated' and not understand why my parents laughed.

They also laughed at my desire to be a missionary. This was confusing, because its source came from their own teaching. I knew almost by heart,

through the books my father ordered from England, the lives of *Six Great Missionaries*. My brother and I would draw their portraits and perform their stories as plays. I planned to emulate Mary Slessor, go to Africa and be eaten by cannibals, or become a leper and identify with suffering like Father Damien. Alternatively, I could work in prisons like Elizabeth Fry in *Six Great Reformers* and, for a while, Quaker grey dresses with white collars were my ideal of feminine dress. Unfortunately, my heroes were all depicted as serene in their sufferings and serenity was not my strong point. I turned to the stories of *Ten Saints* – especially to those who tortured their bodies or destroyed their beauty in order to remain virgins. When I was eight, I went without chocolates and lollies for the forty days of Lent, hoarding any that came to me in a shoebox under my bed. I had discovered self-control.

On Good Friday that year, we walked the cloisters of the Abbey at Cluny, imagining ourselves as medieval monks. Before dawn on Easter Sunday, we drove to the ecumenical community of Taizé. We came into its thirteenth-century church, packed with villagers and visitors, in almost total darkness. The brothers entered in silent procession and prostrated themselves on the flagstones. As a single beam of light crept through a high window-slit, illuminating masses of daffodils and narcissis on the altar, they rose singing ‘Il est ressuscité! Il est ressuscité!’ ‘He is risen! He is risen!’ and at the conclusion of the service we gave our neighbours the kiss of peace. Then I remember a walk through fields of brilliant green wheat shoots, covered with dew and teeming with life, before sitting down at trestle tables with French farmers and church leaders from around the world, sharing platters of omelet and local sausages and breaking fresh, round loaves. The symbolism of death and rebirth with music, in nature and through community had entered me, but it was not until years later that I realized its significance.

Not long after this, I had a conversion experience. The art teacher at my school belonged to the Salvation Army and every Thursday, a day off for children in Geneva, she walked through the Old City in uniform to meetings at the Salvation Army Hall. Once, she invited interested students to meet Frère Pierre, who had just come back from missionary work in China. Brother Pierre was better than any of my Sunday School classes: he had lived his own adventure stories, he taught us to sing along with his guitar and he spoke to us as equals. He told us that God loved us whatever choices we made and that we were free to ignore or trust that love. When I came home, glowing with this revelation, to announce that I had been converted, my parents were amused as if children were incapable of spiritual awareness or commitment. Immediately, my joyful certainty was surrounded with rationalistic doubts.

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In the two years when my mother was dying of Hodgkins' Disease, I would often climb into bed beside her after school to read and talk. Sometimes I would run to her room and find it empty because the ambulance had taken her back to hospital in pain. When this happened, energy and joy abruptly drained out of me. I hated the antiseptic smell of the hospital, not knowing how long she would have to stay there, waiting in the corridor while nurses modestly concealed the body she had never hidden from me. I took her gifts I'd made: drawings, embroidery and cupcakes. My tenth birthday fell in the last week of her life. Her presents for me expressed her hopes for my future; Dinu Lipatti's record of 'Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring' and a set of the best quality watercolours. J. S. Bach had always been my favourite composer and painting my most creative activity. 'Jesu Joy' eventually inspired my piano lessons and when I played it, people sometimes cried. This was the last time I saw her. When she was sedated, I chose not to go in case she did not recognize me.

We were told not to mourn. The funeral was for family alone and our grief was concentrated in the alien space of the hospital chapel. A few days later, there was a packed thanksgiving service. My older brother's teacher and mine brought both our entire classes. We gave thanks for my mother's life and her 'victory over death'. I had no idea what this meant, but I would not let people feel sorry for me. Immediately afterwards, we took a holiday beside Lake Locarno with both sets of grandparents and I broke only once, the night before our return. Three months later, my father fell in love with one of his colleagues (our favourite) and the following year they married. I was devoted to my step-mother, learning to play the piano, had joined the Swiss Girl Guides, met my kindred spirit Christine and started writing a diary. My adolescence had begun.

Christine's father was also a minister and she had spent the previous few years in Hong Kong. Our experiences of cultural relocation had made us unusually self-aware and we instantly recognized each other's sensitivity. Each of us felt that the other was a gift from God. Our parents were disturbed by our mutual obsession and their anxieties were fuel for a mild rebellion. We would take our bikes into the fields or forests and lie in each others' arms for hours, united with the world. We shared each other's beds and in the long twilight, dragged them to the window to gaze at the first stars and imagine my mother's spirit sanctifying our relationship. We listened to Beethoven and Brahms and read our diaries aloud. Then the friendship we believed would last forever was abruptly interrupted when Christine's family returned to the USA and, a few months later, mine took me back to Sydney. We dealt with the separation by distancing ourselves before it happened and lost touch for the next thirty years. In our early forties, I found where she lived, wrote and visited her and we reclaimed

our connection – a model of spiritual relatedness which is once again central to our lives.

My diary was full of love for the land where I lived and gratitude for my friendships, often expressed in the sentimental language I met through my teachers and my reading. My internal experience mirrored the world:

Today, everything outside is beautiful. The trees with their new leaves, the pale blue sky, the spring daisies I see everyday coming home from school, the bright light, the little fleecy clouds . . . and I am happy; but my emotions are aroused by anything: the silver birches that make me think of how I am now, because of their fluttering leaves, and then the twinkling stars, that you sometimes see, sometimes don't and that seem uncertain whether to shine or not. . . . Each time I see this, it gives me a feeling of peace and joy so great that I think I may burst. . . . As Ramuz [the best known poet of Suisse Romande] says: 'there is a kind of voice that urges you to live, at this time of the year. It is in the singing bird, in the sunshine, in the swelling buds.' I love Switzerland more than I have ever loved it before. Switzerland is my real 'patrie' [homeland].

Growing up among the families of the World Council of Churches, at a school which took Christianity for granted, gave me religious words to explain my experiences, but they would have been no less spiritual had I not expressed them in those terms. After my mother's death, piano lessons were the high points of my week. When I stood in the tiled corridors of the Geneva Conservatoire, in the cross-currents of music which poured out of its rooms, I felt joined to its composers, living or dead, and to the music of the spheres. When my friends and I camped beside glaciers and lakes or rode down mountain passes with our hands off the handlebars or talked by torchlight in our tents about deaths, divorces and self-doubt; when we sang around the fire beneath the pinetrees and washed in rocky streams at sunrise, our feelings for each other and the land were replete with shared meaning. In losing Switzerland I lost, not French, but the reality of our common language. It was a long time before I found my way back.

At the same time, I began to rage against my father – my repressed grief no doubt encountering his. I rebelled at his failure to understand me, but I had internalized his value system and was beginning to use it against myself. After a particularly bitter row when I was twelve, I wrote:

I am feeling sick with misery. I don't know what to do to be liked again except to think of others, which I had been trying to do before Daddy told me I am getting worse and worse! I am going to sleep. Then I will forget all my troubles and I would like to sleep all my life, then they would be sorry! I hope I will be sick! I hope I will lose ten kilos! I want to look pathetically skinny and think of nothing but other people! Tomorrow I start a completely new life. Here is a list of my faults which I am going to abolish: Selfishness, Vanity, Rudeness, Dishonesty, Unpunctuality, Superiority. I will have to really slog to get all this out of my system!

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Although there was perfectionism, pain and repression in my childhood, it was never bleak. I was healthy, loved, and full of enthusiasm and hope.

**1960–1965**

On the aeroplane which brought us back to Australia, I was sexually abused in the cockpit by an acquaintance of my father's; an Australian judge. Heaving with nausea, I pulled my very pregnant stepmother into the cramped aircraft toilet and told her what had just happened. In the sixties, people did not talk about such things. At least she believed me. What he had done was wrong, she said, but some men were just like that; they could not help themselves and there was nothing to be done about it. I would have to put the experience behind me and get on with my new life in Australia. Only my parents knew what had happened and neither of them ever mentioned it again. After a few weeks, the nausea went; but the disgust with my body, the fear of its sexuality and of men were still there two years later when boys began to ask me out. In self-protection, I had separated myself from the source of my troubles – my body – and was frightened by its demands. Also, unknown to me, I was growing to look more like my mother and I could not understand why my father was pushing me away. I responded by rejecting what mattered most to him – his religion.

During my highschool years, my theological questioning was complicated. At school, I joined the Student Christian Movement which encouraged critical inquiry into religion. I was also a Sunday School teacher at my grandparents' church, played the piano for its kindergarten and went to the weekly youth fellowship. In 1962 a new, evangelical, minister came to our congregation. Anxious about the dangers of 'juvenile delinquency', he zealously arranged for the entire youth group to spend a weekend at a Baptist campsite. The bait was horseriding, but all I remember is a stream of messages about hellfire and damnation. Most of the camp counsellors were converts fresh from the Billy Graham crusades, enthusiastic but unlearned. My older brother, a debater schooled in the history of the Reformation and horrified by the saccharine sentimentality of the music, stood aloof from the proceedings and provided a running critical commentary throughout the weekend. I was more susceptible to the emotional appeal of eternal salvation. I hoped that a 'decision for Christ' would save me from the doubts which had plagued me since I was twelve. I wanted to be reborn to escape my present suffering, so I went forward when the youth leader asked for 'decisions'. This time, my parents were angry at the distorted version of their faith which had been presented to me and this



time, I agreed. I had been raised to seek intellectual justification for all my actions and when I found it missing from this latest experience I thought I had lost the possibility of any kind of faith forever. Shortly after this I declared that I was no longer a Christian and resigned from all my religious activities and my father, hurt and bewildered, ignored me as much as he could.

I still went to SCM school camps and conferences, because they nurtured my philosophical interests. Romantically and often painfully, I languished over two of the leaders (a man and a woman) and then found, to my amazement, that they reciprocated my feelings. Twenty years later, both had claimed a homosexual identity; but for us in the sixties, there were no stories, only tumultuous feelings. In my diary, I wrote: 'I don't know anything, think anything or express anything and everything seems unreal and very dark and desperate most of the time'. Although I longed to believe that God was in everything, I was told at an SCM 'science conference' that pantheism was a heresy of the early Church. Part of my tradition made me believe that what was intellectually unconvincing was wrong; but another part asserted that faith was a gift; one to which I was apparently not sufficiently receptive. During this period, encouraged by my school principal, another student and I composed a musical meditation on the Holy Spirit which was performed by a verse-speaking group, choir and orchestra. My contribution was wooden and uninspired and I never attempted to compose again. Struggling to make sense of the doctrine of the Trinity, I had no idea to what order of reality the events of Pentecost belonged. My own body was so obscure to me that I could not imagine the feelings of the Apostles in the story when they were filled with spiritual energy. At the youth group suppers after Church on Sunday evenings, I binged on cookies and cakes instead.

When I was fifteen years old, I decided to lose weight as a means of establishing to myself and to others that I was in control of my life. I had never heard the words anorexia nervosa, or that people could deliberately starve themselves to death or into a form of half life. I only knew that I was desperately unhappy and that I hated myself. I thought that if I carefully controlled what I ate, I could be transformed: there would be less of me to hate and an achievement to be proud of. I drew up written and mental lists of good and bad foods, good and bad times to eat and good and bad ways to eat. The lists and the practices they required were more and more elaborate and rigid. They became highly symbolic rituals and, for me, sacrosanct. Failing to observe them would bring about terrible retribution. Within a few months, I had lost over twenty kilos, I was terrified of eating, constantly shivering, weak but forcing myself to exercise and increasingly isolating myself in piano practice and study. My diary was full



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of suicidal thoughts. My buffer against despair was academic success and the pleasure of learning. When my final exam results were spectacular, I thought the examiners must have made a mistake.

During those and the next few years, I tried many times to gain weight; for the doctor anxious I wasn't menstruating, for my step-mother who cried when she saw the sharpness of my ribs, for my school friends worried by my shivering and hair loss and sometimes because I was afraid of dying; but I could not find the way out of the pit I had entered because I had not yet reached its bottom.

**1966–1968**

When I finished school, I broke with family tradition and left home to go to a university where I might not be identified with my father. I studied history and philosophy and seized on arguments about the illusory nature of the world. For a while, I was in love with a medical student in the college next door. Both of us were intense and repressed; a doomed combination, but safe. I was afraid of my sexual feelings because of a shame whose source I could not face. I alternated between weeks of contented sharing of college meals and bouts of food anxiety and restriction. I read Bernard of Clairvaux's letters on Caritas; the love which joins all humanity. I sought out moments of transcendence in the college choir, when we sang about mystical knowing and peace in anthems:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence  
and in fear and trembling come  
Ponder nothing earthly minded  
for with healing in his wings  
Christ from sky to earth descended  
Our true homage to repay.

and in psalms:

Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace  
whose mind is stayed on Thee.  
The darkness and the light are alike to thee.  
The night is as bright as the day.

I responded to the body/mind dualism of the anthem and did not read the rest of the psalm:

Where could I go to escape from you?  
Where could I get away from your presence?  
If I went up to heaven, you would be there;  
If I lay down in the world of the dead, you would be there,

I wanted to be a better person and thought the way was through control,

but I had created a pattern of living which cut me off from connection with my body, with others and with nature. It wasn't an illness, though it made me ill: I had fallen into a paradoxical form of spiritual suffering designed by my very attempt to escape from it. At the beginning of my third year at university, my parents and my three younger brothers went to live in Fiji and I spent my university vacation with them. Instead of the joyful reunion I had anticipated, I found a bewildered silence from my parents, shocked at my difficulties with food. The less I ate, the more they withdrew and the more they withdrew, the less I ate; until I was so weak I flew back to Melbourne where I went straight into hospital. Wanting to please the psychiatrist and the staff, who gave me the first sustained care I had had in years, and sedated to the point where I thought it didn't matter, I gained the weight they said I should.

I went back to university seven kilos heavier. I felt gross. I hated my new, more attractive body, and the loss of my anorexic identity. The barbiturates I was still prescribed made it impossible to think. When I tried to tell people about the escalating confusion and self-loathing in which I lived, they found it narcissistic or incomprehensible. Only the psychiatrist recognized some of the sources of my perfectionism, but my sessions with her had begun to touch feelings my anorexic behaviour had so successfully stifled and I was not ready to cope with their re-emergence. My despair ate up the world and myself with it. I was certain about two things only; that I was worth nothing and that I could not go on. A week after my twentieth birthday, close to the anniversary of my mother's death, I swallowed fistfuls of tranquilizers and lay down to die.

Twenty four hours later, a distraught fellow-student alerted the college principal and the lock on my door was broken. I remember going through darkness towards light and then being pulled into the world again by the energy of someone I loved. My older brother had flown straight from Sydney to the hospital where I lay unconscious and it was his hand, holding mine, which dragged me back, as I screamed with the pain of my return. This unsuccessful suicide was the turning point for my rebirth. It was nine months before the depression lifted and I could really see and feel my surroundings. I spent that time in Fiji with my family, at first staring at the floor all day, then starting to teach in a primary school, healing with the unquestioning love of my small half-brothers and my eight-year-old students and the warmth of the multiracial community in which we lived. Against my will, but because I didn't think I cared, I took anti-depressants for a while and they made a difference. One day, on the way home from work, I walked over the brow of the hill above our house and saw, as if for the first time, the aqua, green and ultramarine spectrum that stretched to the reef and the palms, frangipani and hibiscus on either side of the road. It