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## Prologue

For much of his life Henry James pondered the thought “It’s a complex fate, being an American.” For much of my life I have pondered the thought that it is a complex fate being a shy, sheltered, and provincial Jewish boy, of modest means, an unhappy family, and an intellectual inclination, limited by what Virginia Woolf called “the pressure of convention,” lacking in self-confidence, yearning to transcend the limitations of his origins, eager to earn the respect and praise of others, determined to leave a legacy or at least some modest evidence that I had once lived.

When I was a schoolboy growing up in Manchester, New Hampshire, we were required to read Thomas Macaulay’s magisterial *Essay on Johnson* (1856). The final assignment was to identify the single sentence in Macaulay’s essay that best captured the essence of Johnson’s life. The key sentence, said our teacher, was “But the force of his mind overcame every impediment.” Few of us in this post-Freudian age are apt to believe that we can readily encapsulate the essence of a life—our own or anyone else’s—in a single sentence. But sometimes lives do seem to have themes. The central themes of the first twenty-seven years of my life—the years covered here—were a love of learning and a profound ambition to make a mark upon the world.

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But only when two significant life passages caused me great emotional pain was I motivated to explore how these themes had worked themselves out. The first was my move in 1987 from the University of Iowa to Dartmouth College. There was a decided difference between the state of Iowa and the state of New Hampshire, between the Midwest and New England. There was also a decided difference between the two institutions, one public, one private, especially in my reception as a Jew. At Iowa, the fact that I was the first Jewish president of the University went virtually unnoticed; it simply didn't matter in the open-minded egalitarianism of the state's midwestern culture. At Dartmouth, on the other hand, the fact that I was the son of an immigrant and the first professedly Jewish president of the College drew attention; it represented a triumph of the nation's commitment to the values of a meritocracy, a gratifying marker in the advancing openness of a formerly restricted section of American life. But for the first time in my life I also encountered persistent anti-Semitism. As I wrote in my book *Liberal Education and the Public Interest* (2003), I experienced "a whole series of troubling incidents: my frequent embarrassment when Jewish parents of prospective college students told me they would not consider sending a son or daughter to Dartmouth; my chagrin when friends told me how surprised they were to learn that a Jew would choose to be president of Dartmouth; my anger when a fund-raising consultant warned me that a Jewish president should expect to face difficulty in raising money from Dartmouth alumni; my exasperation when the tirades of the *Dartmouth Review*, an off-campus conservative newspaper, were often characterized [accurately] by the national press as anti-Semitic and erroneously attributed to the College; and my impatience when the press found it relevant to continually refer to me, alone among Jewish college presidents, as Jewish." These experiences challenged my identity as a Jew.

In my first remarks to the Dartmouth faculty, I spoke, with only some license, of having been raised "in the shadow" of the College. Manchester was only ninety miles away. During my early months at Dartmouth, I made several trips to Manchester. I went alone so

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that I could experience the freedom to visit the sites that had meaning for me: the houses we lived in, the Straw School and Central High School that educated me, the public parks in which I sledded, the playgrounds on which I learned to play baseball and basketball, the mill yard, my high school hangouts, and the neighborhoods in which my friends and I lived.

Walking down Elm Street, I noticed immediately that the rounded, bumpy cobblestones of my youth had been paved over. I passed many familiar stores—especially those with French-Canadian owners, like Pariseau’s clothing store and Desjardin’s jewelry store—with the customary placards reading, “On parle français ici,” an assurance to French-speaking citizens that they would feel linguistically comfortable inside. I also passed some empty storefronts in bad repair—an unimaginable sight in my youth.

When I walked the length of the downtown, on virtually every block I met childhood companions, friends from the *Union Leader*, my father’s former students now into their sixties and seventies, often recalling an anecdote or one of his characteristic expressions, and family friends of my parents’. Many remembered me as Jimmy. Some recalled incidents from my youth. A Manchester lawyer surprised me with a worn copy of a book on debating, carrying the ownership signature of my father, dated two years before my birth. The lawyer had come upon the book in a discard pile of the Memorial High School Library, to which my father must have donated it.

I had not anticipated that returning to New Hampshire would stir so many painful memories—memories that I had assumed had long since been laid to rest. Indeed my return forced me to confront the past and to ask how my early years in New Hampshire had shaped the person I had eventually become. As F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), we are “borne back ceaselessly into the past.” If we do not acknowledge the past and deal with it, I came to learn, it will forever press its insistent, perhaps corrosive claim for attention. My return became a pilgrimage of self-discovery.

The second passage occurred seven years later, in March 1994, when I underwent surgery at the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston for removal of a tumor. The subsequent biopsy supplied

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a diagnosis of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma of the central nervous system, a chronic malignancy characterized by multiple relapses. Hearing a physician say the dread word "cancer" and having him describe it as incurable was an event for which I had no preparation. It unsettled my mind. The shock of that diagnosis brought home to me the power of another of Fitzgerald's observations, that "in a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning."

It was a time in which I knew what the poet meant when he wrote of "fear in a handful of dust." It was a time fraught with regret, in which the lowest moments in my life—its unfulfilled aspirations, its unspoken messages to loved ones, its intended good deeds not done, its failures and frustrations, its cowardly lapses of resolve—took control of my mind. It was a time of confusion, panic, and despair, when all of my resources of education and intellect seemed inadequate to disciplining the emotions I faced. I needed to calm my fears, renew my strength, summon my courage, and affirm my worth. As I passed through Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's stages of denial, anger, and depression, I realized that I needed to achieve a measure of retrospective clarity on my life.

Cancer, I found, slowed me down from the trajectory that I had been on since adolescence. I had always been imbued with a sense of destiny—a sense that I was ordained for significant achievements—and a conviction that with hard work and good luck I would achieve my destiny. The presence of cancer—a more explicit sentence of death than that faced by many patients—compelled me to acknowledge the certainty of my mortality and the vulnerability of my being. I could no longer count on continuing on an upward arc of achievement. Could I, in the words of the Israeli poet Abba Kovner, learn to "accept that the stars / do not go out when we die?" ("Detached Verses").

My illness also separated me in unspoken ways from many others—those who inhabited the world of the healthy. It ineluctably imposed a stigma from which I could not escape. It enlisted me in a community of cancer from which I could not withdraw. I have since had four recurrences of cancer. During toxic rounds of che-

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motherapy and radiation, during dismaying months of CT scans and repeated hospitalizations, I experienced that most human of desires: the yearning to make order and sense out of my life.

I had often spoken to students on themes suggested by two authors I admire. In his great novel *Doctor Faustus* (1947), Thomas Mann writes: “There is at bottom only one problem in the world and this is its name. How does one break through? How does one get into the open? How does one burst the cocoon and become a butterfly?” In his gathering of essays *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), Lionel Trilling quotes a plaintive query by the eighteenth-century English poet Edward Young: “Born Originals,” Young asks, “how comes it to pass that we die Copies?”

Now, in my loneliness and fear and introspection, I was finally ready to address the great questions these authors put: Who am I? How did I become who I am? What springs had nourished my life? How, and at what cost, did I burst the cocoon? How nearly, if at all, did I remain an Original?

This memoir is my attempt, filled with frailty, to retrieve and make imaginative sense of my past. In writing it, I have been keenly aware of an observation of Mark Twain’s, who understood the nature of autobiography better than most: “An autobiography is the truest of all books, for while it inevitably consists mainly of extinctions of the truth, shirkings of the truth, partial revealments of the truth, with hardly an instance of plain straight truth, the remorseless truth *is* there, between the lines.” The pages that follow contain the lines.