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THE  
SOUL'S  
CODE

IN SEARCH OF  
CHARACTER  
AND CALLING

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IN A NUTSHELL:  
THE ACORN THEORY  
AND THE REDEMPTION  
OF PSYCHOLOGY

There is more in a human life than our theories of it allow. Sooner or later something seems to call us onto a particular path. You may remember this "something" as a signal moment in childhood when an urge out of nowhere, a fascination, a peculiar turn of events struck like an annunciation: This is what I must do, this is what I've got to have. This is who I am.

This book is about that call.

If not this vivid or sure, the call may have been more like gentle pushings in the stream in which you drifted unknowingly to a particular spot on the bank. Looking back, you sense that fate had a hand in it.

This book is about that sense of fate.

These kinds of annunciations and recollections determine biography as strongly as memories of abusive horror; but these more enigmatic moments tend to be shelved. Our theories favor traumas setting us the task of working them

through. Despite early injury and all the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, we bear from the start the image of a definite individual character with some enduring traits.

This book is about that power of character.

Because the "traumatic" view of early years so controls psychological theory of personality and its development, the focus of our rememberings and the language of our personal storytelling have already been infiltrated by the toxins of these theories. Our lives may be determined less by our childhood than by the way we have learned to imagine our childhoods. We are, this book shall maintain, less damaged by the traumas of childhood than by the traumatic way we remember childhood as a time of unnecessary and externally caused calamities that wrongly shaped us.

So this book wants to repair some of that damage by showing what else was there, is there, in your nature. It wants to resurrect the unaccountable twists that turned your boat around in the eddies and shallows of meaninglessness, bringing you back to feelings of destiny. For that is what is lost in so many lives, and what must be recovered: a sense of personal calling, that there is a reason I am alive.

Not the reason to live; not the meaning of life in general or a philosophy of religious faith—this book does not pretend to provide such answers. But it does speak to the feelings that there is a reason my unique person is here and that there are things I must attend to beyond the daily round and that give the daily round its reason, feelings that the world somehow wants me to be here, that I am answerable to an innate image, which I am filling out in my biography.

That innate image is also the subject of this book, as it is the subject of every biography—and we will encounter many biographies throughout these pages. The biography question haunts our Western subjectivity, as its immersion in therapies of self show. Everyone in therapy, or affected by therapeutic reflection even as diluted by the tears of TV-talk, is in search of an adequate biography. How do I put together into a co-

herent image the pieces of my life? How do I find the basic plot of my story?

To uncover the innate image we must set aside the psychological frames that are usually used, and mostly used up. They do not reveal enough. They trim a life to fit the frame: developmental growth, step by step, from infancy, through troubled youth, to midlife crisis and aging, to death. Plodding your way through an already planned map, you are on an itinerary that tells you where you have been before you get there, or like an averaged statistic foretold by an actuary in an insurance company. The course of your life has been described in the future perfect tense. Or, if not the predictable highway, then the offbeat "journey," accumulating and shedding incidents without pattern, itemizing events for a résumé organized only by chronology: "This came after That. Such a life is a narrative without plot, its focus on a more and more boring central figure, "me," wandering in the desert of dried-out "experiences."

I believe we have been robbed of our true biography—that destiny written into the acorn—and we go to therapy to recover it. That innate image can't be found, however, until we have a psychological theory that grants primary psychological reality to the call of fate. Otherwise your identity continues to be that of a sociological consumer determined by random statistics, and the unacknowledged daimon's urgings appear as eccentricities, compacted with angry resentments and overwhelming longings. Repression, the key to personality structure in all therapy schools, is not of the past but of the acorn and the past mistakes we have made in our relation with it.

We dull our lives by the way we conceive them. We have stopped imagining them with any sort of romance, any fictional flair. So, this book also picks up the romantic theme, daring to envision biography in terms of very large ideas such as beauty, mystery, and myth. In keeping with the romantic challenge, this book also risks the inspiration of big words,

such as "vision" and "calling," privileging them over small reductions. We do not want to belittle what we do not understand. Even when, in a later chapter, we do look carefully at genetic explanations, we find mystery and myth there, too.

At the outset we need to make clear that today's main paradigm for understanding a human life, the interplay of genetics and environment, omits something essential—the particularity you feel to be you. By accepting the idea that I am the effect of a subtle buffering between hereditary and societal forces, I reduce myself to a result. The more my life is accounted for by what already occurred in my chromosomes, by what my parents did or didn't do, and by my early years now long past, the more my biography is the story of a victim. I am living a plot written by my genetic code, ancestral heredity, traumatic occasions, parental unconsciousness, societal accidents.

This book wants to lift the pall of victim mentality from which individual people cannot recover until the theoretical paradigms that give rise to that mentality have been seen through and set aside. We are victims primarily of theories before they are put into practice. The current American identity as victim is the tail side of the coin whose head brightly displays the opposite identity: the heroic self-made "man," carving out destiny alone and with unflinching will. Victim is flip side of hero. More deeply, however, we are victims of academic, scientific, and even therapeutic psychology, whose paradigms do not sufficiently account for or engage with, and therefore ignore, the sense of calling, that essential mystery at the heart of each human life.

In a nutshell, then, this book is about calling, about fate, about character, about innate image. Together they make up the "acorn theory," which holds that each person bears a uniqueness that asks to be lived and that is already present before it can be lived.

"Before it can be lived" raises doubts about another principal paradigm: time. And time, that takes survey of all the world, must have a stop. It, too, must be set aside; otherwise the before

always determines the after, and you remain chained to past causes upon which you can have no effect. So this book devotes more of its time to the timeless, attempting to read a life backward as much as forward.

Reading life backward enables you to see how early observations are the sketchy preformation of behaviors now. Sometimes the peaks of early years are never surpassed. Reading backward means that growth is less the key biological term than form, and that development only makes sense when it reveals a facet of the original image. Of course a human life advances from day to day, and regresses, and we do see different faculties develop and watch them wither. Still, the innate image of your fate holds all in the copresence of today, yesterday, and tomorrow. Your person is not a process or a development. You *are* that essential image that develops, if it does. As Picasso said, "I don't develop; I am."

For this is the nature of an image, any image. It's all there at once. When you look at a face before you, at a scene out your window or a painting on the wall, you see a whole gestalt. All the parts present themselves simultaneously. One bit does not cause another bit or precede it in time. It doesn't matter whether the painter put the reddish blotches in last or first, the gray streaks as afterthoughts or as originating structure or whether they are leftover lines from a prior image on that piece of canvas: What you see is exactly what you get, all at once. And the face, too; its complexion and features form a single expression, a singular image, given all at once. So, too, the image in the acorn. You are born with a character; it is given; a gift, as the old stories say, from the guardians upon your birth.

This book sets out on a new course based on an old idea. Each person enters the world called. The idea comes from Plato, his *Myth of Er* at the end of his most well-known work, the *Republic*. I can put the idea in a nutshell.

The soul of each of us is given a unique daimon before we are born, and it has selected an image or pattern that we live on earth. This soul-companion, the daimon, guides us here; in the process of arrival, however, we forget all that took place and believe we come empty into this world. The daimon remembers what is in your image and belongs to your pattern, and therefore your daimon is the carrier of your destiny.

As explained by the greatest of later Platonists, Plotinus (A.D. 205–270), we elected the body, the parents, the place, and the circumstances that suited the soul and that, as the myth says, belong to its necessity. This suggests that the circumstances, including my body and my parents whom I may curse, are my soul's own choice—and I do not understand this because I have forgotten.

So that we do not forget, Plato tells the myth and, in the very last passage, says that by preserving the myth we may better preserve ourselves and prosper. In other words, the myth has a redemptive psychological function, and a psychology derived from it can inspire a life founded on it.

The myth leads also to practical moves. The most practical is to entertain the ideas implied by the myth in viewing your biography—ideas of calling, of soul, of daimon, of fate, of necessity, all of which will be explored in the pages that follow. Then, the myth implies, we must attend very carefully to childhood to catch early glimpses of the daimon in action, to grasp its intentions and not block its way. The rest of the practical implications swiftly unfold: (a) Recognize the call as a prime fact of human existence; (b) align life with it; (c) find the common sense to realize that accidents, including the heartache and the natural shocks the flesh is heir to, belong to the pattern of the image, are necessary to it, and help fulfill it.

A calling may be postponed, avoided, intermittently missed. It may also possess you completely. Whatever, eventually it will out. It makes its claim. The daimon does not go away.

For centuries we have searched for the right term for this "call." The Romans named it your *genius*; the Greeks, your *daimon*; and the Christians your guardian angel. The Romanics, like Keats, said the call came from the heart, and Michelangelo's intuitive eye saw an image in the heart of the person he was sculpting. The Neoplatonists referred to an imaginal body, the *ochtina*, that carried you like a vehicle.<sup>1</sup> It was your personal bearer or support. For some it is Lady Luck or Fortuna; for others a genie or jinn, a bad seed or evil genius. In Egypt, it might have been the *ka*, or the *ba* with whom you could converse. Among the people we refer to as Eskimos and others who follow shamanistic practices, it is your spirit, your free-soul, your animal-soul, your breath-soul.

Over a century ago, the Victorian scholar of religions and cultures E. B. Tylor (1832–1917) reported that "primitives" (as nonindustrial peoples were then called) conceived that which we name "soul" to be a "thin insubstantial human image, in its nature a sort of vapour, flm, or shadow . . . mostly palpable and invisible, yet also manifesting physical power."<sup>2</sup> A later ethnological reporter, Åke Hulkrantz, whose special field is the Amerindians, says that soul "originates in an image" and is "conceived in the form of an image."<sup>3</sup> Plato in his *Myth of Er* uses a similar word, *paradeigma*, a basic form encompassing your entire destiny. Though this accompanying image shadowing your life is the bearer of fate and fortune, it is not a moral instructor or to be confused with conscience.

The Roman *genius* was not a moralist. It "knew everything about the individual's future and controlled his fate," yet "his deity held no moral sanction over the individual; he [sic] was merely an agent of personal luck or fortune. One might ask without opprobrium to have evil or selfish desires fulfilled by his Genius."<sup>4</sup> In Rome, in West Africa, in Haiti you could well ask your daimon (whatever it might be called) to harm enemies, spoil their luck, or aid in manipulations and seductions. This "evil" aspect of the daimon we also shall explore in a later chapter ("The Bad Seed").

The concept of this individualized soul-image has a long, complicated history; its appearance in cultures is diverse and widespread and the names for it are legion. Only our contemporary psychology and psychiatry omit it from their textbooks. The study and therapy of the psyche in our society ignore this factor, which other cultures regard as the kernel of character and the repository of individual fate. The core subject of psychology, psyche or soul, doesn't get into the books supposedly dedicated to its study and care.

I will be using many of the terms for this acorn—image, character, fate, genius, calling, daimon, soul, destiny—rather interchangeably, preferring one or another depending on the context. This looser mode follows the style of other, often older cultures, which have a better sense of this enigmatic force in human life than does our contemporary psychology, which tends to narrow understanding of complex phenomena to single-meaning definitions. We should not be afraid of these big nouns; they are not hollow. They have merely been deserted and need rehabilitation.

These many words and names do not tell us *what* "it" is, but they do confirm *that* it is. They also point to its mysteriousness. We cannot know what exactly we are referring to because its nature remains shadowy, revealing itself mainly in hints, intuitions, whispers, and the sudden urges and oddities that disturb your life and that we continue to call symptoms.

Consider this event. Amateur Night at the Harlem Opera House. A skinny, awkward sixteen-year-old goes fearfully onstage. She is announced to the crowd: "The next contestant is a young lady named Ella Fitzgerald. . . . Miss Fitzgerald here is gonna dance for us. . . . Hold it, hold it. Now what's your problem, honey? . . . Correction, folks. Miss Fitzgerald has changed her mind. She's not gonna dance, she's gonna sing. . . ."

Ella Fitzgerald gave three encores and won first prize. However, "she had meant to dance."<sup>5</sup>

Was it chance that suddenly changed her mind? Did a singing gene suddenly kick in? Or might that moment have

been an annunciation, calling Ella Fitzgerald to her particular fate?

Despite psychology's reluctance to let individual fate into its field, psychology does admit that we each have our own makeup, that each of us is definitely, even defiantly, a unique individual. But when it comes to accounting for the spark of uniqueness and the call that keeps us to it, psychology too is stumped. Its analytical methods break down the puzzle of the individual into factors and traits of personality, into types, complexes, and temperaments, attempting to track the secret of individuality to substrata of brain matter and selfish genes. More strict schools of psychology kick the question right out of the lab, packing it off to parapsychology for the study of paranormal "callings," or to research stations in the distant colonies of magic, religion, and madness. At its most bold, and most barren, psychology accounts for the uniqueness of each by a hypothesis of random statistical chance.

This book refuses to leave to the lab of psychology that sense of individuality at the core of "me." Nor will it accept that my strange and precious human life is the result of statistical chance. Please note, however, that these refusals do not therefore bury our heads in the folds of a church. The call to an individual destiny is not an issue between faithless science and unscientific faith. Individuality remains an issue for psychology—a psychology that holds in mind its prefix, "psyche," and its premise, soul, so that its mind can espouse its faith without institutional Religion and practice its careful observation of phenomena without institutionalized Science. The acorn theory moves nimbly down the middle between those two old contesting dogmas, barking at each other through the ages and which Western thought fondly keeps as pets.

The acorn theory proposes and I will bring evidence for the claim that you and I and every single person is born with a defining image. Individuality resides in a formal cause—to

use old philosophical language going back to Aristotle. We each embody our own idea, in the language of Plato and Plotinus. And this form, this idea, this image does not tolerate too much straying. The theory also attributes to this innate image an angelic or daimonic intention, as if it were a spark of consciousness; and, moreover, holds that it has our interest at heart because it chose us for its reasons.

That the daimon has your interest at heart may be the part of the theory particularly hard to accept. That the heart has its reasons, yes; that there is an unconscious with its own intentions; that fate plays a hand in how things turn out—all this is acceptable, even conventional.

But why is it so difficult to imagine that I am cared about, that something takes an interest in what I do, that I am perhaps protected, maybe even kept alive not altogether by my own will and doing? Why do I prefer insurance to the invisible guarantees of existence? For it sure is easy to die. A split second of inattention and the best-laid plans of a strong ego spill out on the sidewalk. Something saves me every day from falling down the stairs, tripping at the curb, being blindsided. How is it possible to race down the highway, tape deck singing, thoughts far away, and stay alive? What is this “immune system” that watches over my days, my food sprinkled with viruses, toxins, bacteria? Even my eyebrows crawl with mites, like little birds on a rhino’s back. We name what preserves us instinct, self-preservation, sixth sense, subliminal awareness (each of which, too, is invisible yet present). Once upon a time what took such good care of me was a guardian spirit, and I damn well knew how to pay it appropriate attention.

Despite this invisible caring, we prefer to imagine ourselves thrown naked into the world, utterly vulnerable and fundamentally alone. It is easier to accept the story of heroic self-made development than the story that you may well be loved by this guiding providence, that you are needed for what you bring, and that you are sometimes fruitfully helped by it in situations of distress. May I state this as a bare and familiar fact without quoting a guru, witnessing for Christ, or claiming the

miracle of recovery? Why not keep within psychology proper what once was called providence—being invisibly watched and watched over?

Children present the best evidence for a psychology of providence. Here I mean more than providential miracles, those amazing tales of children falling from high ledges without harm, buried under earthquake debris and surviving. Rather, I am referring to the humdrum miracles when the mark of character appears. All of a sudden and out of nowhere a child shows who she is, what he must do.

These impulses of destiny frequently are stifled by dysfunctional perceptions and unreceptive surroundings, so that calling appears in the myriad symptoms of difficult, self-destructive, accident-prone, “hyper” children—all words invented by adults in defense of their misunderstanding. The acorn theory offers an entirely fresh way of regarding childhood disorders, less in terms of causes than of calls and less in terms of past influences than of intuitive revelations.

In regard to children and their psychology, I want the scales of habit (and the masked hatred within the habit) to fall from our eyes. I want us to envision that what children go through has to do with finding a place in the world for their specific calling. They are trying to live two lives at once, the one they were born with and the one of the place and among the people they were born into. The entire image of a destiny is packed into a tiny acorn, the seed of a huge oak on small shoulders. And its call rings loud and persistent and is as demanding as any scolding voice from the surroundings. The call shows in the tantrums and obstinacies, in the shyness and retreats, that seem to set the child against our world but that may be protections of the world it comes with and comes from.

This book champions children. It provides a theoretical foundation for understanding their lives, a foundation that draws its own foundations from myths, from philosophy, from other cultures, and from imagination. It seeks to make sense of children’s dysfunctions before taking these disorders by their literal labels and sending the child off for therapy.

Without a theory that backs the child from its very beginning and without a mythology that connects each child to something before its beginning, a child enters the world as a bare product—accidental or planned, but without its own authenticity. Its disturbances can have no authenticity either, since the child does not enter the world for its own reasons, with its own project and guided by its own genius.

The acorn theory provides a psychology of childhood. It affirms the child's inherent uniqueness and destiny, which means first of all that the clinical data of dysfunction belong in some way to that uniqueness and destiny. Psychopathologies are as authentic as the child itself, not secondary, contingent. Given with the child, even given to the child, the clinical data are part of its gift. This means that each child is a gifted child, filled with data of all sorts, gifts peculiar to that child which show themselves in peculiar ways, often maladaptive and causing pain. So this book is about children, offering a way to regard them differently, to enter their imaginations, and to discover in their pathologies what their daimon might be indicating and what their destiny might want.

#### CALLINGS

Two stories of children: the first of a significant English philosopher, R. G. Collingwood (1889–1943); the second of a brilliant Spanish bullfighter, Manolete (1917–1947). The first shows how the daimon breaks suddenly into a young life; the second exhibits the disguises and tortuous concealments the daimon sometimes uses:

My father had plenty of books, and . . . one day when I was eight years old curiosity moved me to take down a little black book lettered on its spine "Kant's Theory of Ethics." . . . as I began reading it, my small form wedged between the bookcase and the table, I was attacked by a

strange succession of emotions. First came an intense excitement. I felt that things of the highest importance were being said about matters of the utmost urgency: things which at all costs I must understand. Then, with a wave of indignation, came the discovery that I could not understand them. Disgraceful to confess, here was a book whose words were English and whose sentences were grammatical, but whose meaning baffled me. Then, third and last, came the strangest emotion of all. I felt that the contents of this book, although I could not understand it, were somehow my business: a matter personal to myself, or rather to some future self of my own. . . . there was no desire in it; I did not, in any natural sense of the word, "want" to master the Kantian ethics when I should be old enough; but I felt as if a veil had been lifted and my destiny revealed.

There came upon me by degrees, after this, a sense of being burdened with a task whose nature I could not define except by saying, "I must think." What I was to think about I did not know; and when, obeying this command, I fell silent and absent-minded.<sup>6</sup>

The philosopher who thought out major works in metaphysics, aesthetics, religion, and history was already called and beginning to practice "philosophizing" as an eight-year-old. His father provided the books and access to them, but the daimon chose that father, and its "curiosity" reached for that book.

As a child, Manolete did not seem in any way to be a prospective bullfighter. The man who changed old styles and renewed the ideals of the corrida was a timid and fearful boy.

Delicate and sickly, having almost died of pneumonia when he was two, little Manuel was interested only in painting and reading. He stayed so much indoors and clung so tightly to his mother's apron strings that his sisters and other children used to tease him. Around his homework,



he was known as "a thin, melancholy boy who wandered around the streets after school lost in thought. He rarely joined other boys' games of soccer or playing at bullfighting." This all changed "when he was about eleven, and nothing else mattered much except the bulls."<sup>7</sup>

Radical transformation! At his first corrida, Manolete, hardly out of short pants, stands his ground without moving a foot—and does in fact suffer a groin wound, which he regards diffidently, refusing to be helped home to Mother, so as to return with the comrades with whom he came.

Clearly heroism is constellated. A myth of the hero calls from within his acorn.

Was a dim knowledge of the call there all along? Then of course little boy Manolete was afraid and clung to his mother. (Were her "apron strings" a metaphor, or was he already using her apron, her skirt, as a cape?) Of course he kept away from torero games in the street, taking shelter in the kitchen. How could this nine-year-old boy stand up to his destiny? In his acorn were thousand-pound black bulls with razor-sharpened horns thundering toward him, among them Islero, the one that gored him through groin and belly and gave him death at age thirty and the largest funeral ever witnessed in Spain?

Collingwood and Manolete exhibit a basic fact: The frail competencies of a child are not equal to the demands of the daemon. Children are inherently ahead of themselves, even if they are given low grades and left back. One way for the child is to race ahead, as in the famous cases of Mozart and other "infant prodigies" who benefit from good guidance. Another way is to shrink back and hold the daemon at bay, as did Manolete in his mother's kitchen.

The "wave of indignation" that assaulted Collingwood belonged with his inadequacy; he was not up to Kant, who was his "business, a matter personal to myself." One part of him was too untutored to read the meanings of the text; another part was not an eight-year-old child, never was a child.

Two similar examples also show the distinction between the ability of the child and the needs of the genius. First, the pioneering geneticist Barbara McClintock; second, the renowned violinist Yehudi Menuhin.

McClintock received a Nobel Prize for her research, which required the solitary thinking and handwork in the lab that gave her the deepest pleasure. She reports that "at the age of five I asked for a set of tools. [My father] did not get me the tools that you get for an adult; he got tools that would fit in my hands. . . . they were not the tools I wanted. I wanted real tools, not tools for children."<sup>8</sup>

Menuhin also wanted what his hands could not hold. Before Yehudi was four he frequently heard the concertmaster (first violinist) Louis Persinger break into a solo passage as little Yehudi sat with his parents up in the gallery of the Curran Theatre. "During one such performance I asked my parents if I might have a violin for my fourth birthday and Louis Persinger to teach me to play it." His wish was granted, it seems, when he was given by a family friend a toy violin made of metal with metal strings. "I burst into sobs, threw it on the ground and would have nothing more to do with it."<sup>9</sup>

Because the genius is not bound by age, by size, or by education or training, each child is too big for its britches and has eyes bigger than its stomach. It will be narcissistic, demanding excessive attention, and it will be accused of childish omnipotence fantasies, such as asking for instruments it cannot handle. What is the source of this omnipotence, if not the grandeur of the vision accompanying the soul into the world? The Romantics understood this inherent grandiosity of the child. How did they put it: "trailing clouds of glory as we come?"

Barbara's hands could not heft a heavy hammer, nor could Yehudi's arms extend and fingers articulate enough for a full-sized violin, but the vision was full-sized to match the music in his mind. He had to have what he wanted because "I did know, instinctively, that to play was to be."<sup>10</sup>

Let us consider that little Yehudi's daimon refused to be treated as a child, despite the fact that the boy himself was only four. The daimon threw the fit, demanding the real thing, for playing the violin is not playing with a toy. The daimon does not want to be treated as a child; it is not a child, and not an inner child either—in fact, it may be intensely intolerant of this mixture, this incarceration inside the body of an unaccomplished child, this identification of its complete vision with an incomplete human being. Rebellious *intolerance*, as the example of Yehudi Menuhin shows, is a primary characteristic of acorn behavior.

When we look at the childhood of the French writer Colette, we find that she, too, was fascinated by the instruments of her craft. Unlike Menuhin's fate, which pounced like a tiger, hers, more like a French cat on the windowsill, watched and waited, deviating her own necessity to write by observing her father's attempts. More like Manolete, she drew back—in self-protection?

As Colette herself says, her resistance to writing guarded her from beginning too soon, as if her daimon did not want her to start before she was able to receive its gift, but rather to read and read, to live and learn, to sense and smell and feel. Writing and the torture of it would afflict her life, and bless it, soon enough, but first she had to absorb the sensuous stuff that would enter the compositions. This stuff refers not only to the perceived events that entered her sensuous memory, but the very palpable stuff of writing as a physical craft. For although she abjured words, she craved the materials of her calling:

A pad of virgin blotting paper; an ebony ruler; one, two, four, six pencils, sharpened with a penknife and all of different colors; pens with medium nibs and fine nibs, pens with enormously broad nibs, drawing pens no thicker than a blackbird's quill; sealing wax, red, green and violet; a hand blotter, a bottle of liquid glue, not to mention slabs

of transparent amber-colored stuff known as "mouth glue"; the minute remains of a spahi's cloak reduced to the dimensions of a pen wiper with scalloped edges; a big inkpot flanked by a small inkpot, both in bronze, and a lacquer bowl filled with a golden powder to dry the wet page; another bowl containing sealing wafers of all colors (I used to eat the white ones); to right and left of the table, reams of paper, cream-laid, ruled, watermarked.

Menuhin knew exactly what he wanted: to play the violin; Colette knew just as surely what she did not want: to write. Although in her sixth year and well able to read, she "refused to learn to write."

No, I would not write, I did not want to write. When one can read, can penetrate the enchanted realm of books, why write? . . . in my youth I never, *never* wanted to write. No, I did not get up secretly in the night to scribble poems on the cover of a shoebox! No, I never flung inspired words to the West wind or to the moonlight! No, I never made good marks in composition between the ages of twelve and fifteen. For I felt, and felt it each day more intensely, that I was made exactly for *not* writing. . . . I was the only one of my kind, the only creature sent into the world for the purpose of not writing.<sup>11</sup>

I want to recapitulate what we have learned so far about how destiny affects childhood. In Collingwood, an unexpected annunciation; in Manolete and Colette, an inhibition causing them to retreat. As well, we saw in McClintock, Menuhin, and Colette an obsessional desire for the tools that make realization possible. And we saw the discrepancy between child and daimon. Mainly we learned that the call comes in curious ways and differently from person to person. There is no overall pattern, but only the particular pattern in each case.

However, any reader with a keen Freudian nose will have detected one common factor: all these fathers—Collingwood's, McClintock's, Menuhin's, Colette's!—as if what the father might facilitate accounts for the child's call. This "parental fallacy," as we shall expand upon in the chapter of that name, is hard to avoid. The fantasy of parental influence on childhood follows us through life long after the parents themselves are faded into photographs, so that much of their power comes from the *idea* of their power. Why do we cling to the parental fallacy? How does it still parent us, comfort us? Are we afraid to admit the daemon into our own lives, afraid that it might have called us once, might still be calling, so we hide out in the kitchen? We retreat to parental explanations rather than face destiny's claims.

If Colette could postpone her destiny or acknowledge it by the intensity of her resistance, Golda Meir, who led Israel during the 1973 war, was launched straight forward by hers while in fourth grade in the Milwaukee public schools. She organized a protest group against the required purchase of schoolbooks, which were too expensive for the poorer children, who were thus denied equal opportunity to learn. This child of eleven (!) rented a hall to stage a meeting, raised funds, gathered her group of girls, prepped her little sister to declaim a socialist poem in Yiddish, and then herself addressed the assembly. Was she not already a Labor party prime minister?

Golda Meir's mother had pressed her to write out her speech first, "but it made more sense to me just to say what I wanted to say, 'speeches from my head.'"<sup>12</sup>

The future life does not have to arrive so overtly. Golda Meir, a woman of determination and leadership, came right out with it. Her daemon set the path and kept her to it. At about the same age, Eleanor Roosevelt, another woman of great determination and leadership, was entering the world of her future, not through action but by withdrawing into fantasy. Eleanor Roosevelt declared herself an "unhappy child," whose early years were "gray days." What a quieting, police

term for what she endured. "I grew up with a fear of insanity."<sup>13</sup> She lost a mother who never liked her, a younger brother, and a playboy father, all before she was nine. "She is such a funny child, so old-fashioned, that we always call her 'Granny.'" From the time she was five, if not earlier, her natural reserve tightened; she became more sullen, stubborn, spiteful, sour, and unable (she could not read at seven, could not cook or sew, as was expected in her circles at that period). She lied; she stole; she threw antisocial tantrums in company. She was taught and subdued by a tutor, whom she "hated for years."<sup>14</sup>

All the while "I carried on a day-by-day story, which was the realst thing in my life."<sup>15</sup> In her story, Eleanor imagined that she was living with her father as the mistress of his large household and a companion in his travels. The story continued years after his death.

Today "the case of Eleanor R." would require therapy. Today, even if the family system were addressed, the child would almost certainly be treated by biopsychiatry's armamentarium of drugs, which would confirm with all the power of biology the child's feelings of being a "bad child." (Badness must be in my very cells, like an original sin or like a sickness. Else why would I be taking these pills to make me better, like the pills I take when I have fever and pains?)

Eleanor's elaborate daydreams would have no intrinsic value as exhibiting the imagination of her daemon, and her calling. Instead they would be reduced to escapes into unreality, verging on delusions. With drugs to reduce the strength and frequency of her images, psychiatric medicine could minister to a mind diseased, thereby proving by circular reasoning that what it had eliminated was indeed disease.

Another consultant, if called in on the case of Eleanor R., would suspect a connection between her early day-to-day fantasy and her later regular newspaper columns concerning social reality and called "My Day." This consultant would reduce her genius for democratic compassion, for human welfare, and her

optimistic wide-angle vision to "compensation" for the isolated self-enclosed fantasies of her childhood's gray days.

Again a father. And again an opportunity to slip in a Freudian interpretation: Eleanor's Electra complex (love for the father and desire to replace the mother) caused both the gray depressions and the escapes from them in wishful omnipotence fantasies. Since the fantasies could have had other content, such as magical flights, secret pacts, romantic trysts, animal rescues, and royal weddings, the acorn theory proposes a very different understanding of young Eleanor Roosevelt's imaginings.

Their caring and managerial content was purposeful, preparation for the dutiful life she would later live. The fantasies were invented by her calling and were indeed more realistic in their orientation than her daily reality. Imagination acted as teacher, giving instruction for the large ministering tasks of caring for the welfare of a complex family, of a crippled husband, of the state of New York as the governor's wife, the United States as its first lady, and even of the United Nations. Her fantasies of attending to "Father" were a preliminary praxis into which she could put her call, her huge devotion to the welfare of others.

### COMPENSATION THEORY

The theory of compensation—that Eleanor Roosevelt compensated her hopeless feelings with empowerment fantasies—pulls a lot of weight in psychobiography. Simply stated, the theory says the roots of later superiorities are buried in early inferiorities. Short, sickly, and sad children are driven by the principle of compensation to develop into towering leaders of activity and strength.

The biography of Generalissimo Francisco Franco, dictator of Spain from 1939 until 1973 (he died two years later), fits easily into the frame of compensation theory. As a boy he was

"excruciatingly shy," of "fragile build" and "diminutive size." "At fifteen, tiny and baby-faced, he entered the Infantry Academy at Toledo, and one of the instructors . . . handed him a short-barreled musketoon instead of the heavy regulation rifle." Franco drew himself up and said: "Whatever the strongest man in my section can do, so can I."<sup>16</sup> This insult stayed with Franco, for he was a man to whom dignity was central. Besides the evident compensation for early frailty, he competed ("sibling rivalry") with his extraverted brothers, who were cheerful, successful, and talkative. So Franco overcame early inferiorities with victories, oppression, and a ruthless hand.

We can put on parade, one after another, eminent men of accomplishment and bravery who as children gave quite opposite indications. Erwin Johannes Eugen Rommel—the Desert Fox, a heroic soldier, decorated with the highest medals for bravery under fire in two world wars, a field marshal, campaign veteran, tactician, and inspirer of his men in campaigns in Belgium, France, Romania, Italy, and North Africa—as a little boy was known in his family as the "white bear" because he was so pale, dreamy, and slow of speech. Falling behind his classmates in primary school, he was considered lazy, inattentive, and careless.<sup>17</sup>

Robert Peary, who walked the Arctic wastes until he "discovered" the North Pole, was the only son of a widow. He stayed close to his mother, at home in the yard, "to evade boys who called him 'Skinny' and teased him about his fearfulness."

Vilhjalmur Stefansson, another heroic polar explorer, was called "Softy" by his classmates and spent hours alone, sailing a toy boat in a tub of water.

Mohandas K. Gandhi was a short, thin, ailing, ugly, and frightened child, afraid especially of snakes, ghosts, and the dark.<sup>18</sup>

The theory of compensation that these figures supposedly exemplify begins with Alfred Adler, the third, least-known,

and shortest-lived member of the great therapeutic triumvirate of Freud, Jung, Adler. His studies of gifted personalities universalized the idea of compensation into a basic law of human nature. His evidence, gathered in art schools at the beginning of this century, claimed to show that 70 percent of art students had optical anomalies, and that there were degenerative traces in the ears of the great composers Mozart, Beethoven, and Bruckner.

According to the Adlerian theory, challenges of illness, birth defects, poverty, or other untoward circumstances in youth provide the stimulus for all higher achievements. Each person—in less spectacular fashion than the eminent and extraordinary—compensates for weaknesses with strengths, transforming inabilities into empowerment and control. The human mind is basically constituted to think in the constructs of strength/weakness, superior/inferior, striving to stay on top.<sup>19</sup>

The little anecdote of the Spanish dictator shows the more simple Adlerian notion of compensation. A more subtle and dangerous notion links it with the Freudian theory of sublimation. The Freudian theory holds that early weaknesses are transformed not simply into strengths, but into products of art and culture—at the bottom of which, nonetheless, are the dregs of early childhood wrongs that can be detected in the product as its true originating seed.

This pernicious mode of interpretation can be readily put to use: Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), who “invented” the drip calligraphy of abstract expressionist action painting. He painted on expansive white canvases, laying them on the floor and walking around and dripping colors from his brush as he moved, flinging interlacing arcs, wiggles, curves, and splotches, a vast tracery of rhythmic patterns. He is said to have said: “When I am painting, I am not aware of what I am doing.”

But the wise psychologist, of course, can trace Pollock's traces on white canvas back to a signal inferiority in child-

hood. The youngest of five brothers on a Wyoming farm, little Jackson was referred to by his brothers “as ‘baby’ up into his teenage years, and he *hated* it.”

Like most farmhands, the Pollock boys shunned the outhouse whenever possible, preferring to make evanescent designs on the nearest patch of dry, dusty ground [and white winter snow]. Young Jackson often saw his brothers urinating . . . competing to see who could reach farthest. Too young to compete, he would retreat to the outhouse . . . even to urinate—a habit that persisted for the rest of his life, even after he was old enough to make the same long yellow arcs his brothers made.<sup>20</sup>

Although the painter does not know what he is doing, every smart analytical psychobiographer does know! The later arcs are sublimations of piss marks in the dust, piss marks that have remained in the shamed unconscious of the artist. The analytical psychobiographer denies what the artist himself says (and therefore perhaps knows—that is, that he does not, perhaps cannot, know the invisible source of his work). Also, the interpreter ignores the meaning of the very word he relies on for the interpretation: “unconscious.” If you already know what the unconscious contains and what it is doing—sublimating phallic competition and sibling rivalry by action painting—then the source is not unconscious at all, and Pollock is implementing a program, proving a theory, of the psychobiographical interpretation.

A theory so degrading to inspiration deserves the derision I am giving it. Compensation theory kills the spirit, by robbing extraordinary persons and acts of their sui generis authenticity. Superiorities emerge from a lower source rather than expressing a more significant image. For, as almost every extraordinary life shows, there is a vision, an ideal that calls. To what precise actuality it calls usually stays vague if not altogether unknown.

If all superiorities are nothing more than overcompensated inferiorities, and all gifts but reformed wounds and weaknesses in nobler disguise, which can be unmasked by analytical acumen, then Franco is nothing but a short man, *really*, still caught in competing with his brothers, and Pollock, too, is but a "baby." They are nothing but the theory itself; and so too is everyone else, a "nothing but." There is no gift and there is no daimon who gives it. We are each alone on the planet, without an angel, subject to our hereditary flesh and all the oppressor's wrongs of family and circumstances, which only the willpower of a "strong ego" can overcome.

With compensation theory torched and discarded, let's go back and review from the perspective of the acorn theory the childhood characteristics of Gandhi, Stefansson, Peary, and Rommel, reading backward as we did with Manolete's early shyness. Gandhi was afraid of invisible presences and the dark because the daimon that held his destiny knew of the lathi charges and beatings, of the long imprisonments in dark cells, and knew that death would be his steady companion on the road. Assassination was written in Gandhi's script. Were Peary and Stefansson already rehearsing in their odd, childish ways the barren loneliness at the icy top of the world? And Rommel (who said to his son, "Even as an army captain I already knew how to command an army")<sup>21</sup>—perhaps that pale, slow, lazy, inattentive "white bear" of a boy was retreating in a kind of precognitive shell shock from the overwhelming artillery fire of El Alamein, the poundings and bombings he was to meet in two world wars, including the strafing that fractured his skull in Normandy and the suicidal poison the SS required him to take for his suspected part in the plot to kill Hitler.

Franco's pretentious posturing, too, can be reread less as an Adlerian compensation and more as a demonstration of the dignity of the daimon. "I am not a little baby-faced boy. I am El Caudillo of all Spain and must be accorded the respect of my calling." Whatever the calling—for not only

caudillos demand respect (murderers do, too, as we learn in the chapter on the Bad Seed)—the daimon stands in dignity. Don't dis the daimon. A child defends its daimon's dignity. That's why even a frail child at a "tender" age refuses to submit to what it feels is unfair and untrue, and reacts so savagely to abusive misperceptions. The idea of childhood abuse needs to be expanded beyond the sexual kind—which is so vicious not principally because it is sexual, but because it abuses the dignity at the core of personality, that acorn of myth.

#### MOTIVATION THEORY

Although I condemned the compensation theory of calling, the theory of motivation finds support in our anecdotal evidence. Eminent people whose lives present the most striking examples of calling are characterized, according to the study of creativity by Harvard professor of psychiatry Albert Rothenberg, by one supreme factor. He rules out intelligence, temperament, personality type, introversion, inheritance, early environment, inspiration, obsession, mental disorder: All these may or may not be present, may contribute, may be strongly dominant, but only motivation is "absolutely, *across the board*, present in all."<sup>22</sup>

Is not psychology's "motivation" the push in the acorn of the oak—or, better, the oakness of the acorn? Oaks bear acorns, but acorns are pregnant with oaks.

Motivation appears in odd ways, as indirectly as Eleanor Roosevelt's daydreams and as violently as in this story from the very early childhood—he was five—of Elias Canetti, a Bulgarian-born thinker and writer who was awarded a Nobel Prize for literature in 1981.

My father read the . . . *Neue Freie Presse* every day; it was a grand moment when he slowly unfolded it. . . . I tried to find out what it was that fascinated him in the news-