Human Development

Uniqueness unto Death

The unique human being, as described in the previous chapter, has a "geography," that is, an ecological context. One aspect of that geography was not elaborated, namely, the human surroundings of the human individual. The human species is itself very unique, but the most unique accomplishment on earth is the human individual whose uniqueness depends on interaction with other human beings. This chapter begins, therefore, with a discussion of interhuman geography, that is, the relation between the human individual and the human community.

In addition to examining this most central circle of biotic geography, the present chapter looks at the history of the human individual. From interaction with the entire biotic system, including other human beings, the individual person changes over time. Like other animals, the humans are born, they grow, they decline, they die. Nothing is more obvious than this steady and inexorable march from birth to death. And yet, behind the surface, there is a mysterious depth in the way each individual encounters the interval between birth and death.

The human beings are born unique; as indicated earlier, the phrase unique person is practically a redundancy. Meaning B of uniqueness emerged with the idea of person. However, the assertion of uniqueness always implies more unique (or more nearly unique) than something else. If the human individual is considered on its own, the comparison of uniquenesses can be between temporal versions of the same individual. The successful development of a human individual means that the person becomes more (nearly) unique in the course of his or her lifetime. The culmination of such unique development is the act of dying, which is the most unique of the individual's experiences.

This chapter has three preliminary sections that converge upon the fourth. The first section is a reflection on the relation between person and community. This relation is the precondition and the context of the individual's history. The second section is a reflection on the nature of time, particularly the contrasting meanings of uniqueness in relation to the present. The third section concerns the term development, one of the distinguishing words of the modern era; once again there are two sharply contrasting meanings of development. All three of these sections feed into the concluding reflection on human dying. In this last consideration, I introduce the Jewish and Christian symbol of resurrection, which I interpret to be the final affirmation of Meaning B of uniqueness.

In the sections on community and development, I draw some broad pictures of what constitutes human possibilities. I do so without offering scientific data or embracing one of the theories of "human development." It is not my wish to reject the helpful information about human individuals that has been pieced together in this century. However, I do resist the contemporary assumption that "human development" is a subset of the field of psychology. While I take what I can from psychology about how people develop, I assume that numerous fields of study are necessary for the full study of human development.

To the social or psychological expert, I make the same statement of limits I did to the experts on the Holocaust, Christian theology, and ecology. I am not pretending to be an expert who can substitute my voice for the voices that speak with authority in each of these areas. My interest in this chapter, as it is throughout the book, is to raise a single question of language. How does the term unique get used, and how better might it be used to clarify controversies in this area? As in the previous chapters, the distinction between Meanings A and B of uniqueness illuminates the question of development unto death.

PERSON AND COMMUNITY

Describing the ecological crisis in chapter 6, I said that one could interpret it as the triumph of Meaning A of uniqueness over Meaning B. Human beings are a confusing combination of the two uniquenesses. Within Meaning A, humans can never leave behind a concern for the exclusive control of their space; every human being resists a knife put into his or her ribs. However, this unavoidable concern needs to be placed within an overall attitude toward life that emphasizes receptivity and an ever-increasing inclusiveness.

When the context has been prepared and the person gives consent, the individual's identity is not threatened by the presence of other people, even if the other person is spatially very close. Indeed, entrance into one of the body's orifices and acceptance of such entrance can be among the pleasures of human life. This fact might suggest that the relation of men and women is one of the links in understanding the relation of human and nonhuman within Meaning B of uniqueness.
Much of ecological discussion is trapped in the categories of “man and nature.” This obscurantist phrase hides the fact that some men dominate other men, some men dominate women, and other oppressive relations operate within the abstraction of man.¹ There is an attitude inherent to the human condition, perhaps more prevalent among men than women, that says: My life needs preserving and protecting; the intruder must be repulsed and, if necessary, destroyed. When this attitude is let loose, it can overwhelm other considerations. The white European invaders, for example, had a more pronounced attitude of individualism, possessiveness, and aggression than did the North American natives; however, the latter group had their own share of death and destruction.

The language of “man and nature” provides no room for maneuvering and negotiating. Worse, it identifies the opponents as the human race on one side and all of (nonhuman) nature on the other. This picture implies that whatever warring there is within humanity is peripheral to the contest with nature, a distraction from the main war. In that case, the bears, elephants, and kangaroos should be worrying that the humans might settle their differences and stop their wars. Then a unified “man” could launch the final assault to control “nature.”

The above reasoning is a possible interpretation of how intra-species and inter-species conflicts are related, but it seems to me all wrong. The attitude within “man” that leads to indiscriminate destruction works its havoc on human and nonhuman alike. Human wars are not kind to the ecological system; conversely, kindness and compassion between human beings is not especially dangerous to most animals. There are situations in which otherwise kind human beings are oblivious to the sufferings of many animals, but that is a problem of ignorance that can be corrected.

A human grasping for the wrong kind of uniqueness will lead an individual to strike out at feared competitors, whether the recipient of violence is man, woman, child, or cat. A human individual who does this is often described as acting like an animal or a wild beast. The accusation is unfair to the animals. The violent lunge after uniqueness is specifically human; it springs from a heightened rationality that is at war with its own biological basis. Rape, for example, as is now generally accepted, is not an overflow of animal eroticism; it is a highly rational act of violence to ward off a perceived threat from some stereotype of female control.

I would therefore posit that the relation of person and community is not the opposite of the relation of “man and beast.” Indeed, there is much that can be learned about human relations by studying human–nonhuman and nonhuman–nonhuman relations. Humans have to learn that their most important uniqueness does not depend on their being bigger and tougher than the other animals. And each human individual has to learn a similar lesson as he or she grows up among humankind; pretentious claims to superiority are not the best policy. A man can say to his dog: “I’m unique and you’re not.” The man gets no argument, even though the statement is inaccurate. He perhaps feels comforted by thinking himself superior to his dog. But if he says to his brother-in-law, “I’m unique and you’re not,” he could get an earful in return. When this issue of a unique self surfaces in childhood, it is one of the greatest problems confronting the fragile person: How can I be myself if there are billions of people who are just like me?

I would think there would be numerous studies of this issue of uniqueness in individual development. The issue is implied in many social and psychological studies, but the theme of uniqueness and the paradox in the term uniqueness are seldom treated at length. One of the few full-length studies is Uniqueness: The Human Pursuit of Difference.² The authors, Snyder and Franklin, refer at the beginning of the book to an “apparent paradox,” but the paradox is real, not apparent.³ That is, people have a desperate need to be the same as other human beings (no one wishes to be inhuman) and at the same time different (to be a self). This real paradox (an apparent contradiction) cannot be resolved by human beings; they have to learn to live with the paradox. Meaning B of uniqueness is the best way to understand this paradox.

The problem that the book addresses has become more acute in recent centuries, perhaps especially in the last few decades. Both sides of the paradox have been continually heightened. The gospel of the individual is incessantly proclaimed. “I’ve gotta be me” is drilled into the individual from infancy. At the same time, much of the effect of modern industrialization and technology is toward homogenization. Sheer quantity alone becomes a problem if the individual is trying to find a mark, a characteristic, an expression of personal style that no one else has. The person might seem to be succeeding in being different within the family or the neighborhood, but can he or she really withstand comparison to five or six billion?

The pressure to maintain a difference can obstruct the individual from experiencing whatever self he or she does have. Philip Slater writes: “In a society that places a value on individualism, this inability to experience oneself leads paradoxically to a cry for more uniqueness, more eccentricity, more individualization, thus increasing the symptoms.”⁴ Slater equates uniqueness with eccentricity, a term that usually has a negative meaning. To the extent that Meaning A is assumed, then eccentricity is the most likely outcome. Striving to be different, to maintain some spark of originality in dress, hair color, earrings, size of house, make of car, length of weapon, and so forth, succeeds only in throwing a person off center (ec-centric) in human terms. In contrast, Meaning B of uniqueness situates the individual more and more toward the center of the whole human race.

The thesis of Snyder and Franklin is that people are characterized by “a striving to maintain a moderate sense of dissimilarity relative to other people.”⁵ This formulation does very little to unravel the complexity of the problem. The authors never seem to sense the paradox within the very idea of uniqueness. They continually refer to the pursuit of uniqueness. If one sticks to Meaning A of uniqueness, then pursue is what one does. Even if
one eventually discovers that the pursuit is illusory. Meaning B of uniqueness comes into play only when we stop seeking.

The paradox of finding by not seeking is central to both Jewish and Christian traditions; terms such as grace or salvation point to this experience. Not just in the modern era, though perhaps especially here, individuals seek to rise above all others in accomplishments and to secure complete control of their lives. In religious terms, they seek salvation by ordering life according to a preestablished structure of rules of success.

The religious experience consists of a change of heart, a realization that we have been encountering the world with the wrong attitudes. The most intense moments of life—experiences of compassion, love, suffering, bereavement—shake us out of our illusory assumption that our lives are under the control of the human will. As the beauty of the world, the suffering of humanity, and the sense of our own mortality are received into the center of our personal beings, Meaning B of uniqueness emerges. How does one maintain a sense of difference? By forgetting about that problem and allowing all the similarities to flow into one’s life. The interweaving of all these similarities is the way an individual becomes distinctive. The greater the immersion in the common qualities of humankind, the greater the unmistakable and unique identity of the person.

The relation of similarity and difference is not a zero-sum game. When compassion, love, power—indeed any genuine human characteristic—is shared, the result is increase rather than diminishment. The personal uniqueness of Meaning B does not depend on fending off competitors to human possessions. Instead, it depends on recognition that personal existence is a gift of the human community and that one’s life is an embodying of all humanity. The first thing called for is gratitude.

Person and community, therefore, are reciprocal categories; they grow together and are diminished together. Persons make up a community, and communities are composed of persons. The more one becomes a person, the greater is the community. A community is that form of unity in which persons are differentiated by becoming united. Where there is no community, there are no persons; instead, there are individuals who do not recognize a universal humanity within themselves.

When community is weak or broken, one often hears the call for heroes, powerful individuals who can rise above the rest of us and show the way. I think one has to approach with skepticism the oft-heard question: Where have all the heroes gone? Perhaps what we really need are not a few super individuals (traditionally, male individuals), but thousands or millions of persons who, in becoming unique within their communities, offer moral guidance to their own people. Occasionally, such ordinary courage rooted in ordinary communities will inspire a wider response; ancient figures like Jesus or Gautama, contemporaries like King or Gandhi are ready examples.

The uniqueness of the person is not something to be followed, as if the solution to one’s own life could be found by mechanically imitating a hero or leader. However, the uniqueness of a highly developed person offers endless instructive examples for those who are willing to listen and respond in their own way. This point is misunderstood by Theodore Roszak in saying: “Uniqueness provides no grounds for contest or comparison—only for self evaluation.” Meaning A suggests that there is nothing to compare: my self is not your self. But the uniqueness of Meaning B invites comparison with all unique people, from each of whom we could learn something.

The author of a book on mid-life crisis begins with the premise: “I have made a deliberate attempt in this book to avoid using examples and case studies. The reason for this is that people tend to follow examples, but you and your life are unique.” I think the fallacy in this statement is obvious. Precisely because one’s life is unique, storytelling and examples are the closest that an author can get to providing directions for personal life. The only alternative is a lot of preaching and scientific generalities.

UNIQUE PRESENTS

This section is an excursion into the nature of time, a meditation that is needed before we can look at the question of lifelong development. Theories of human development always presuppose some image of time; in fact, theories about almost anything do. If one does not examine the image of time, then the culture’s dominant image of time is likely to control the discussion. In the terms of this book, that image of time will be associated with Meaning A of uniqueness. Meaning B of uniqueness will not be denied; it simply will not get a hearing.

I have dealt with time in several of the previous chapters. In those places, I considered time within the large patterns of Jewish and Christian history. In this chapter, I am narrowing the focus to individual human development. To an extent, therefore, this chapter applies to the individual what has been said about the historical group.

There is also some application in the opposite direction, a movement that might throw light on confusion about the meaning of history. It is generally said that Judaism and Christianity are historical religions, with the usual implication that other religions are not. However, prominent Jewish, Christian, and other voices issue forth with both the assertion and the contrast. When one gets deeply into this debate, it becomes apparent that history and historical are very complex terms. Many different questions get mixed together under the aegis of history/historical.

I have no intention of taking on this whole debate. I view this chapter as a step back from history to a simpler issue that is part of the problem. My sole interest in this section is the individual’s encounter with time. What does it mean for a person to experience the present? I argue that there are two main possibilities. Either the individual experiences the present as an isolated moment between a past that has disappeared and a future that has not arrived, or the present is experienced as gathering up and giving unit...
ulating the past, with the future experienced as the quickening possibilities of the present. The first image of time is Meaning A of uniqueness; the second is Meaning B. As is always true of uniqueness, both experiences are limit cases. No one experiences the present as a totally isolated moment, although a psychopath is a person who approaches that limit. Likewise, no one totally gathers all experience into the present, although some people in the act of dying may approach that limit.

**UNIQUE PRESENT: MEANING A**

I will now sketch out with a few more details each meaning of uniqueness in relation to time, especially to the present. Because Meaning A envelops us in the modern western world, the problem is not one of describing this image but of convincing people that it is an image, and it is an image that much of the world does not assume. To this day there are people who resist this image, and there are voices in the late twentieth century warning us that we cannot continue indefinitely with this image. Nonetheless, our modern mechanized and technological world is practically unthinkable without this image of time.

The fundamental characteristic of this image is that of a two-dimensional line. Often it is assumed (especially in Christian theology) that the choice of image for time is between a circle and a straight line. Actually, these two are slight variations on the same linear image found throughout western history. Circular imagery was popular during the Renaissance period; far from being a sign of pessimism, the circle represented a hope that the glories of the past were not lost.

In the modern period, the circle became straightened out into a horizontal line. The line had need of an arrow to indicate the direction of the future. The idea of future, as a distinct segment of time, was thus invented, and with it the dream (or dogma) of progress. The nineteenth century’s mass production of timepieces confirmed the social reality of a time that consists of a present moment, a past that is disappearing at the rate of sixty seconds a minute, and a future which has not arrived. In the late twentieth century, the digital clock is finally eliminating the vestiges of a circular movement to time.

The word that goes with present in this image is moment, a disappearing point between past and future. In mathematical terms, the present is a one-dimensional point that does not exist on its own. But if the past is no more, the future is not yet, and the present never really is here to stay, where is a human being (or a nonhuman animal) to stand? The answer is that no one should stand still; everyone should run toward the future. “Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that constantly recedes before us. But no matter, tomorrow we shall run faster, stretch out our arms farther...”

This image of time can be viewed as an optimistic one, especially at the macro level. The nineteenth century was convinced that “the golden age of the human species is not behind us, it is before us.” Although generations of immigrants who came to the United States were disappointed at what they found, they were sustained by the fervent belief that “life will be better for our children.” Usually, their hopes were not entirely misplaced; life did become better in terms of less labor, more pleasure, longer lives. But despite this seeming progress of society, the individual still confronts the inevitable cycle: birth, growth, decline, death.

If time is experienced as only a series of points, then the individual seems caught in a losing situation. Within the time of Meaning A, the individual speaks of time saved, spent, wasted, lost, made up, slowed down; eventually, however, time “runs out.” Society may be playing a winning game, but the individual always loses. From the first moment, the individual can sense that the cards are fixed. A character in a Samuel Beckett play says: “Two and a half billion seconds. Hard to believe so few.” The irony, of course, is that two and one-half billion is hardly “so few.” But in the context of this image, another billion seconds would be no more satisfying. The real problem is that one can run until tired, and then all one can do is wait. “Do you believe in the life to come?” asks Clov in Beckett’s *Endgame*. “Mine was always that,” replies Hamm. “Moment by moment, pattering down, like the millet grains... and all life you wait for that to mount up to a life.”

Samuel Beckett’s image of time as grains of sand or millets of wheat expresses nature’s insistence that time cannot be reduced to one-dimensional points. “Time doesn’t pass, don’t pass from you, why it piles up all about you... it buries you grain by grain... buried under the sand, saying any old thing, your mouth full of sand.” While humans keep talking about leaving the past behind them, the past comes up to cover them. The characters in Beckett’s plays and novels stubbornly wait, but they have no idea what or whom they are waiting for. In the image of time in which their lives are caught, waiting is all they can do.

**UNIQUE PRESENT: MEANING B**

Beckett’s picture of the modern individual cannot be put aside; it is a powerful indictment of the contemporary scene. Philosopher William Barrett, late in life, wrote: “We might indicate the religious task of our time in the following way: How to let prayer re-enter the world of Samuel Beckett (which is where modernity leads us finally).” I would interpret this task of “let prayer re-enter” to mean a change in the way people encounter the present, a change that includes an interiority of life, an acceptance of bodiliness, and a reestablishing of genuine interpersonal relations. All of these changes are indicated by the symbols of depth and centeredness.

In Meaning B of uniqueness, the present is best imagined as the center of a sphere. The image has to be three-dimensional. ...
not a disappearing point along a line but rather the convergence of lines at the center of a sphere. The first meaning of present is not moment, but a relation, or a matrix of relations. To be present is to be in the presence of. To be present is to be oneself, but that requires the presence of others, both human and nonhuman. To live in the present is to resist the temptation to flee from one’s body, one’s people, one’s place, and other dimensions of one’s finitude.

Where in this image of time is the past imagined to be? It is deposited in one’s body, and is the ground one stands on. An individual’s past experiences have not disappeared “behind the back.” For the time-full self, the past is still present. The attempt to flee from what is painful in our past can only tie us more firmly to past failure. “All that we have felt, thought and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness that would fail leave it outside.”

The present of the individual person also contains the past of his or her people: family, tribe, nation, ultimately all humanity. From this vast, unimaginable storehouse, what comes into the light of consciousness is usually what has been gathered up, preserved, and ritualized by previous generations. The statement that Judaism or Christianity is a historical religion can easily mask the important truth that Judaism and Christianity are religions of the present, a present that includes the past. They are religions of tradition, of memory, of a living God who speaks in the present.

In this image of time, what happened ten centuries ago may be closer to the surface than what happened ten years ago. In tradition’s view, the measure of what is important is not finally determined by “the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who happen to be walking about.” Of course, if the world of a thousand or three thousand years ago is to have its voice heard, then particular rituals must be observed by a community and by individuals who willingly participate in such exercises.

Jewish tradition is unexcelled in this awareness of the past that lives within the present. The Talmud advises: “In each and every generation, let each person regard himself as though he had emerged from Egypt.” Yosef Yerushalmi explains this Jewish attitude by saying: “The historical events of the biblical period remain unique and irreversible. Psychologically, however, those events are experienced cyclically, repetitively, and to that extent, at least, atemporally.” I would put the matter a little differently: The uniqueness of personal experience today is dependent on the unique biblical experiences whose meaning is still present. The image is best captured in the observance of Sabbath, a strange celebration of nonactivity, but one that centers the cleaving unto God throughout the work week.

What of the future? There is less to say of it than of the past, but some kind of orientation toward the future is an indispensable dimension of the present. In Jewish and Christian terms, the future exists as promise, as that which is hoped for. The future as a segment of a time line, something to be planned for and speculated upon, can be a dangerous distraction. But this modern invention could be worthwhile if it does not diminish the present or obliterate the past. Now that the idea of a future has spread throughout most of the world, societies do need some hope that life can be improved.

For the individual, the future exists at the mysterious juncture of the deposit of the past and the imagination of novelty. The past controls the future, though not entirely; the individual can gently reshape what the past offers as a gift. The future also controls the past to the extent that the meaning of the past has not reached its conclusion. The death of Jesus or the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem are still to be determined in meaning; the same is true of the bombing of Hiroshima or the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr.

It can be plausibly argued that the central virtue of Christianity and Judaism is hope; faith is a kind of hoping. Twentieth-century thinkers from Heidegger to Beckett have emphasized waiting. Waiting can imply a degree of hope, but the waiting needs a present experience of oneself, one’s neighbors, and a sense of the All. If the present is rich enough in meaning, then the future becomes promise. Religions attempt to sustain hope in the face of evidence to the contrary. The issue of religion, wrote W. P. Montague, “is whether the things we care for most are at the mercy of the things we care for least.”

The individual’s difficulty is that no matter what glossy pictures are painted of the world’s long-range future, the individual’s future is death within a few score years. When time is understood as a series of points, then the movement toward death is almost of necessity a march of despair. Erik Erikson describes despair as the feeling that one is running out of time. But many people do not experience the approach of death this way. They have discovered from religion or somewhere else a meaning of time in which the present is constantly being enriched by the past; they are content with the day. “He who lives with a sense of the present,” writes Abraham Heschel, “knows that to get older does not mean to lose time but rather to gain time.” One sinks into the middle of time, toward the center of the world. “And do not call it fixity, where past and future are gathered.”

**UNIQUE DEVELOPMENTS**

The term development is not only a modern word, it is one of the terms that defines modernity. Evolution and progress are its closest kin, but both of those words have remained restricted in application and open to debate. *Development*, in contrast, has continued to become more widely used from psychology to economics; and almost no voice can be heard in opposition to the idea of development.

The modern idea of development arose in *rebellion against a scholarly convention.* This endeavor was manifestly opposed to the spirit of 19th-century positivism. Evolution theory was taken up with renewed vigor. Development became a commodity, a universal good, a means to an end. But through the lens of change, the forms of the past were reinterpreted as prototypes and models. Evolution was given a new and more plausible meaning: the principle of development, if it was to be made compatible with the new Darwinist vision of evolution, needed to be made to mean progress in a direction rather than simply a succession of changes. This idea was expanded by Herbert Spencer, who, in his *The Principles of Science*, proposed that the world is moving toward an end state of perfect organization. The scientific study of development, as seen by Spencer, is the science of the world's progress. Spencer's ideas were widely accepted and continue to influence our understanding of development today.
world with a preordained end. In the age dominated by medieval Christianity, the emphasis was on a fair distribution of the world's goods and the salvation of the individual soul. There was a path of success leading to heaven, and there was the alternative of total failure: not finding the path at all.

Under the influence of numerous forces—not especially the discovery of new lands, the rise of empirical science, and its attendant technology—the idea that life could be improved here and now. Christianity and Judaism had oriented history toward God. The project of modernity was to retain the arrow forward while liberating humanity from the endpoint of God and heaven. With a new way of looking at wealth as something that can be increased or developed, the modern world had an alternative to an endpoint, namely, the indefinite expansion of goods.

Psychologists arrived rather late on the scene of development. But starting in the late nineteenth century, development became individualized; each human person was now seen to undergo a process of “growth and development,” the two words becoming almost synonymous. Jean Piaget and others showed how the development of mental capacities in the child paralleled physical growth. For a long time, and to some extent even today, development was applied only to children; “human development” became a subdivision of child psychology.

The restriction of development to the child was almost a self-contradiction. Development does not have an endpoint, even one called adulthood. The individual has to be freed from any preordained path that would limit his or her growth. Slowly but surely, the idea of development has spread to mid-life and finally to elderhood. Middle-aged men go through their crisis of mid-life development; middle-aged women demand liberation from a fixed track of dependency. And now the old wish to be liberated and to have the means to live free and independent lives.

As in the previous section on time, I will briefly describe the two meanings of uniqueness in relation to development. One can readily see the parallel between images of time and the understanding of development. Both meanings of time and development have their roots in Jewish and Christian history. Even at their narrowest, Jewish and Christian traditions had a sense of unique individuals who were called to greatness. Modern secular thinkers have tried to throw off the confinement of the religious tradition while retaining the sense of unique human individuals.

Modern developmental theory can, therefore, be the chief competitor to Judaism and Christianity. But as in the ecological question, a deeper strand of Jewish and Christian traditions may reveal that the religious and secular approaches need each other's help. As ecological imagery needs the humans at the center for a responsible ecological system, so development needs a cyclical or conversionary movement on the part of the individual.

At their best, Christianity and Judaism call the individual to a unique development, a circling about a center. This kind of movement is ultimately the only way to be liberated from the control of either an endpoint or an ecologically disastrous image of unlimited expansion. What counts is the richest, deepest sense of life in the present. Modern secular thinkers attack the idea that this life is merely a test for which one is rewarded at the end. What most secular thinkers seem unaware of is that prophets, saints, and mystics throughout the centuries have made the same protest. 32

**Meaning A**

Development, within Meaning A of uniqueness, assumes that the individual is not yet differentiated from the mass at life’s beginning. The task of development is an increasing differentiation that ultimately places the individual on one time line unlike anyone else’s. Zvi Lamm describes this development:

The realization of what is human in the individual is the realization of what is unique and different in him. To develop means to advance along the road leading to this differentiation. Uniqueness cannot be predicted or planned. Educating the individual toward self-actualization means educating him without any ready-made models that he must try to emulate. 33

The absence of ready-made models is, from one perspective, liberating. But having no one to emulate also means an increasing isolation of the individual. The little boy is to become his own independent self, disregarding previous history and present society that tempt him with ready-made models. Every man is to be Robinson Crusoe. 34

The little boy’s problem is to detach himself from the mother and hold his ground against the father. If he repeats that process with every other power that seeks to control him, he will become an autonomous man. Meaning A of uniqueness implies separation, independence, and autonomy. Negatively considered, uniqueness can mean disconnectedness, isolation, and loneliness. One is distanced from the moments of one’s own life.

This negative side to autonomy has generated considerable criticism from women during the last two decades. They argue that theories of human development have been theories of male development. 35 Most powerfully in Freud, but even in a writer like Erikson, the little boy’s search for separation and autonomy skews the issue of human development. Little girls, for better or worse, do not separate from the mother or confront the father the way boys do. Women argue that even for men there is a need to reconsider the emphasis upon independence and autonomy, the extraordinary claim that a man is whatever he makes himself to be. The following description of “man's development” is not untypical: “A human life is composed of performances, and each performance is a disclosure of a man's essential nature.”

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about himself and the world and an exploit in self-enactment. He is what he becomes; he has a history but no 'nature'. This history is not an evolutionary process or a teleological engagement."36

In this author's determination to fight the confinement of fixed nature and the oppression of a teleological point of control, he is thrown into the opposites, namely, performance, self-enactment, and a man's life being what he becomes. Perhaps there are other choices besides dependence versus independence, nature versus history, teleology versus self-enactment. It is almost impossible to imagine a woman writing the above passage, not just because of the male pronouns but because the imagery is so foreign to women's experience.

If one is born male, healthy, white, and rich, development within Meaning A of uniqueness is certainly attractive. The only question is whether one can exercise sufficient reason and will to become the independent self that is so desirable. When one starts with all the advantages of gender, race, education, health, and wealth, the development of an autonomous self is not really so difficult. The man becomes more unique, an isolated self with the power to control his wife, his children, his dog, his employees, his time, his cash flow, his body. The arrow goes forward and upward; each self-enacted moment seeks to be an increase over the previous ones.

Even for the most advantaged man, however, this theory of unique development eventually shows its limits. In fact, it is the successful man who is often hardest hit by male mid-life crisis. The trigger may be the death of a friend or the first heart attack; man is mortal. The occasion may be rebellion by his wife or his teenage daughter; man is not in complete control. The man senses in his own body that he is no longer on the ascent. Within the confines of his imagery, the only way he can see himself moving is downward, away from a uniquely autonomous self to a dependent and blunted selfhood.

Sometimes it is said that middle-aged men fear they are running out of time; this description misses the point of the imagery. The man's real problem is that he sees years and decades stretching out before him—all of them running downhill. He has believed since infancy that life is supposed to keep going up to better and better things. But this construct of a lifetime can be shattered in the course of an hour. Now the man needs a new meaning for "unique self." The meaning can come from voices within his own body, as well as the voices of his wife, his children, his elders, or anyone else who has been pressed to discover another meaning of uniqueness.37

Meaning B

In Meaning B of unique development, a person is born with a unique self. It is the gift of previous generations, of one's parents, of the cosmos, of God. One is also called by these forces to become more unique, that is, a more nearly unique self. A sixth-century Christian author wrote: "God is really wonderful and extremely wise in having distinguished each of his creatures by a unique disposition lest unseemly confusion overwhelm them."38 The Jewish and Christian doctrine of creation does not refer to an isolated fact at the beginning of things. It refers, instead, to the continuing support of this "unique disposition."

Where Christian and Jewish thought sometimes erred was in thinking that God provides a unique self and that the individual's task is simply to hold on to it. But the unique self is called to develop into a more (nearly) unique self. In the language of Irenaeus, each human being is born an imago of God and is called to become a similitudo.39 The child is already related to the cosmos; its vocation is to transform those relations so that the world consciously and freely flows into his or her person. This process takes time; it includes the bad days as well as the good. If the process is successful, each stage of life recapitulates all of one's previous life.

Each stage of life has its own uniqueness; there is no need to press forward to the next step. A child ought to be allowed to be a child, neither a minor version of an adult nor a station on the way to adulthood. The teenage period, at least in the modern era, is most in tension with a uniqueness of continuous development. Emerging from childhood, one is tempted to try eliminating the past and inventing oneself anew. A great danger is that the uniqueness that teenager adolescents seek can turn into the model for a whole society when it fails to appreciate the unique stages of middle age and elderhood.

Adolescence has perhaps gotten a bad name by being totally identified with teenagers. Adolescence means becoming adult; if there is such a thing as lifelong development, then everyone is an adolescent. One can reach greater degrees of adulthood, but one can never reach a fixed state or final point called "adult." This theory of development and adulthood seems, in fact, to be working in its way into the contemporary world. Middle-aged men are sometimes embarrassed to be having experiences similar to those of their children; they need not be. Even seventy-year-olds may be thinking of getting new work and finding a sexual partner. Such things were once associated with teenagers, who were allowed a period of changeableness before they were supposed to settle down in their twenties.

If everyone becomes an adolescent, would that not be a disaster? That depends on which set of adolescent characteristics predominates. On the positive side, adolescence can mean fluidity, spontaneity, and openness to the future; life has not been fixed into a final form. Unfortunately, however, adolescence can also mean instability, emotionalism, and a flight from one's past. Teenaged adolescents remain especially vulnerable to such chaos unless they have older adolescents to provide encouraging examples and advice.

Forty-year-old adolescents should have stability without rigidity, be affective without being irrational, and recognize that the future is the past reshaped. The forty-year-old adolescent should be able to look to seventy-
year-old adolescents who have further developed into stable and unique selves. A forty- or a seventy-year-old who is still just experimenting with sexual partners may be a case of retarded development, but the rest of us adolescents should be slow to judge the success or failure of a person’s life. In any case, by the time of eldership, people should be more unique than teenagers or young adults. Even dependencies that resurface in old age can be a sign of the uniqueness that relates us to the whole universe.

Can the human race, or even a major part of it, succeed in doing away with a fixed point at the end while retaining meaningful direction and order? The answer is not yet clear. What is needed for success is the experiencing of end (direction, purpose, meaning) in everything we do. These ends are found in the interior of our selves, in the middle of communal activity, in our relation to the center of the cosmos. As for an ultimate end that orders everything, it can only be imagined as the mathematical center of a sphere. This center point orients movement, even though the point itself is never reached.

In religious terms, God is the fixed point of meaning at the center (not the termination point) of life. Meister Eckhart and other mystics have used at times shocking formulas to deny that God is a reward at the end of the line. A contemporary Catholic monk, after saying that God is no-thing, writes: “God is the direction in which we go in our quest for meaning.”

The lifelong quest is important, but God will not be found as an object. God is the direction which emerges as one practices justice and love. The practicing of such virtue is not done for the reward but because the activities are worth doing. From the time of the Pharisees onward, Jews and Christians have been told to do things “for the sake of the thing itself.” God is discovered or revealed in silence, in rituals of remembrance, in acts of compassion, in the refusal to accept evil as the final condition.

A MOST UNIQUE EXPERIENCE

The culminating test of the meanings of uniqueness is the experience of dying, or the sense of mortality that is implicit from the beginning and may blossom at any stage of life. How we deal with vulnerability in our lives and the lives of those we love prepares the context in which we have what is likely to be our most unique experience: dying. Thus, the attitude toward death that I describe in this section cannot have its development postponed until old age. The hour of our birth is the hour of our beginning to die. To each arriving infant, the sign is posted: “Welcome to earth; the death rate here is 100%. One out of one dies.”

John Hick notes that the presence of death in human life brings about a uniqueness, or rather a double uniqueness, in comparison to other animals: The individual knows that he or she is going to die, and, in an important sense, he or she doesn’t believe it. To the extent that Meaning A of uniqueness governs one’s life, death must be banished from consciousness.

The individual believes that he or she is immortal, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Other animals cannot foresee their own deaths and are therefore saved from denying their mortality. Human beings are pressed to deny death because to go on with daily life seems unbearable if all the struggles are in vain, if the joy as well as the sorrow ultimately counts for nothing. Tolstoy wrote in his Confession that “the most basic question of life—the simplest kind of question, and one which is lying in the soul of every man, from the silliest child to the wisest old man is the question: ‘Is there in my life a meaning which would not be destroyed by my inevitable, imminent death?’”

In recent decades, an attempt has been made to bring the topic of death out into the open, to reverse a century or more of near silence on the issue. This new “speaking about death”—thanatology—is unavoidably in danger of chattering on about life’s most mystery laden experience. Thanatology is sometimes accused of romanticizing death into something positive that can be lovingly embraced. Dying would then be one more pleasant and interesting experience.

Paul Ramsey, understandably upset at some of the trivializing talk, wrote an essay entitled “The Indignity of ‘Death and Dignity’.” In it, Ramsey argues: “To deny the indignity of death requires that the dignity of men be refused also. The more acceptable in itself death is, the less the worth or uniqueness ascribed to the dying life.” Ramsey’s reaction is distorted by his simple opposition between “accepting death” and “unique life.” Accepting death need not mean praising it or eagerly seeking it. The acceptance of death can mean that one finally recognizes life and death are not opposites, and that life becomes unique precisely in the acceptance of death.

The connection between a unique human life and the acceptance of death is captured in the final paragraph of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s classic, On Death and Dying:

Watching a peaceful death of a human being reminds us of a falling star, one of the million lights in a vast sky that flares up for a brief moment only to disappear into the endless night forever. To be a therapist to a dying patient makes us aware of the uniqueness of each individual in this vast sea of humanity. It makes us aware of our finiteness, our limited lifespan. Few of us live beyond our three score and ten years and yet in that brief time most of us create and live a unique biography and weave ourselves into the fabric of human history.

Kübler-Ross in this passage uses the word unique in two metaphorical contexts: a falling star and the weaving of a fabric. I think that her second metaphor for the individual’s unique biography—“weave ourselves into the fabric of human history”—assumes Meaning B of uniqueness and is appropriate for her intentions. Kübler-Ross’s first image of a falling star, flaring...
for a moment, tends toward Meaning A of uniqueness, thereby evacuating
the meaning that she has been dealing with throughout the book. The
controlling metaphor for the relation of life and death is crucial to the
meaning of human uniqueness. Death becomes a ratification of the unique-
ness that the individual has lived.

In Meaning A of uniqueness, life is understood to be a quest for auton-
omy, independence, and control. Within this meaning, the individual is
separated from the body, the present is separated from the past, and life
is separated from death. These separations are never completed, but each
moment, event, occasion, performance, self-invention, can be a striving
toward splendid and solitary isolation. This search for total independence
must put death out of mind, but it does not succeed in eliminating death
from life. This way of life can lead to a cruel “last moment” in which dying
is experienced as the ultimate aloneness. In Meaning A, the most unique
and most isolated moment is the act of dying.

Meaning B, in contrast, is movement toward communion throughout all
of life. Love and care for particular beings during life prepare one for a
greater communion that is beyond imagination, though not beyond hope.
Dying is not the last moment but the central experience, the revelation of
our interdependence with all creation. Most people do not embrace death
as something desirable; they accept death because their experience has led
them to the conclusion that living and dying are not separate processes.
Dying is what each being does in small ways every day; living is what buds
forth from death.

For the individual to sustain this second meaning of uniqueness, in which
dying is entrance into deeper communion, the social context should reflect
this meaning. People ought to be able to die among the living; they ought
to be able to sink into the center of a human community and a cycle of
nonhuman life. A problem today is that people die in hospitals surrounded
by or hooked up to machines. Modern medicine can be a great benefit;
there is nothing glorious about dying in excruciating pain. However, we are
only starting to develop an ethic to deal with the mechanizing and indefinite
prolongation of the act of dying. Both Jewish and Christian traditions sup-
port an ethic in which the dying are allowed to die. In Meaning B of
uniqueness, biological death is not the worst of happenings; it is something
to be accepted when most of the signs in the present point to its appro-
priateness.

Some of the most creative thinking on death in Christian theology
has been done by Karl Rahner. He combined the traditional Christian belief
that “Christ redeems us by his death” with twentieth-century thinking,
especially Heidegger’s, that “man is a being unto death.” In Rahner’s
theology, death is not a last point on the line; it is the guiding presence in
all of life and the final recapitulation of individual existence. One’s life
moves toward either greater isolation or deeper communion; the act of
dying reveals what may have been unclear about the journey and gives us
a final chance to ratify or reject the choice. Each of us can die alone, or
we can die with humanity. In Christian theological terms, dying in com-
munion with all means dying “in Christ.” Jesus’ life was summed up and
ratified by his death; each person’s death is the most nearly unique expe-
rience that recapitulates one’s previous experience. One is freed from
limited communion for greater communion; at death one becomes not a-cosmic
but pan cosmic.

Karl Rahner’s work provides a theological interpretation of the meaning
of death and resurrection. But if one tries to turn this interpretive idea into
an empirical description of each person’s conscious experience, then one
goes beyond the evidence. Also, one may be adding an unnecessary burden
on the individual who is approaching death. Although many people who
have brushed with death say “my whole life flashed before me,” there is
no persuasive evidence that each person has to make one great decision
about his or her life at the moment of dying. “Christianity must always
remain realistic, even about death, and should refuse to increase its burden.
Therefore, it will not demand a surcharge of fantasy at the very moment
when that is least possible.”

The belief that “death is not god” is surely one of the most universal
religious beliefs, if not the foundation of religion itself. All religions reject
the notion that dying is simply the last of a series of points. Rather, death
is summation and transition, a revelation of what life is for. Jews often
criticize Christians for glorifying death and for teaching that this life is
merely a trial for getting into heaven. Christianity and Judaism over the
centuries have moved apart on this issue, but the differences are a matter
of emphases within a commonality of belief.

Christianity, more than Judaism, has been tempted to deny the unique-
ness of the person, that is, the temporal, bodily, communal, ecological unity
of human existence. The temptation is to negate death by imagining that
the human being is really not a person but a spirit held captive in a bodily
prison. Death in this picture is liberation from the body. In this earthly life,
one is not inclined to struggle for justice; all supposed progress is illusory.

The other way to cope with death is to see existence as a constant
transformation of life into death, death into life. The individual’s bodily
death is a stage in this transformation. The Christian and Jewish term for
the affirmation of life in spite of real death is resurrection. Instead of
describing some other world, resurrection is a negative, or more precisely,
a double negative term. It affirms life by negating the negation of life,
especially those theories that the human being is not a bodily unit in the
first place. Resurrection, according to Rahner, “only forbids in a negative
sense the exclusion of particular elements of man from the outset as of no
consequence for his final state.” Thus, the secular critics of the idea that
“we change horses and ride on” are not necessarily opposed to the Jewish
and Christian doctrine of resurrection.

Like most things Christian, resurrection was a Jewish idea before it

became central to Christian teaching about Jesus. In writing about Jesus in chapter 5, I barely adverted to this claim, even though it came first in the preaching of the Christian gospel. In our day, introducing the term resurrection without ample preparation is likely to turn the referent for this belief into a magic trick. The problem is not, as Bultmann claimed—that no one can believe in the resurrection after the invention of the electric light bulb—but that the meaning of resurrection has always demanded a communal and cosmic context that has seldom been available. The ground for such a meaning may be stronger today than in most of the previous 2200 years.

There is no doubt that the early Christians saw resurrection as central: “The unique claim of Jesus upon his followers is sealed by the fact that he was raised from the dead.”52 The Christians did not invent the term or the hope that it represents. Resurrection seems to have arisen in Judaism with the beginnings of Pharisaism several centuries before the common era. A God who lovingly cares for all creation and every human individual cannot allow death to be the final statement. In some sense, all of life must be “saved.”

The announcement of Jesus’ resurrection was to an audience already familiar with the term. Such a resurrection stood within Jewish tradition, but with one discrepancy: “If you had the faith of the Pharisees, his appearance would have startled you, but it would not have surprised you. You would have been stunned chiefly that he was alone.”53 The announcement “Christ is risen” was and is premature; what the first Christians believed was that Jesus had risen (or was raised) as the first fruits or downpayment for the resurrection of the whole Christ.

Many people, including some Jews, think that resurrection is a Christian term. Thus it is assumed that Christians believe in “life after death” but Jews do not. I have acknowledged a difference of emphasis in the two traditions, but the two need not be contradictory. Christians could learn from Jews to celebrate the only life and only world we know as the way to affirm resurrection. Jews could learn from Christians not to close the gate on a belief that is embedded in Jewish tradition, even though the belief has often been used to devalue the joys and struggles of this life.

What Jews and Christians should be able to agree upon is that the meaning of resurrection has to arise out of experience in the present. More particularly, resurrection has to derive its texture of meaning from: 1) the life cycle of the ecological system; 2) the integrity and joy of individual bodily life; 3) the communal fight against evil.

ECOLOGY

A reference to ecology may seem as though I am imposing a contemporary concern on an ancient doctrine. Actually, the Jewish and Christian doctrine probably has roots in a much older doctrine of death and resurrection as they are experienced in the seasons of the year. Resurrection is about the rebirth of the earth each year and all those whom the earth has gathered to itself. For example, in the excavations at New Grange in Ireland, there is clear evidence that this community of five thousand years ago had some belief in the rebirth of its dead, the belief connected to the rising of the sun and the change of seasons. The bones of the dead are gathered in a burial mound that is built with such geometric precision that light enters the interior only on the day of the winter solstice. The sun begins its annual ascent, and all that is buried in the earth stirs to life.

Even to urban dwellers today, this experience of a living earth and a life-giving sun remains central to the interpretation of human life.54 It is the earth as a whole that is alive, and the humans share in that life. The ascent of the sun, the change of seasons, and the yield of new crops may seem to some Christians a long way from Jesus and resurrection. But as Archbishop William Temple put it: “Only if God is revealed in the rising of the sun in the sky can he be revealed in the rising of a son of man from the dead.”55

INDIVIDUAL LIFE

Resurrection can only make sense to those who value and enjoy life.56 If someone has cared for individual living things and has loved particular human beings, then he or she will affirm life even in the face of death. Resurrection stands in contrast to “saving one’s soul,” which is usually a defensive and egocentric movement. Resurrection is an outward movement that is primarily concerned with the death of a loved one. “The man who can see his beloved die, believing that it is forever, and say I don’t care, is a traitor to his beloved and to all that their love has brought them. He has no right not to care.”57 For those who have loved dearly, it is impossible to imagine that the loved person is simply no more. Reflecting on the death of his friend Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis wrote: “When my idea of death and the idea of Williams thus met in my mind, it was the idea of death that was changed.”58

If we follow the developing uniqueness of a human being until death, we cannot imagine simply another segment of life after death. But we also cannot believe that the entire movement toward greater uniqueness was an illusion. Science has no real countervailing evidence; a lifetime of experiencing uniqueness is the best evidence we have on which to judge. Resurrection is the refusal to accept death as the final word. Not life after death is demanded, but life out of death, a life into which the loved person has been taken.

JUSTICE

A struggle for justice by a community is what makes its use of the term resurrection credible.59 Various liberation movements in Christian theology
have been rediscovering this theme, one that has been present in most of Judaism. In Jewish tradition, one does not speculate about an afterlife or even about God. The human task is to “heal the world,” to do justly with the goods of creation. The effort to improve the world has to be rooted in one’s own immediate community, but it should not exclude any human being. The stranger, the outcast, the one furthest away is the test of our protestations of human love.

A terrible part of medieval Christian theology was the belief that one of the joys of heaven is observing the pains of the damned. Most contemporary people—religious and secular—are repelled by the idea. We have not solved our problems of human division and enmity, but we do seem to have developed an ideal of human solidarity. As some Christian Fathers of the church realized, the harsh language of the New Testament need not mean that God tortures individuals for eternity. Religions do imply the possibility of radical failure. Perhaps some people do not become receptive enough (at least in one lifetime) to enjoy God’s love, but that is not ours to pronounce.

In summary, the Jewish and Christian doctrine of resurrection can be understood as a realistic affirmation about life and its inevitable accompaniment, death. We are given life, which is a kind of miracle. Human uniqueness is the experience that life has possibilities beyond anyone’s imagination. Most paradoxically, the greatness of this unique experience is based on weakness, vulnerability, and mortality. “If in this life we know that we are poor, that we are nothing and have nothing which we are not receiving from the unknown, then it will not seem uniquely strange that life should continue to be given beyond the boundaries of physical death.”

Whatever physical and psychological facts were the case in the experience of Jesus’ disciples (an issue that the original documents can never resolve), the term resurrection indicates breakthrough to unique personhood. Resurrection is a reference to the cosmos before it is a puzzling fact about Jesus. It does not refer to another world on top of this one or after this one. Resurrection is about living and dying and living, about doing your work the best you can and loving those around you. In the beautiful words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “Wherever the world of death is illumined by the miracle of resurrection ... one neither clings convulsively to life nor casts it frivolously away. One is content with the allotted span and one does not invest earthly things with the title of eternity; one allows to death the limited rights which it still possesses.”

**Conclusion**

The preceding chapters have traced the pattern of usage for the term *unique*. Two contrasting logics were found to be embodied in the use of this peculiar word. Both of these logics were traced to their emergence in Jewish and Christian traditions. Many of the main concepts in these traditions (for example, faith, revelation, chosen, covenant, mediator) were examined in relation to uniqueness. The final two chapters have extended the analysis to a wider sphere, what I called the geography and the history of the individual person.

The meaning of a term does not neatly divide into two parts. What I have called Meaning A and Meaning B of uniqueness are sharply opposed *directions* within the meaning of the term. They are movements in opposite directions away from the common note of “different from all others.” In both cases, the absolutist claim that seems inherent to the term is never reached. The peculiar nature of the claim to uniqueness is that it is never the case.

Is *unique* perhaps similar to *absolutely*, a word that has inundated popular speech in the last fifteen years? People say absolutely when they simply but enthusiastically mean yes. There is nothing very absolute these days about “absolutely.” Many uses of the word unique reflect a similar inflation of ordinary speech. People say unique when they wish to be emphatic about the importance of something. Often, the difference between an event and a unique event is merely that the speaker wishes to call attention to the latter. Thus, Meaning A of uniqueness is often an exclamation point whose removal from a statement would not essentially change the statement.

However, when a Jew says that “the Holocaust is unique” or a Christian says that “Christ is unique,” a powerful and emotionally laden claim is at stake. Such claims are usually attacked not on the grounds of redundancy or vacuousness, but, on the contrary, because they are assumed to be arrogant and imperialistic.

Even if people have not thought out Meaning B of uniqueness, they often sense an alternate logic that can be conveyed through the term. This logic is an alternative to the “fact plus reasoning” logic that has dominated much of the modern era. In this modern framework, general laws are formulated by abstracting from individual cases. In contrast, Meaning B of uniqueness takes its approach to the universal not through abstracting from the particular but by going more deeply into it. The uniqueness is