How American Individualism Is Evolving
By Daniel Yankelovich

The cultural changes of the 1990s (including multi-culturalism, the advances of feminism, a growing rejection of moral relativism, new forms of spiritual self-expression, and greater attentiveness to children and child-care) can only be understood in the context of how the revolution in social values that took the nation by storm in the 1960s and 1970s has subsequently evolved.

The transformation in values from the mid-sixties to the late-seventies confronts us with one of the sharpest discontinuities in our cultural history. Observers have attached a variety of names to the changes. Journalist Tom Wolfe famously labeled the period as the "me generation." More academically, Ron Inglehart referred to the new values as "post-materialist" and documented their spread from the United States to other industrialized democracies. A label for the new ethos that I and others prefer is "expressive individualism."

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It is not a crisp sound-bite but it has the virtue of precision: the value changes revolve around the twin issues of the roles that "expressiveness" and "individualism" play in people's lives. The new ethos gave priority to the expressive side of life even at the expense of economic benefits. By the end of the 1970s, the majority of Americans had decided that self-expressiveness was too important for artists and writers to monopolize: everyone should have the opportunity to develop their inner potential for self-expression.

A belief in individualism is, of course, as old as the nation itself. But prior to the 1960s, American individualism focused mainly on the political domain—freedom to speak our minds, to pursue our religious beliefs, to live where we chose. In the 1950s we were a nation of political individualists but social conformists. The 1960s ushered in a radical extension of individualism, broadening it from the political domain to personal lifestyles.

By the 1980s the ethos of expressive individualism had grown into a national preoccupation. Now, in the late 1990s, after more than three decades of radical experimentation, Americans find a new conception of individualism evolving.

The Cultural Revolution of the Sixties

To understand how individualism is changing, it is useful to hold two contexts in mind. The first is to glance backward at the full scope and sweep of the value changes the 1960s introduced.

I had the good fortune to track the era of expressive individualism in its initial stages of development. In the early sixties, my survey firm identified a "forerunner" group of college students who had begun to question some of their parents' core values. They had concluded that their fathers' nose-to-the-grindstone way of life and their mothers' sacrifice of self for the family somehow didn't make sense in a time of emerging affluence. They felt that sacrifice for the family was all well and good if you were obliged to do it. But if it proved economically unnecessary, why sacrifice something as important as one's self-expressive needs?

These student attitudes spread rapidly beyond the nation's campuses—from 3% of the population in the mid-sixties (the college-student children of affluent, well-educated parents) to 80% of adult Americans by the late-seventies! To be sure, the dispersion was not universal, and among the 80%, a majority were highly selective in choosing the new values they found most congenial. But nonetheless it was an extraordinary transformation in social values of the sort usually associated with generations or even centuries.

Here is a quick reminder of some of this period's most important value shifts:

- *The concept of duty*: less value placed on what one owes to others as a matter of moral obligation;

- *Social conformity*: less value placed on keeping up with the Joneses;

- *Respectability*: less value placed on symbols of correct behavior for a person of a particular social class;

- *Social morality*: less value placed on observing society's rules;

- *Pluralism*: greater acceptance of differences in ethnicity and lifestyle;

- *Sacrifice*: less value placed on sacri-

fice as a moral good, replaced by more pragmatic criteria of when sacrifice is required for economic reasons;

• *Expressiveness*: a higher value placed on forms of choice and individualism that express one's unique inner nature;

• *The environment*: greater value placed on respecting and preserving nature and the natural;

• *Technology*: greater value placed on technological solutions to a vast array of problems and challenges;

• *Sexuality*: less moral value placed on "morally correct" sexual behavior; a loosening of some but not all norms of sexual morality;

• *Pleasure*: less Puritanism about pleasure, especially about bodily pleasures; pleasures are regarded as good;

• *Family*: a high value placed on family life, but with a vastly expanded concept of family beyond the traditional nuclear form;

• *Husband-wife relationships*: a far-reaching shift from role-based obligations to shared responsibilities;

• *Health*: greater value placed on one's own responsibility for maintaining and enhancing health;

• *Work ethic*: a shift from the Protestant ethic of work having an intrinsic moral value to work as a source of personal satisfaction; and,

• *Women's rights*: a high value placed on women achieving self-fulfillment by paths of their choice rather than through roles dictated by society.

Lurch and Learn

The second context to keep in mind is an understanding of how and why sharp discontinuities in values take place in our culture.

I freely admit that this understanding took me a long time to grasp in its full concreteness. Our annual survey tracking data over the past three decades have finally taught me that societies learn and react differently than individuals[1]. Surprisingly, social learning is often far more abrupt than individual learning. It is more extreme. It is less incremental. Mature adults who encounter new circumstances will usually adjust to them in a slow and moderate fashion. They have learned that cautious adjustments keep them from making huge mistakes. But for a variety of reasons, societies react far less cautiously. They tend to lurch suddenly and abruptly from one extreme to the other.

We have developed a theory to account for the discontinuities. We call it "lurch-and-learn." It holds that a typical pattern of social change starts with a sharp lurch in the opposite direction which is then followed by a complex series of modifications based on trial and error learning. Some of this learning is valid and some of it is false. People do not always draw the right lessons from trial and error learning.

We have found that two factors usually precipitate such lurches: a change in circumstances and a lack of responsiveness to the change on the part of institutions. If government, business, schools, colleges, churches, the media, medicine, law, and the family are slow to adapt to external change, the people affected by it build up a great deal of frustration. It is the frustration that causes them to overreact in the form of a lurch. As an individual you can control your life but you have little or no control over society and its institutions. Often the only way to get an institution to respond is to push things to an extreme.

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Society's lurch and learn process is far more mistake-prone than individual learning. It often leads to serious mistakes before corrective learning takes hold. In the lurch phase, people are quite error prone because of their strong emotions. In the momentum of the lurch, they are blind to the positive features of what they are reacting against. Some of the lurches in recent years include:

• the lurch from automatic sacrifice for the family to the view that there is no need to sacrifice at all;

• from the conviction that social morality is unnecessarily rigid to the view that "if it isn't illegal it's okay";

• from Puritanism to casual sexual experimentation; and,

• from excessive reliance on government to the conviction that government has no legitimate role to play.

The New Path for Individualism

With these two contexts in mind, let us see what society has learned about individualism and where the ethos of expres-

sive individualism seem to be heading as we approach the millennium.

We have learned that we like many aspects of expressive individualism and want to hold onto the gains:

• We want to preserve the self-expressive focus on health, well-being and fitness that emerged in the seventies.

• We continue to regard sexuality as an inherent good to be expressed openly rather than as an urge to be suppressed puritanically. People are becoming more prudent about sexuality, but the change in attitude is firmly entrenched.

Above all, self-expressiveness continues to be valued as a major goal of life.

There are, however, some aspects of expressive individualism that the public has rejected, particularly its overtones of moral relativism. Significantly, we are beginning to edge away not from its expressive side, but from its individualistic side. This is a fascinating state of affairs. We appear to be holding onto the new expressive values, but are in the process of changing our conceptions of what it means to be an individual, to be a "self."

Conceptions of self are incredibly powerful forces that shape the destinies of cultures. It's not an exaggeration to state that the fate of cultures and civilizations, and their ability to adapt to change, is closely tied to how people see themselves. These past 30 years have, I think, witnessed a series of learnings in American culture about the self and what it means to be an individual.

Consider the goal of self-fulfillment. The conception in the sixties and seventies was that self-fulfillment consisted of filling as many personal needs as possible: the more needs you met the more self-fulfilled you would be. This was the ethos of "you can have it all"—career, family, affluence, leisure, self-esteem, sexual gratification, self-expression, and guaranteed entitlements.

Today's culture is evolving a different notion of the self. It holds that self-fulfillment is *not* a matter of how many needs you can fill, but whether there is a good fit between you and the world in which you live.

In the moral domain, the assumption in the 1980s was: "if I want it and it isn't illegal, why shouldn't I have it?" The image of the self here is that of an autonomous individual governed by needs, wants, self-interests, and external constraints only in the form of the

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law. A shift is now occurring toward a perception of the self as a moral actor with obligations and concerns as well as rights. There is a growing realization that lots of perfectly legal actions hurt other people and are morally wrong. The ancient truth that moral rules are not always relative to individual preferences and that there is such a thing as "right" and "wrong" is regaining favor. In our tracking studies, we are beginning to measure a shift back toward absolute as distinct from relative values.

Our society is also moving away from the doctrine of need-based rights ("if I need it I have a right to it") to a conception of the self as part of a larger community, enmeshed in a network of responsibilities and obligations as well as rights. We are edging toward a concept of reciprocity—the idea that people should not expect to get something for nothing and that if you are able-bodied and adult, you should give back something for what you receive.

There is also a shift away from indulging feelings of victim-hood any-

time your rights are not honored. Instead, a greater emphasis on self-reliance is coming into play: "I am not a victim; I am responsible for my own actions."

A trend toward Social Darwinism also shows up clearly in our data. It reveals a shift away from the kind of egalitarianism dominant in the 60s and 70s which dictated that everyone was entitled to share in the bounty of available resources even if this required large-scale redistribution. The assumption then was that unequal results were society's fault, and that it was society's obligation to address and correct them. We are now moving back toward the traditional American value that people are responsible for their own lives, and that the reality of life is such that there inevitably will be both winners and losers. This conception limits society's moral and legal obligations, but it does not rule out compassion. The view is compassion "yes," legal obligation "no." Unequal results are no longer deemed to be society's fault.

In the domain of spirituality, a shift is occurring away from the assumption that the individual is autonomous and complete in and of him or herself. The conviction is growing that we are part of a larger whole and that our relationship to this larger whole is not fully captured in our relationship to conventional churches and religions.

With respect to the idea of sacrifice, a shift is occurring away from the notion that with enough energy and juggling you can have it all (family, career, self-expressiveness) without any sacrifice, to the notion that if you want your children to grow up into caring, responsible, effective adults, you have to sacrifice more of yourself for them than you may have once assumed necessary.

With all these changes, what is the emerging conception of the individual?

Americans have come to realize that the image of the individual as an aggregation of needs, each demanding

to be filled to the brim, is false and misleading. Young Americans are learning that self-expression is not necessarily achieved through a career as a dancer, filmmaker, photographer, body-builder, or architect. Instead, self-fulfillment is expressed in phrases like "he is his own person," "she is a real person," "she knows who she is." Respect for the willingness to give something up is growing; the urge to accrete as many satisfactions as possible, each one piled on top of the other, is receding.

The late Erik Erikson used the word "virtues" long before it became fashionable. His concept of virtues refers to those strengths of the individual that have moral overtones. Erikson argued that identity is formed as much by what you give up as by what you add. Like a sculptor working with a block of stone, the figure emerges from what is chipped away from the block. The moral discipline of giving up possible satisfactions reverses the conception of filling all the little pots of needs that people assume to be their collective "selves."

Seeking self-realization by giving something up is related to the shift away from the image of the individual as a free-standing, autonomous, self-sufficient entity to the image of the individual as part of a web of relationships: relationships to self, to others, to the community, to the society, to humanity, to the world.

Centuries ago John Donne said, "No man is an island, but each a part of the mainland." People are realizing that the self, considered apart from family, friends, community, country, tribe, society, and civilization, is a meaningless abstraction. As part of a web of relationships, the self is not so much a lone power center engaged in a struggle for maximizing satisfactions even at the expense of others, but a center of care,

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love, responsibility, playfulness, warmth, concern for others. This is a decisive shift away from the narcissism of the 1960s toward a broader, deeper conception of individualism.

This change in what it means to be an individual is one of the most heartening I've seen in years. As a member of the World War II generation, I have a strong ambivalence about the sixties. I've been cognizant of its positive accomplishments in enlarging individual choice, autonomy, diversity, physical fitness, and a heightened environmental consciousness. But I have been troubled by its self-centeredness and hubris.

I've long suspected that the 1960s' conception of "satisfy-my-needs" individualism is bad for society, bad for personal relationships, bad for children, and bad for the people who hold it.

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I believe that some truly valid social learning is taking place, and it leaves me more optimistic about the future than I have been for a long time.

Endnote:
[1] My interpretations are drawn mainly from "DYG Scan—A Trend Identification Program." For interpretations of trends in the 1970s and 1980s I am indebted to "The Yankelovich Monitor."

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