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## My Many Selves

Wayne C. Booth

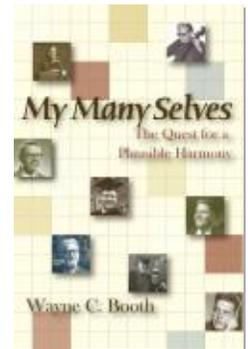
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## Chapter Four

# My Many Selves Confront the Man Who Believes in LOVE

*I am inordinately self-centered. . . . There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.*

—Oscar Wilde

*I must write as though I were a person of importance; and indeed, I am—to myself. To myself I am the most important person in the world; though I do not forget that, not even taking into consideration so grand a conception as the Absolute, but from the standpoint of common sense, I am of no consequence whatever. It would have made small difference to the universe if I had never existed.*

—Somerset Maugham, *The Summing Up*

*Man, whose joy consists in comparing himself with other men, can relish nothing but what is eminent.*

—Thomas Hobbes

*This [Brutus] was the noblest Roman of them all;  
All the conspirators save only he  
Did that they did in envy of great Caesar;  
He, only, in a general honest thought  
And common good to all, made one of them.*

.....  
... "This was a man!"

—Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

*Envy's a sharper spur than pay,  
No author ever spar'd a brother,  
Wits are gamecocks to one another.*

—John Gay, "The Elephant and the Bookseller"

*Envy and wrath shorten the life.*

—Ecclesiasticus 30:26

*I wish that I could somehow get myself talked about as much as Wilde has managed to get himself talked about, even now in 2005.*

—Anonymous Booth

One morning back in 2002, I received an email from my friend Homer Goldberg informing me that the “Millennial” issue of *PMLA*<sup>1</sup> has a long list of selections from past presidential addresses. “And for some reason yours is just ignored.” This message instantaneously provoked a silly, internal dispute:

*VainB*: “How could they do a brutal thing like that to *me*, one of the best . . . ?”

*LOVERB* (chanting): “Oh, damn it man, just ignore it; to worry about fame or attention is simply contemptible. How could you spend three pages in *For the Love of It* mocking Norman Podhoretz for his celebration of the joys of ‘making it’ in the world and then let yourself feel miserable because *you’ve* not ‘made it’ in an issue of *PMLA* that almost nobody will read anyway?”

*ThinkerB*: “Well, of course, you’re absolutely right. So I’ll slap the vain fool down.”

*VainB*: “But wouldn’t it make *sense* to write the editor to find out just why . . .”

But by midmorning, *LOVER* had triumphed, aided by the would-be *LIFER*, laughing about the quarrel. I never felt any further temptation to write a complaint to that “unfair” editor. Further back,

#### *November 2000*

I have known, for quite a while, that *The Chicago Tribune* (now that *For the Love of It* is coming out in paperback) has been planning to feature an article about me and my celebration of amateuring. The columnist has interviewed Phyll and me. Two photographers have taken about 60 shots. So everything is on the way.

This morning I wake at six, as usual, and suddenly find myself debating with *VainB* about whether to go right this minute to a newsstand to get a copy, or wait until later, after getting some work done. *VainB* loses—for the moment—and I don’t drive to the newsstand until about 7:01. I buy a copy, and glance through the load of cruddy Sunday stuff, increasingly

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1. *Publications of the Modern Language Association.*

worried for fear the article has been canceled. Ah, here on the front page of the BOOKS/ARTS section is my huge photo, with me looking, head raised, eyes closed!—oh, shit!—looking like someone posing as either asleep or faking rapture. VainB is crushed by the photo—why didn't they allow me to choose from the shots? I almost decide not to buy any more copies. Then, still sitting in the car parked next to the stand, I do a quick read of the article. Oh, it's quite good—all of the Selves agree. And the second photo of Phyllis and me playing is much better, though it's not the best choice either. So then I buy five more copies.

“But why plague relatives and friends with copies of that tiny celebrity blip?” the anti-vanity Selves whine [the next day]. “Why bother? Why on earth succumb to egotism like that? It's because you, you idiot, long for a bit of celebrity. You're the fool who whines to yourself every time Stanley Fish and Harold Bloom get celebrated. You want your book to sell even more copies. You are in fact feeling ebullient about this minor featuring, and you find yourself today, as you were yesterday, pleased that there was a chamber music concert that afternoon and friends there had already read the article, and liked it—and didn't mock the photo.”

Before looking at the history of VainB, the slightly more defensible AmbitionB, and their struggles with the other Selves, here's what I wish were a transcription of a conversation I overheard last week. I, the LIFER, ordered them to speak frankly about their goals.

*AmbitionB:* Well, I want what just about everybody wants: to *be* number one, whether as teacher, scholar, husband, father, amateur cellist, or autobiographer who really *thinks* about the meaning of life.

*VainB:* That's fine, OK, but like just about everybody I want even more to be *seen* as moving toward the top, maybe even as number one, whether I've really made it or not. And like the author Heller in his last book, *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*, I'm really upset when evidence of decline in my reputation emerges. After all, shouldn't everyone in the world still know about the ten translations of my first book, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*?

*LOVER:* That's stupid. What I'm pursuing is *living* today to the fullest. Make love, play some music, walk on the beach. *Carpe diem*, seize the day.

*MoralB, smiling favorably on AmbitionB and speculating about whether to take the name Improver-Booth:* Well, yes, but don't do the seizing just any old way. To live *right* today we've got to work hard to improve our *character* and to improve the awful world. We've got to accomplish something *good* today, even if it's only an attempt to get the *New York Times* to publish a protest letter about Bush's . . .

Suddenly a new Self plunges in, who might be called *Zen-Booth*:

Stupid, stupid! Wipe out *all* of that! Stop that Mormonish worry about self-improvement. Stop even practicing the cello and walking on the beach. Just sit down and meditate, and meditate some more, and more, until you feel your Selves disappearing into Nada. Don't seize the day; let Nada seize you. *LIFER, pursuing not Nada but a Plausible Harmony*: That's absurd; nobody can do that for more than a few minutes or hours—at most. Why not probe yourself and discover the true core within? We all know that each of your cases is defensible, at least some of the time. Let's sit down and talk about it—like singing in a cantata. Or maybe we could talk one another into doing an autobiography about our conversations.

My attempts to deal with such quarrels have always been a bit equivocal, as by now you might expect. Some readers of *For the Love of It* have claimed to detect some dishonesty in it, as VainB is shoved behind the scene and AmbitionB dwells on “getting better” at cello playing: “Even as you shouted, ‘live for the sake of the loving, not for future payoff,’ obviously you were driving yourself to get another book out, urging yourself to practice even harder on the cello to get credit as a better player—and doing that even when your practicing was yielding no joy—and surely sometimes hoping the book would raise your reputation.”

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF VAINB AND AMBITIONB

1926

One day Mama sees in the newspaper an IQ test for young children. Ask him this, ask him that. Have him do this or that. She tries all the stuff on Clayson, her beloved five-year-old. One section asks me to consider a twelve-inch blank square that represents a weed-grown field in which a baseball is lost. “How would you walk to find the ball?” I draw a path wandering and circling in every conceivable direction, back and forth and with a lot of pointless crisscrossing.

The newspaper tells Mama that bright little boys don't do it that way: they go around in *systematic* diminishing circles or squares, lines equidistant. I have revealed myself as not that kind of bright little boy: I am a thoughtless wanderer!

“Clayson, that's very disappointing.” I'm not as bright as she had thought (or hoped). Misery—for both of us.

Not long after, Mama is nursing my new baby sister, Lucille. VainB reawakens, feeling intense envy.

“Mama, can I have a little suck?”

“Of course not.”

“But why not?”

“You just can’t.”

In tears I go on pleading, and finally Mama surrenders, sort of; she gets a teaspoon, squeezes out a bit, and offers it to me. So maybe she loves me *almost* as much as she loves Lucille.

1930

I am on my way home carrying my fifth-grade report card. I sob most of the way because I’ve been given only a “C” for Handwriting—the first lower-than-top grade I’ve ever had. Mama’s confidence in me will be annihilated, and she might weep, saying again, “Oh, Wayne C., I am so disappointed in you.”

She does, and she starts drilling me daily on my Palmer Penmanship.

1931

I have been caught planting the wrong seeds in the wrong part of Grampa Clayson’s vegetable garden. Grampa shouts at me, “Clayson, you must learn to use your head. You haven’t got the brains God gave a soda cracker!” I weep.

1933

It is my first day in junior high school, and because the gym coach has never seen me play basketball, he makes the mistake of judging by my height that I should be put on the “first team.” VainB feels triumphant and plays with incredible vigor. But only for a few minutes. The coach soon sees the real, awkward me, totally untrained, and announces that I must step down to third team. VainB is humiliated—but this time keeps the sobs suppressed until he’s out of sight.

1934

We Boy Scouts are camping on an “overnight,” and we’ve been told that there will be a prize for the best-designed area around our tents. I work hard gathering moss and flowers to decorate my spot. As you have predicted, I lose; my best friend, Junior Halliday, has been declared the winner. VainB retreats into his tent, flings himself onto his sleeping bag, pounds his fists on the nonpillow, and bursts into quiet sobs that he hopes are inaudible: weeping is even worse than losing.

I could record scores more such memories, including those of being somehow *trained* to see winning as the only goal in life, allowing defeat to spoil the day. But let's turn instead to a selection from the somewhat more reliable journal entries.

The first real intrusions of ThinkerB into the diary began only after my serious four-month bout with Bright's disease as I turned sixteen. Some of the entries reveal a cheaply anxious VainB; others show me trying to escape not just vanity but all ambition. If you find yourself asking, "Why is this LIFER including so much of this?" just imagine what fun it is for this LIFER, as quester for harmony, to look back after almost seventy years and discover that self-divided kid. As his two months out of school with Bright's disease draw to an end, he soon must attend classes with students who may be well "ahead" of him and he writes:

*April 27, 1937*

One of my main faults is that I like to think of my own accomplishments too much. I am not exactly conceited. I don't think that I am a better person than I am but I have to watch myself to keep from talking about myself. Whoever reads my diary is going to get the idea that I do nothing but talk about myself but that is only true in this diary.

I'm pleased to see the boy beginning to acknowledge just how absurd it is to worry about popularity—and sometimes I find hints of even deeper probing. (Am I now still surrendering to VainB when I take amused pride in how the teenager continues to grapple with the problem?)

*July 29, 1937 [after many pages about flirting with the first "intellectual" girl he has known]*

I don't know who will read this, perhaps I should say nothing that sounds silly or girl crazy but I suppose a true account of my life should contain something of that sort. Look at the preceding account, dear reader (child be it, or grandchild or whatever you are) as the prattlings of a young boy, not near to being mature in mind (although 6'1" tall and weighing 165 lbs) and yet at times feeling that he knows more than anyone older than he is.<sup>2</sup> . . . Now is as good a time as any to analyse myself and what I am. I feel that to write thoughts on paper, read them over & criticize is the best way to understand which are reasonable & which are not. . . . I will endeavor to approximately every six months reanalyze myself and compare.

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2. Note how his alternation of first-person and third-person presages his and the LIFER's later dodges. As you know, such trickery has become a cliché in fiction—sometimes used brilliantly, as in Michael Frayn's recent *Spies*.

—I will start by telling of the bad things. I am, frankly, a noisy, loud-mouthed show-off, according to some people's standards. I am inclined to voice my opinion when it is not wanted; I say what I think rather than stop for a minute and use tact. I get too much joy out of making people feel uncomfortable mentally. I waste time and thought making jokes . . . when I could be doing things of more advantage. (What a devilish hard job it is to write a journal when you don't know who will read it.)

Then, after an account of LusterB's first experience with purchased pornography, VainB arrives at a moment of triumph.

It seems that I have so much wrong with me that it would take forever to cure me, and yet I am so much better than most boys my age (no conceit intended) that there is no comparison!

*Feb. 22, 1938*

I'm 17 today but I don't know how old I am actually. Some of the things I do & can do would do credit to a 20 or 21 year old and some of the things would disgrace a six year old. I suppose maybe I expect too much, but I, like Benjamin Franklin, would like to become as nearly a perfect human being as is possible. (An absurd desire as far as hope of completion, yet very sane as a goal to work to.)

In his senior year of high school in 1938, VainB naturally longs to be elected "Representative Boy" of his class. He feels miserable when he loses and then writes about it.

It doesn't matter much though I wish the kids liked me more (that's what they voted for, although the characteristics listed were dependability, scholarship, all-around course activities & sociability).

*1939*

I really am ashamed of myself. . . . I have a hard time not to get an exaggerated idea of my self-importance. . . . I believe that the extreme joy I get from achieving minor triumphs (such as getting the highest in a test, or getting on the honor roll, etc) is not to good. I should strive to take what success I may have in my stride (to use a very trite phrase) as I do whatever failures I have.

Quite often the boy, longing for maturity, writes as if attempting to write this chapter.

*May 30, 1939*

Why do I write this diary? I've tried to analyze what I am trying to do, and I find that one time I write for one purpose, another time for another. For instance, occasionally I catch myself writing for the effect it will have on whoever reads this. At other times I write for my future reminiscence. . . . Sometimes I wonder if all my writing isn't just for inflating my ego (an over-used phrase).

Many destructive intrusions of VainB did not get recorded, probably because he saw them as too contemptible. One that the family has often retold and amused ourselves with occurred in the summer of 1939. Here is my memory of how Mama told it.

The family had agreed that we all should drive together to explore Yellowstone Park. But you, always criticizing almost everything I suggested those days, were nasty about it: "A silly trip." You kept saying you had too much important reading to do. I insisted you had to go with us, or else! "It could be one of the best family get-togethers ever." Well, you caved in, after I made several stronger threats of punishment. But you carried along a huge *Anthology of World Literature*, reading it not only as we drove along but as we viewed the scenes. Instead of reveling in the lovely scenes or joining our conversations, you always had that book open, reading away, or pretending to—just trying to impress us all that you were a true intellectual. The worst moment came as Old Faithful shot up: there you were, refusing to look at it, your nose buried in that heavy book!

One of my cousins recently retold a similar version of the story. She remembers—now in a friendly way—her anger and contempt at my insulting behavior. Of course, I'm embarrassed about the event (and, of course, amused by it); I wish I could believe that I was genuinely captured by the poems in that book.

In college, almost every journal entry reveals AmbitionB's and VainB's goals and his other Selves' strong reproaches.

*April 15, 1940 [second year of college]*

I just got my report card, and it'll put me on the honor roll. . . . I am going to become scientific if it kills me. My writing betrays my present confused thinking, I know, but I'm trying to improve my mind, along with my marks. I read more *good* books than anyone I know . . . and thus am becoming educated more than anyone I know. But boy, how I've got to work. I'm really dumb, compared to so many of the people who have been great. Constant striving is what is necessary. Lately I have slid back in my striving.

And then he almost summarizes the LIFER's quest in this book:

I wonder if I will ever overcome my faults (lazyness, conceit, vague dishonesty, crudeness, etc.) to *become a truly integrated individual*. [Not his italics!]

There we have what has been a lifetime quest for a *plausible harmony*.

### WHO OR WHAT PRODUCED VAINB'S VITALITY?

Sometimes the budding ThinkerB seems to blame only Mama for the faults of VainB, while tacitly supporting AmbitionB.

*June 30, 1940*

Mother . . . worries about me and her supposed inability to guide me correctly. . . . She thinks I have the ability to "amount to something" and worries about my reading so much, feeling that I should be preparing for life. I can't convince her that I am getting alot out of my reading. Of course, she doesn't think it's harmful, but she would rather see me work than read. Thank goodness she doesn't rebel when I buy books. I have such a desire to have a fine personal library in my head.

Then the budding LOVER describes his own contrasting picture of "amounting to something"—as if to refute Mama behind her back.

I would like to get on the B.Y.U. faculty, or some faculty of a better university, and learn French, German, Latin, Greek, philosophy, by taking classes and individual study all the rest of my life. There is that desire, but it is almost in opposition to my desire to be something scientifically—a chemist, or biologist, really contributing some actual knowledge to the world. Whatever I do, I want to be able to feel that I am doing something toward making others happy, because that is about the only real achievement there is worth having. [And on to his joy in teaching Sunday School classes.]

*Sept. 12, 1940*

Nothing risqué, nothing gained, I always say.

I see now that I will never amount to anything except a genial, likable, half-successful school teacher [which would betray Mama's hopes to "amount to something"]. I don't settle down to sustained effort in any one line, I don't do any real thinking of my own—I am a fritterer and see no indication of ever becoming anything else.

Then, after several rambling pages that interest me but would bore you, AmbitionB worries about losing steam.

My worry is that I can't become convinced in myself that I am up to much.  
Other people . . . think much more of me than I really do, as a potentiality.

Behind all those episodes, many today would argue that VainB and AmbitionB were produced not by socialization but through genetic inheritance. Many biologists see such figures as entirely encoded in our competitive, “selfish” genes: only the winners survive, as every ancestor, all the way back to the slime, quickly learned. I'll spend no time here quarreling with these extremists. After all, though, no matter how the nature vs. nurture quarrels are resolved, we all have to agree that my competitive excesses show that I am not completely unrelated to the two deer I saw on television recently, butting each other, competing for a mate.

The second most obvious source is capitalist culture. Pierre Bourdieu, whose fame VainB envies and who detests the fame drive as much as ThinkerB and MoralB do, sees egocentric competition as inescapably constructed by our own cultures. Wasn't VainB simply echoing the drives dwelt on by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, still celebrated as supreme virtues by scores of economists and CEOs? Why should my more pious Selves blame AmbitionB and VainB for embracing what many capitalists see as the “virtue” that saves us—competition or even greed? In short, what I've reported can be found everywhere, earlier and now. To take in whatever you can by “driving ahead” is the way to live. If, as many of us lament, perhaps naïvely, our new millennium reveals an even crazier drive for winning than ever before, what's the point of worrying about it in one's Self? Doesn't every American who “succeeds” exhibit it?<sup>3</sup> The incredibly successful books by Steve Covey, touting Seven Habits that lead to being an “effective person,” celebrate exactly what I'm worried about.<sup>4</sup>

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3. This negative emphasis on American culture is surely a bit undue. We could find parallels in every “civilized” culture throughout history, and perhaps we would find them in all the “uncivilized” cultures—if only their members kept diaries and records. Hans Christian Andersen, back in the middle of the nineteenth century, said of himself, “My name is gradually beginning to shine, and that is the only thing for which I live. I covet honor and glory in the same way as the miser covets gold.” (Quoted in “A Melancholic Dane,” *New Yorker*, January 8, 2001.) For all we know, Andersen intended a bit of irony there—but I doubt it.

4. A recent book by Robert W. Fuller, *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank* (British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2004) could be described as a powerful attack on VainB and, with some qualification, AmbitionB. Inventing the term

That Steve Covey is a Mormon suggests a third candidate in the list of possible causes of the excesses: Mormonism's extreme emphasis on individual progression. The Church insists that the goal of life is to "progress." Though the overt commands are usually—thank God—spiritual and ethical, there are many hints that such progress requires getting ahead in the rat race. The goal of *eternal* progress—for us males it was, as I mentioned before, progress toward becoming Gods of other worlds—can turn into the desire to outclass the others, to prove to yourself and to them that though you may not be quite Number One yet, you will reach it someday, at least in one part of the universe. God commands us to "get better all the time" and to keep a record of how we're working to get better. Onward and upward—whether in the arts, or business management, or academic achievement, or strengthening one's genuine virtues.

A recent guidebook, "counsel and inspiration for each day of the year," published by the Church President, Gordon B. Hinckley, is called *Stand a Little Taller*. As the publisher's preface puts it, "find in these pages the motivation and inspiration to follow the prophet, to make each day a little better than the one before, and to 'stand a little taller.'" To me as a boy that would have been taken quite literally: I must become taller—in fact I'm already almost as tall as Uncle Joe! I wonder how the metaphor feels to those, including most women, who are permanently much shorter than we giants.<sup>5</sup> In its more defensible metaphorical form, the get-taller command means "Labor to improve the quality of your soul, by cultivating love, charity, generosity, forgiveness." But again and again it turns into "Do what you can to get more credit from the world, whether you deserve it or not."

But putting it like that risks exaggeration; many Mormons I know have *not* exhibited such destructive, compulsive drives, and I can think of no other organization, religious or not, that produces as much disinterested pro bono work. Why does the Salt Lake City–Ogden region of Utah top the list of American cities in the amount of charitable giving—with the average taxpayer giving 15 percent of income?

But before looking further at the favorable side, let us return to the fourth and final likely source: the way my family often encouraged the harmful side of the Mormon drive for progress (as you've seen in some of my examples). Though I love all my family in memory, I see them as too often reinforcing VainB.

The Clayson clan, including Mama, could all be described as striving souls, worrying about getting ahead of the Joneses. All of them were

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"rankism," Fuller does a wonderful job of deploring the ways in which aspiring to be at the top harms those considered "nobodies."

5. Phyllis says the metaphor doesn't bother her a bit; unlike me, she never felt pressed to become physically taller.

descendants of the British working class—farmhands, factory hands, weavers—and they were thus always a bit anxious about the “wolf at the door,” the threat of poverty. Yet they were surrounded by evidence that in the land of Glory you could, with sufficient effort, “get ahead.”

Grampa Clayson, orphaned early and having had to labor full-time from age ten, finally got back to elementary school and graduated from high school in his twenties. By the time I knew him, he had worked at several jobs simultaneously, had managed to put all but one of his eight children through college, and had produced a huge clan (which by now is loaded with doctors and lawyers and professors and rich business leaders). The family has achieved! (And yet, we often turned the religious command to *become* better into a cheap command to *look* better.)<sup>6</sup>

Though these four driving forces—survival of the fittest, capitalist competition, Mormon emphasis on progress, and my family’s drives (what I’ve sometimes called “Claysonism”)—hit me in especially concentrated form, I obviously can’t claim that my experience was unique. My Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant friends have confessed to excessive ambition-anxieties like mine. And VainB sometimes takes great pride in claiming that, on the whole, my efforts to resist cheap vanity have succeeded far more often than my friends’ have. So you see, I win.

#### WHO GETS CREDIT FOR THE LOVER FIGHTING BACK, IRONICALLY OR NOT?

With these four forces so strongly at work, where did my quite early contempt for such competitiveness come from? ThinkerB would like to intrude and claim that the rising critical stance against AmbitionB and VainB was a product of the drive to think profoundly—a nice paradox. But it’s clear that from early on, for each kind of influence (even evolution, many now argue), I met moral counterdrives as strong as the drive to win.

Leaving evolution aside, with its recent exploration of altruism, what about American culture? Well, anyone who has read much in the literature that I encountered in my teens will find piles of contemptuous attacks on many aspects of American culture, on capitalism, on the reduction of life to mere winning. The very sources of cheap ambition simultaneously contained attacks on it. American culture and European culture, in the books and

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6. I wonder with VainB how many of them think that I have also “achieved.” And I’m amused at the pleasure I take in seeing Jane Clayson, my first cousin once removed, as anchorwoman on CBS’s “Early Morning Show.” My family is winning! And what, other than comical vanity, could lead to my adding this footnote?

articles I began to read, provided me with many counterspokesmen—Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, Aldous Huxley, Anthony Trollope, Dostoevsky, and so on—proclaiming the stupidity and immorality of placing personal triumph at the top of one's list. And they had influenced the teachers I will be celebrating in a moment. (We will face a paradox every time AmbitionB is challenged: "Are you not," ThinkerB intrudes, "seeking ambitiously to be among the top critics of ambition?")

What, then, about family? Well, just as they often jumped on me for failing, they often would sermonize against such jumping. I suspect that if they read what I've said so far, they would feel it unfair. All of them—well, *most* of them—much of the time were wrestling with the very paradox I'm dealing with: the true goal was not to be *seen* as at the top but really to achieve the best possible "character." Nothing was more contemptible than *revealing* the wrong kinds of personal pride.

*Sometime in High School*

Some of my male friends are obviously more popular among the girls than I am. I feel especially anxious about not being the most handsome. Finally I confront my best judge: "Mama, do you see me as handsome?" She replies, without hesitating, "Wayne C., I see you as an extremely clean-cut young man." It is clear to me that the message is "Whether or not you are handsome, you should not worry about that. In our family we are above cheap anxieties about *appearing* the best. I want you to have your mind on higher things."

A more powerful example of the counterurge is the following advice Grampa Clayson wrote on the flyleaf of his daughter Ann's new journal, which she, like me, began keeping at age fourteen:

Dear Ann:—Popularity vanishes like the dew before the morning sun; reputation varies with the changing opinions of humanity, but character, real, genuine, true-blue character—grows stronger through all the storms of life. The first two are not to be despised; but the last is to be sought after, obtained, and cherished if we would know and enjoy the fullest measure of real life. Retain the first two if you can, but never at the sacrifice of the last.  
Your Father, Eli J. Clayson.

I can't remember Grampa ever talking that wisely to me—but surely something like that was always in the air. Despite all the drive to get visibly ahead, there was a "commandment" to become a "good person"—by becoming more *virtuous* from moment to moment.

It thus doesn't surprise me in the least to find my teenage journals full of praise for my virtuous family and of my ambition to reach their heights. "My Grandpa Clayson is surely a good man and if I can only be as good as he is when I grow up I will be satisfied."

On my father's side (the Booths and Chipmans), the points against ambition for fame and money were stressed even more strongly. My key influence was Grampa Ebenezer Booth, a farmer contemptuous of the hoity-toity. The only one of his family who didn't get a college degree, he seemed to see his main achievement as appearing clearly *against* vain aspirations, except in the matter of virtue. Violating the ambitious standards of his brothers and sisters, who were already "high" in the Utah world—lawyers, judges, church leaders—he would distress Gramma Booth by deliberately walking to the post office wearing soiled overalls and shoes reeking of manure. He loved to spend time mocking the world's achievers, especially in matters of fame and money: "Wayne C., never forget that when you meet a millionaire, you're meeting a crook."

He loved to write satirical verse, mocking the wealthy and vain. One Christmas he wrote a thirty-line spoof on the advertising of a local department store—one that I almost memorized.

Dear Chipman Merc.,

I received your Christmas Greetings, for which I am truly grateful. Accept the following lines as a token of my gratitude.

Your big red store is a sight to gladden any eye.  
And to describe it properly I scarcely think I'll try.

Then, after listing the advertised items he couldn't afford,

But my old wad has sunk so low for them, I could not pay.  
I've lost my watch and cap and gloves, which causes me to sigh,  
When I have not enough mon' left to buy a two-bit tie.  
.....  
And now, dear Merc., excuse me if some more I cannot tell,  
When I think of all I'd like to buy it makes me feel like—the deuce.

Thus he helped create the half egalitarian you'll meet in chapter 9.

While attacking the drive for money or fame, Grampa Booth's drive to achieve virtue and learning was intense. He would read both the Bible and the Book of Mormon cover to cover once each year. He would jump on me for spending time reading *Huckleberry Finn* rather than sacred texts. Yet much of his energy went into ensuring education for his children. As Aunt Relva put it

in her autobiography, “The sacrifices both of them [he and Gramma Booth] made that we might all of us have an education can only be repaid by our lives being worthy of them.”

It’s clear, then, that the boy was subjected to immense pressure to rise in the world, but on conflicting paths. One goal, pursued by both clans, was for VainB or at least AmbitionB to get ahead, to win, whether in the eyes of neighbors or the eyes of “the world.” But at the same time another goal, pursued by both clans, was for other Selves to win by increasing in genuine virtue.

The same division is revealed by the more admirable forms of upward-pushing in Church doctrine. The insistence on progressing eternally—achieve, achieve, achieve—was almost always put explicitly in terms of achievement in the virtues, in character. The advice (and commands) included absolute warnings against harming others in order to win—warnings that too few current self-helpers include. You gotta succeed, you gotta progress, you gotta achieve day by day, but on the other hand, as one hymn put it, “Then wake up, and do something more, than dream of your mansions above,” more than getting ahead and winning all the prizes from God. “Doing good is a pleasure, a joy beyond measure, a blessing of duty and love.”<sup>7</sup>

With these anti-VainB forces at work, it’s hardly surprising that the journals soon became full of explicit self-reproach about cheap winning, along with affirmations of higher ambitions, even LOVE.

*June 20, 1939 [age 18½]*

I believe this is going to be the most consciously happy summer of my life (up to now). I enjoy my work [irrigating for the college]. It's not hard, it's variagated [a deliberate pun, believe me], . . . it's out of doors 12 to 16 hrs a day, it's fairly remunerative [25¢ an hour]. Provo is beautiful in the summer. . . . all day long I see nature . . . at its best.

There follows a lovely description of the beauty, a list of what he’s reading—and then:

My main objective in life is to become a wise philosopher, a person who can think, and be happy in spite of (or because of) it. Voltaire said that philosophers realize that they sacrifice happiness when they become philosophers,

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7. Another hymn that memory draws up frequently concluded with “There is no tomorrow but only today.” I have to use the past tense because the current text of the hymn has been changed—succumbing to the success-drive—to “Prepare for tomorrow by working today”! That’s one of the worst deliberate corruptions of text I’ve ever met.

and that in spite of being unhappy, none of them would willingly become ignorant for the sake of being happy again. Voltaire may disagree with me, but are not the philosophers the happiest persons if they would not trade their state with anyone less wise? . . . This happiness is what I am seeking. As yet, I'm muddle-headed. The clumsy handling of this paragraph proves that. *But, I won't always be muddle-headed.* I *will* learn to think fairly and accurately and *honestly*, if it takes the rest of my life, and it probably will. At any rate, it's a great life.

### THE INFLUENCE OF TEACHERS

It was only in my early conversations with wonderful teachers—and my responses to the reading they recommended—that I discovered just how much of the “achievement split” can be found not just in my life but in all of current life and indeed throughout human history. The major authors they introduced me to, almost all of them, express contempt for those who merely want to win over others. Especially influential, memory says, were Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* and George Meredith's *Evan Harrington*.

It took me a long time reading and thinking about such books to realize, after years of blaming Mormonism and my beloved relatives for producing the anxious striver, that the whole history of cultures (particularly of American culture) was at least as much to blame—and yet was simultaneously providing resources for its own criticism.

Here's a high school journal entry about how my ambitions were already being challenged through teaching.

*May 21, 1937*

The two teachers that have influenced me most this year are Miss Gean Clark and Mr. Luther Giddings. . . . [Though teaching me to be skeptical about what I read, they also have taught me to believe in] love, not only of individuals but for everyone; I believe that anyone who swallows his own interests and spends his life working for others will find much more happiness in the end, not because he has followed Christ's teaching particularly, but because we are so built, our minds are so formed that it makes us feel happy to do good to others.<sup>8</sup> . . . I have been reading some philosophy books, some

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8. How much pride should I take in my unconscious prediction of recent research about the brain? “Science Times” reports, as I write today, research proving that we are “wired to cooperate,” that the “act of cooperating with another person, of choosing trust over cynicism, generosity over selfishness, makes the brain light up with quiet joy” (*New York Times*, July 25, 2002, D1).

novels some not, lately, and have received many ideas from them. I was somewhat surprised to find that even such sexy novelists as Aldous Huxley believe in the ultimate joy and happiness that comes from living the ideal Christian life. I have come to realize how selfish I am, how little I do for others. . . . I have decided that I will work along some scientific field and try to learn things that will benefit other people.

Thus the troubled youth illustrated how, from our beginnings, we have been indoctrinated with a split: the sheer need to win at all costs confronting a deep contempt for mere winning. (To avoid the paradox again—I want to win among those contemptuous of mere winning—let me say that the confrontation is not with Contempt-Booth but with the LOVER.)

#### HOW ARE “WE” COPING WITH VAINB AND AMBITIONB TODAY?

My conflicts among Selves are, as you’ve seen again and again, revealed most sharply in this very *LIFE* project as it relates to other projects that have tempted me recently. First, this was to be an autobiography, solicited by a New York editor and thus possibly yielding a bit of further “fame,” perhaps even money. Then, after seeing that my uncolorful life didn’t generate a seductive, chronological *LIFE*, it became a book *about* autobiography, one that would demonstrate to the world that even the aging Booth could still produce a first-class *scholarly* book. Then, as I saw more and more hypocritical posing in the *LIVES* I read and felt that my own drafts were really lousy, it shifted to become a critical work about hypocritical posing, valuable and destructive, in *all* kinds of writing. The drafts of that book, still on the back burner, might leave behind after my death some proof to “the world”—or those in it whose high opinion I strive for—that I was a genuinely driven *scholar*, not just a Wandering-Generalist-Booth.

Only after getting bogged down in that one did LOVER realize that what I should be writing, if anything at all, is the first one, the one I *want* to write, the one that I might even love to write: this *LIFE*. So the more defensible Selves win, sort of, with continuing conflict.

But am I not driven more by AmbitionB and even VainB as I write that sentence? Hard to judge. Ambition for what? Vanity about what? Oh, it’s fairly clear: I want to write a *LIFE* that is acknowledged by the *best* readers—readers like you—to be the *best* example of one written without the slightest concern for fame or public recognition. Rising above Rousseau’s hypocritical claim to write the first honest autobiography ever, a claim echoed by thousands of others, I, the humble, non-ambition-driven Wayne Booth, write the least ambitious, least pride-driven *LIFE* of all time. Anything paradoxical in that?

Certainly—VainB is still there. The mildly embarrassing fact remains (evident in these attempted ironies) that throughout it all I am still too often a “driven” man, a man who feels he must somehow be “further along” at the end of the day than he was at the beginning. Even after I’ve spent an hour or two practicing the cello, feeling totally freed of ambition, or after Phyllis and I have had a glorious hike up the Utah mountains, with loving conversation, I can catch myself, as I open the mail, longing for another favorable review of the last book or feeling tempted to write an angry letter to an editor who has “stupidly” turned down an earlier draft of this book, or . . .

So, as the anecdotes that begin this chapter show, silly VainB, the corrupt version of AmbitionB, still survives, hoping for more and more public acclaim. Usually I manage to hide him from the public, but sometimes I lose control.

Would you like proof that I am now above it all, that love finally has triumphed over cheap ambition? I’m tempted to list—and later will list—some of the love choices I honor most.

But why, then, ThinkerB whispers, is the LIFER concluding here with LOVE? The only answer I can think of is that VainB is immensely proud of being able, sometimes, to fumble toward what I—one of his brothers—am tempted to call *proud* harmony.