"Bateson has an extremely interesting mind and the ability to express herself with extraordinary literary felicity. . . . Too much truth steams behind the quiet elegance of these passages."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

"I want to hail Bateson for finding—creating, really—a literary form that reflects the way women commonly reason and talk. . . . Bateson makes an addition to women's literary culture that feels absolutely true. . . . In the end we are left reflecting in amazement on the marvelous delicacy and scope of a whole woven discourse about a community of friends and the larger human community in which they thrive. . . . A fascinating book."

—*The Boston Globe*

"Mary Catherine Bateson has written about women but not just for women. Everyone can gain from this book, me especially."

—Bill Moyers

"It is among the most inspiring books about contemporary living. It is potentially helpful to women, and men as well, as they make decisions for themselves and those close to them."

—*Sunday Boston Herald*

"The book proposes an exciting idea: that marginality can be celebrated for its space and creativity, that women may be on their way to establishing a new social ecology . . . Bateson is passionate, convincing, and well informed. . . I admire her attempt to turn the discontinuity that women so often encounter toward a feminine ideal of interdependence, nurturing, and imagination."

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ENRICHING THE EARTH

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EMERGENT VISIONS

THIS IS A STUDY of five artists engaged in that act of creation that engages us all—the composition of our lives. Each of us has worked by improvisation, discovering the shape of our creation along the way, rather than pursuing a vision already defined.

In a stable society, composing a life is somewhat like throwing a pot or building a house in a traditional form: the materials are known, the hands move skillfully in tasks familiar from thousands of performances, the fit of the completed whole in the common life is understood. Traditional styles of pottery or building are not usually rigid; they respond to chance and allow a certain scope for individual talent and innovation. But the traditional craftsperson does not face the task of solving every problem for the first time. In a society like our own, we make a sharp contrast between creativity and standardization, yet even those who work on factory production lines must craft their own lives, whether graceful and assured or stunted and askew.

Today, the materials and skills from which a life is composed are no longer clear. It is no longer possible to follow the paths of previous generations. This is true for both men and women, but it is especially true for women, whose whole lives no longer need be dominated by the rhythms of procreation and the dependencies that these created, but who still must live with the discontinuities of female biology and still must balance conflicting demands. Our lives not only take new directions; they are subject to repeated redirection, partly because of the extension of our years of health and productivity. Just as the design of a building or of a vase must

be rethought when the scale is changed, so must the design of lives. Many of the most basic concepts we use to construct a sense of self or the design of a life have changed their meanings: Work. Home. Love. Commitment.

For many years I have been interested in the arts of improvisation, which involve recombining partly familiar materials in new ways, often in ways especially sensitive to context, interaction, and response. When I was a teenager, I used to go to the house of my mother's sister Liza and hear her son, the jazz flutist Jeremy Steig, playing and practicing with his friends, jamming in the back room, varying and revarying familiar phrases. "Practicing improvisation" was clearly not a contradiction. Jazz exemplifies artistic activity that is at once individual and communal, performance that is both repetitive and innovative, each participant sometimes providing background support and sometimes flying free.

The concept of improvisation stayed in the back of my mind later, as I became interested in studying languages and in thinking about the ways in which each speaker learns to combine and vary familiar components to say something new to fit a particular context and evoke a particular response, sometimes something of very great beauty or significance, but always improvisational and always adaptive. In college, I became fascinated by Arabic poetry, particularly the early poems from the oral tradition in which poets combined memorization and improvisation to fit particular situations. Creativity of this kind has now been well studied. It can be discerned in the Homeric epics, which show every sign of having been produced in this way; and equally well in the rhetorical style of a Martin Luther King, Jr., with its echoes of the rousing preaching in the black churches.

This is a book about life as an improvisatory art, about the ways we combine familiar and unfamiliar components in response to new situations, following an underlying grammar and an evolving aesthetic. It started from a disgruntled reflection on my own life as a sort of desperate improvisation in which I was constantly trying to make something coherent from conflicting elements to fit rapidly changing settings. At times, I pictured myself frantically rummaging through the refrigerator and the kitchen cabinets, convinced that somewhere I would find the odds and ends that could be combined at the last minute to make a meal for unexpected guests, hoping to be rescued by serendipity. A good meal, like a poem or a life, has a certain balance and diversity, a certain coherence and fit. As one learns to cope in the kitchen, one no longer duplicates whole meals but rather manipulates components and the way they are put together. The improvised meal will be different from the planned meal, and certainly riskier, but rich with the possibility of delicious surprise. Improvisation can be either a last resort or an established way of evoking creativity. Sometimes a pattern chosen by default can become a path of preference.

This book attempts to turn my question around, to look at problems in terms of the creative opportunities they present. I believe that our aesthetic sense, whether in works of art or in lives, has overfocused on the stubborn struggle toward a single goal rather than on the fluid, the protean, the improvisatory. We see achievement as purposeful and monolithic, like the sculpting of a massive tree trunk that has first to be brought from the forest and then shaped by long labor to assert the artist's vision, rather than something crafted from odds and ends, like a patchwork quilt, and lovingly used to warm different nights and bodies. Composing a life has a metaphorical relation to many different arts, including

architecture and dance and cooking. In the visual arts, a variety of disparate elements may be arranged to form a simultaneous whole, just as we combine our simultaneous commitments. In the temporal arts, like music, a sequential diversity may be brought into harmony over time. In still other arts, such as homemaking or gardening, choreography or administration, complexity is woven in both space and time.

When the choices and rhythms of lives change, as they have in our time, the study of lives becomes an increasing preoccupation. This is especially true now for women. The biography sections of bookstores continue to expand as scholars chronicle the few famous women and discover others whose achievements have not yet been noted and honored. Others try to understand the texture of the hidden and unrecorded lives of women in our own and other cultures. The women's history movement has many different elements, some of them parallel to the black history movement: the need to make the invisible visible, the desire to provide role models and empower aspirations, the possibility that by setting a number of life histories side by side, we will be enabled to recognize common patterns of creativity that have not been acknowledged or fostered. The process starts with the insistence that there have been great achievements by women and people of color. Inevitably, it moves on to a rethinking of the concept of achievement.

Women today read and write biographies to gain perspective on their own lives. Each reading provokes a dialogue of comparison and recognition, a process of memory and articulation that makes one's own experience available as a lens of empathy. We gain even more from comparing notes and trying to understand the choices of our friends. When one has matured surrounded by implicit disparagement, the undiscovered self is an unexpected resource.

Self-knowledge is empowering.

Nevertheless, there is a pattern deeply rooted in myth and folklore that recurs in biography and may create inappropriate expectations and blur our ability to see the actual shape of lives. Much biography of exceptional people is built around the image of a quest, a journey through a timeless landscape toward an end that is specific, even though it is not fully known. The pursuit of a quest is a pilgrim's progress in which it is essential to resist the transitory contentment of attractive way stations and side roads, in which obstacles are overcome because the goal is visible on the horizon, onward and upward. The end is already apparent in the beginning. The model of an ordinary successful life that is held up for young people is one of early decision and commitment, often to an educational preparation that launches a single rising trajectory. Ambition, we imply, should be focused, and young people worry about whether they are defining their goals and making the right decisions early enough to get on track. You go to medical school and this determines later alternatives, whether you choose prosperity in the suburbs or the more dramatic and exceptional life of discovery and dedication. Graduation is supposed to be followed by the first real job, representing a step on an ascending ladder. We don't expect long answers when we ask children what they want to be when they grow up, any more than we expect a list of names in response to questions about marriage. In fact, assumptions about careers are not unlike those about marriage; the real success stories are supposed to be permanent and monogamous.

These assumptions have not been valid for many of history's most creative people, and they are increasingly inappropriate today. The landscape through which we move is in constant flux. Children cannot even know the names of the jobs and careers that

will be open to them; they must build their fantasies around temporary surrogates. Goals too clearly defined can become blinkers. Just as it is less and less possible to replicate the career of a parent, so it will become less and less possible to go on doing the same thing through a lifetime. In the same way, we will have to change our sense of the transitory and learn to see success in marriages that flourish for a time and then end. Increasingly, we will recognize the value in lifetimes of continual redefinition, following the Biblical injunction, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might" (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

Many of society's casualties are men and women who assumed they had chosen a path in life and found that it disappeared in the underbrush. These are easiest to recognize in areas where continuity used to be greatest.

In the American Midwest, farmers have been losing their farms and finding themselves without path or purpose. Working on land that often has been in the family for several generations, they have interpreted their lives in terms of continuity even as the economics and the technological nature of farming have been steadily changing. The story of the foreclosed farmer is comparable to that of the displaced homemaker who assumed that marriage defined both her work and her security. She has been no more an idle dependent than the farmer, but she too defined herself in terms of a niche that proved evanescent.

Others do not become visible casualties, because they are protected by contracts or union rules from facing the challenges of change. What they lose, and what the society loses through them, is the possibility of learning and development.

In the academic world, the tenure system still supplies a high degree of security and campuses still project serene images of

continuity. Young teachers who choose or are forced to leave often feel that their lives are ending, like foreclosed farmers and displaced homemakers. But watching men and women who have left as they reconstruct and redirect their lives, I have become convinced that for many of them this discontinuity has been a move from stagnation to new challenge and growth, just as divorce often represents progress rather than failure.

All too often, men and women are like battered wives or abused children. We hold on to the continuity we have, however profoundly it is flawed. If change were less frightening, if the risks did not seem so great, far more could be lived. One of the striking facts of most lives is the recurrence of threads of continuity, the re-echoing of earlier themes, even across deep rifts of change, but when you watch people damaged by their dependence on continuity, you wonder about the nature of commitment, about the need for a new and more fluid way to imagine the future.

The twentieth century has been called the century of the refugee because of the vast numbers of people uprooted by war and politics from their homes and accustomed lives. At the time of the Iranian revolution, my husband and I had lived in Iran for seven years. We had to adjust to the loss of our property there, including our books and papers, the loss of jobs, and the destruction of the institutions we had devoted those years to building. But seven years is minor compared to the dislocations that others faced. Some adjusted quickly, finding ways to affirm themselves and their skills in a new environment, bridging discontinuity. Others are still adrift, burdened by the broken assumptions of continuity.

Another set of discontinuities is created by the shifting business and industrial environment, Towns that have depended on a single

industry for generations suddenly find half their people unemployed, with no way to learn new skills or find new homes. In this era of hostile takeovers and leveraged buyouts, continuity at the executive level is suddenly interrupted, businesses are restructured, and career managers find themselves facing "outplacement." Even monks and nuns must learn new skills as neighborhoods change around their monasteries; religious orders today must plan on turnover and constantly revised vocations. The fine old idea of a path and a commitment turns out to be illusory for many people, not only for geographical and political refugees but for cultural refugees displaced by the discontinuities of custom and economy. Even those who continue to wear the same professional label survive only because they have altered what they do. Being effective as a banker or a restaurateur or a general means that one has relearned one's craft more than once.

It is time now to explore the creative potential of interrupted and conflicted lives, where energies are not narrowly focused or permanently pointed toward a single ambition. These are not lives without commitment, but rather lives in which commitments are continually refocused and redefined. We must invest time and passion in specific goals and yet at the same time acknowledge that these are mutable. The circumstances of women's lives now and in the past provide examples for new ways of thinking about the lives of both men and women. What are the possible transfers of learning when life is a collage of different tasks? How does creativity flourish on distraction? What insights arise from the experience of multiplicity and ambiguity? And at what point does desperate improvisation become significant achievement? These are important questions in a world in which we are all increasingly strangers and sojourners. The knight errant, who finds his challenges along the way, may be a better model for our times

than the knight who is questing for the Grail.

Current research on women often focuses on a single aspect or stage of life. Dissection is an essential part of scientific method, and it is particularly tempting to disassemble a life composed of odds and ends, to describe the pieces separately. Unfortunately, when this is done the pattern and loving labor in the patchwork is lost. This book started from the effort to explore different ways of thinking about my own life, to see its pattern as a whole, and to illuminate it by looking at the lives of other women I admire, lives of achievement as well as caring, that have a unitary quality in spite of being improvisations.

The person who first came to mind in thinking about this project was Joan Erikson. I have known Joan and her husband Erik Erikson, friends of my parents, since my childhood. Whatever composing a life is all about, Joan seemed to me to be someone who, at least for her time, got it right. She has three grown-up children and a career that includes several books of her own as well as a complex weave of collaboration with her husband's work, which led Brown University in 1972 to give them simultaneous honorary degrees. Joan was trained as a dancer and dance educator, the first of several careers that became subordinated to child bearing and a husband's work. Now in her eighties, she still moves like a dancer, conveying to younger women the sense of beauty transcending age, and she and Erik hold hands in the street. Joan's creative work has been done in scraps of rescued space and time, in marginal roles that have had to be invented again and again. The theme of improvisation is very clear. Once she described to me how she got started in jewelry making:

"I used to find places in the house to work, a hole here or a hole there, and after I'd gotten far enough along so I could do

something, I asked a man who was a very good craftsman in Berkeley to let me work in his workshop and he promptly said, 'No way!' "Joan laughed. "So I said, 'Well, just wait a minute, I'll tell you what I want, I want to learn a few skills from you. I'm not good enough to be your apprentice, but there are a few things you could teach me on maybe a Saturday morning to keep me going.' And he said, 'I don't even know if you have any skill or imagination or anything else.' I didn't have much to show him, just a few things I had made, but I guess I was kind of persistent, so he gave me a box of junk—you know, when you're working you always have some bits and pieces here or there—and he said, Tut me something together out of that.' And when I did he said, 'Humph, so when can you come?' It was very sweet. My gosh, craftsmen are so nice. When they're nice they're very generous. I went on doing that for quite a while, coming in with a list of things I needed to know. But the next year he left to teach, and when he left he gave me his workbench and the tools he didn't want to take with him. At that point I had to find a better workshop, so I added something onto the garage for a little place to work." Several years later, Joan's designs were appearing in regional and national exhibits.

On the whole, women today follow their interests into more formal careers, but there remain unexpected similarities between the multiple commitments and discontinuities they face and the patterns of Joan's improvisations. Because I have always earned an income and had a professional title, as an instructor or a professor or a dean, the course of my life that led to the writing of this book looked in many ways very different from Joan's. I rushed my degrees to fit in with my marriage instead of abandoning them, and I have taught or done research in linguistics and anthropology ever since. But the underlying assumptions of my life have until recently been very much the same as Joan's: that family life would

be constructed around my husband's decisions about his career—which led him first to the Philippines and then to Iran—and my career would be subordinated to or contingent on the needs of family life, a husband, and a daughter. These assumptions were standard when I grew up, and we are not yet free of them. They continue to order many two-career families.

In my own case, they represented a certain rebellion as well as a coming to terms with cultural norms. My mother, Margaret Mead, was one of the outstanding women of her time, probably the best known of American anthropologists. She constructed her life around professional constancies and made her marriages fit. She left two husbands and was then herself rejected by the third, my father, the anthropologist Gregory Bateson. I had a rich and unusual childhood, with many adult caretakers, and I made my own synthesis from the models offered by my parents and the others I saw around me, assuming I would have a professional life of my own, but that I would construct it around my husband's career. Today I can see that even in our differences my mother and I shared the struggle to combine multiple commitments, always liable to conflict or interruption. Each of us had to search in ambiguity for her own kind of integrity, learning to adapt and improvise in a culture in which we could only partly be at home.

Fluidity and discontinuity are central to the reality in which we live. Women have always lived discontinuous and contingent lives, but men today are newly vulnerable, which turns women's traditional adaptations into a resource. Historically, even women who devoted themselves to homemaking and childcare have had to put together a mosaic of activities and resolve conflicting demands on their time and attention. The physical rhythms of reproduction and maturation create sharper discontinuities in women's lives than in men's, the shifts of puberty and menopause, of pregnancy,

birth, and lactation, the mirroring adaptations to the unfolding lives of children, their departures and returns, the ebb and flow of dependency, the birth of grandchildren, the probability of widowhood. As a result, the ability to shift from one preoccupation to another, to divide one's attention, to improvise in new circumstances, has always been important to women. In the Philippines, when my training in Arabic linguistics was unusable, I retooled as a cultural anthropologist, but this is a less demanding shift than the shift from wife to mother, although perhaps a lonelier one. By examining the way women have coped with discontinuities in their lives, we may discover important clues that will help us all, men and women, cope with our unfolding lives.

Because of the conditions of my life, I have had to learn something many of my academic colleagues don't seem to know: that continuity is the exception in twentieth-century America, and that adjusting to discontinuity is not an idiosyncratic problem of my own but the emerging problem of our era. "How," a young assistant professor wailed to me once, when I was Dean of the Faculty at Amherst College, "can they expect to know me well enough to make a judgment in only three years?" Because of our periods overseas, I had never held a job for over three years, other than that of wife and mother, and plenty of couples decide within less than three years that they know each other all too well.

In many ways, constancy is an illusion. After all, our ancestors were immigrants, many of them moving on every few years; today we are migrants in time. Unless teachers can hold up a model of lifelong learning and adaptation, graduates are likely to find themselves trapped into obsolescence as the world changes around them. Of any stopping place in life, it is good to ask whether it will be a good place from which to go on as well as a good place to remain.

I was in my mid-forties when I left Amherst. We are preoccupied today with midlife crises because these moments of reassessment and redirection occur now with half a lifetime of productivity still ahead, when opportunity still beckons beyond perplexity. We must expect that, over time, such moments will occur repeatedly, that we will live many lives. I found myself looking again at a patchwork of achievements both personal and professional and questioning how they fit together: whether they composed—or began to compose—a life; whether indeed the model of improvisation might prove more creative and appropriate to the twentieth century than the model of single-track ambition. Thinking about myself and about other women I have known, some of them proud and contented and others embittered and angry, I decided that the place to look for the key to new patterns was in lives that were clearly composite. Such a key may be helpful in understanding not only how women make sense of interrupted and discontinuous lives, but also in understanding the goals of education and the terms of men's lives today. All of us are increasingly torn between conflicting loyalties, yet our lives are longer and more full of possibilities than ever before.

Change proposes constancy: What is the ongoing entity of which we can say that it has assumed a new form? A composite life poses the recurring riddle of what the parts have in common. Why is a raven like a writing desk? How is a lady like a soldier? Why is caring for an infant like designing a computer program? How is the study of ancient poetry like the design of universities? If your opinions and commitments appear to change from year to year or decade to decade, what are the more abstract underlying convictions that have held steady, that might never have become visible without the surface variation?

I have chosen to explore these subjects by examining five lives—

my own and those of four friends. All have faced discontinuities and divided energies, yet each has been rich in professional achievement and in personal relationships—in love and work. We are different from each other, but we have many things in common. This book is the outcome of a process of conversation and reflection. It is a way of making these lives available to others in a form that differs both from the extended narratives of heroic biography or case history on the one hand and the lost individuality of the survey on the other.

These are not representative lives. They do not constitute a statistical sample—only, I hope, an interesting one. As I have worked over the material, I have become aware that the portions of these life histories that interest me most are the echoes from one life to another, the recurrent common themes. Teasing these out of a wealth of material and conversation and recognizing aspects of my own experience in different forms has been the process that I found personally most freeing and illuminating. We need to look at multiple lives to test and shape our own. Growing up with two talented and very different parents, I have never looked for single role models. I believe in the need for multiple models, so that it is possible to weave something new from many different threads.

The recognition that many people lead lives of creative makeshift and improvisation surely has implications for how the next generation is educated and what we tell our sons and daughters. The American version of liberal-arts education, since it is not closely career oriented, provides a good base for lifelong learning and for retraining when that becomes necessary, but the institutions themselves often exemplify the opposite. Grassy campuses across the country beckon graciously to children leaving home for the first time; although they are no more than way

stations for their graduates, they still suggest the old norm of lifetime commitment and security. For those who work in them, they represent it even more clearly than a monastery would, or a family farm. In effect, the best of our young men and women are educated by faculties deeply committed to continuity. Most of them have spent their entire lives in a single institution, often surrounded by the apparent tranquility of a small town, and may no longer be intellectually flexible or open to change. Ardent walls covered with ivy are more lovely than tents and trailers, but we need to teach the skills for coming into a new place and quickly making it into a home. When we speak to our children about our own lives, we tend to reshape our pasts to give them an illusory look of purpose. But our children are unlikely to be able to define their goals and then live happily ever after. Instead, they will need to reinvent themselves again and again in response to a changing environment.

Once you begin to see these lives of multiple commitments and multiple beginnings as an emerging pattern rather than an aberration, it takes no more than a second look to discover the models for that reinvention on every side, to look for the followers of visions that are not fixed but that evolve from day to day. Each such model, like each individual work of art, is a comment about the world outside the frame. Just as change stimulates us to look for more abstract constancies, so the individual effort to compose a life, framed by birth and death and carefully pieced together from disparate elements, becomes a statement on the unity of living. These works of art, still incomplete, are parables in process, the living metaphors with which we describe the world.

TWO
IN THE COMPANY OF FRIENDS

ALTHOUGH I HAVE NEVER SEEN HER DANCE, I have always thought of Joan as a dancer, whatever work she was doing, tall and graceful and athletic, with practical strong hands. She wears clothes that are fluid and uncluttered, flaring skirts and turtleneck sweaters and handwoven shawls. She often wears gray or black, which provides a background for jewelry of her own design and making. Often, her jewelry combines interesting beads from all over the world, the human concerns of prayer and exchange and mnemonic expressed in the fashioning of material counters. Joan explored the range of meaning of beads in her book, *The Universal Bead*, so every necklace or pair of earrings that she makes is shaped by scholarship as well as artistry. She has represented to me a distinctive relationship with the physical and material world, one in which the careful handling of metal or ceramic or wool becomes an expression of more abstract issues of human caring and strength.

Women's lives have always been grounded in the physical by the rhythms of their bodies and the giving and receiving of concrete and specific tokens of love, a ring or a teaspoon of cough syrup. Whenever this project has led me into academic abstractions about roles and institutions, I have used my images of Joan to keep me rooted in the loving experience of the sensory and the material. Joan is the oldest of the women who worked with me on this project. She seems to know fully who she is and how the pieces of her life fit together. She has combined her youthful identity as a dancer with her later work as a craftsperson and writer into a single unity, just as each of us, in our different

landscapes, composes a life out of the materials that come to hand.

Ellen Bassuk, a physician and psychiatrist, is the youngest in the group and my most recent acquaintance. I met her in 1983 at Radcliffe's Bunting Institute, a women's center for advanced studies, during a period of transition in both our lives, when I was working on a memoir of my parents. I became fascinated by Ellen's work when she gave the colloquium that each Bunting fellow gives, speaking of the men and women she had interviewed and tested in Boston's shelters for the homeless. Standing by the podium, with the disheveled images of loneliness and despair projected on a screen behind her, she was concerned and professional, and yet she projected an undercurrent of passion.

In those days, homelessness was just beginning to be a matter of national concern, and the issue was new to me. Ellen had become aware of it early, publishing her first related research in 1976. She had tracked the slow increase in chronically ill and isolated patients in the emergency room at Boston's Beth Israel Hospital, where she directed the emergency psychiatric service. Because she recognized the echo of an earlier period when she was assigned as a psychiatric resident to a state mental hospital, she was one of the first to draw the connection between the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill that occurred in the seventies and the rise in homelessness.

"Emergency services are the court of last resort," she explained to me. "They cater to people who are not in the system and don't have insurance, who want to remain anonymous and don't want to deal with fixed hours or appointments. Compared to the rest of the population in the hospital, they are poorer and sicker, with a lot fewer psychosocial supports. The emergency room is the first place that reflects changes in social policy that uproot people, so

when deinstitutionalization occurred, the ER was the first place that began to see the chronics in any numbers."

Ellen's career has involved accepting undesirable assignments and then discovering the intellectual and human challenge of attending those who have not merited attention. "There are certain jobs in big-time teaching hospitals that are almost reserved for women, because in the psychiatric hierarchy they are seen as less desirable than running the inpatient or outpatient units where the psychotherapy goes on. Crisis intervention is not valued in the same way as psychotherapy. In our department, the people who had these jobs were usually women, and women never had those other jobs, the core jobs. The ER is the most dangerous and most service-oriented department in psychiatry. It's open twenty-four hours a day, and if someone comes in you're up, you've got to move fast. It's action oriented and it's really dangerous down there because anybody can walk in and get out of control, an acute unmedicated psychotic or someone on PCP who might have a weapon." Ironically, the risks make such unpopular assignments harder for a woman to decline than for a man; a woman who declines may be suspected of weakness, while a man is credited with ambition.

I found it easier to visualize Ellen meeting with private patients in the upstairs consulting room in her house, where we taped our sessions, than in the hectic environment of the emergency room. She does not evoke images of crisis, but instead projects the concern and good sense that may be exactly what is needed to defuse a volatile situation. She has the coloring of a redhead, with translucent fair skin, a few freckles, and green eyes, but her short curly hair is more nearly auburn.

Ellen's work involves listening, and she listens well, conveying

an impression of neutrality and thoughtful integration leavened with warmth and flashes of mischief. Her presentation at the Bunting colloquium was medical and objective, peppered with statistics, moving into advocacy as we discussed it afterwards and she set out to draw on my background in anthropological fieldwork to supplement her own research training. Later I learned that even as she spoke, she was shifting her focus from homeless individuals to homeless mothers and children and restructuring her professional life to gain the flexibility to have children herself while sustaining her research. By the time we began work on this book, Ellen had a son, Danny, and she and her husband were working their way through the harrowing process of adopting a second child.

Alice d'Entremont is an electrical engineer whose experience has ranged from the design of experimental research equipment for Skylab to being the chief executive officer of a new high-tech company struggling to establish a commercial niche. Much of her work is beyond my understanding, and yet her aesthetic pleasure in what she does, her sense that technology is the art form of the twentieth century, provides us with a bridge of intelligibility. She lives surrounded by plants that flourish and proliferate until she passes them on to friends with less nurturing hands.

I met Alice in 1979 after she and Jack, a creative inventor and entrepreneur whom my husband and I had known since the sixties, became lovers and then colleagues. Together they struggled with elusive questions of electronics and financing until Jack's death in 1985, spending their free time cooking together and searching out the finest ingredients in Boston's Italian markets. When I asked Alice to work on this project, she came and stayed for a week with me in New Hampshire in the summer of 1987. She

walked in the woods and together we taped long interviews about her life.

It was the first vacation she had had after a long, turbulent time, and she used our interviews to sort through the dramas of the last two years and their earlier roots. She struggled to explain to me the technical issues in her work with computer imaging and then commandeered my kitchen to make squash-flower fritters and ratatouille and persuaded me that the time had come to paint the new kitchen cabinets.

Alice is a woman of vivid contrasts, combining delicacy with drama and sexiness. She loves chunky silver jewelry and wears large modernistic earrings and brooches, like a habit of diffidence overcome. She is slim but broad shouldered, with the kind of nose that is said to impart character. Her short hair has turned to silver, but her eyebrows remain dark.

Alice defies stereotypes. Back in the days of Skylab, when there were very few women engineers indeed, Alice showed up to tell a conference of senior NASA officials that their equipment would have to be altered in very basic and very expensive ways, wearing a miniskirt and purple tights, relying on her professional competence to establish her right to speak. When she became an executive and a senior engineer, she made a few sartorial concessions, occasionally even wearing what the advertisers call power suits, but she is too quick and vehement to look convincingly managerial.

Alice's descriptions of her childhood in Rumania were filled with reflections on nonconformity and reminiscences of escaping through the window and over the roof to play with neighborhood children and dogs. "I was always told not to go to the gypsies, because they had all sorts of diseases and they stole children, but

of course that made me go. And I would indeed pick up worms or lice, and my granma would say, 'You must have been with the gypsies,' and I would say, 'Me?' And we would cure all these things, and I would go back. They did outrageous things—the children didn't wear underpants, and we would take our shoes off and walk in the fields in the fresh cowshit, and the granma didn't really scold. I developed the idea very early that if there were rules that didn't make sense, you had to think carefully about how you broke them. If you got caught, well, OK, you got caught, but that was not a reason to stop thinking."

Shortly after we began work on this project, johnnetta Cole, once my neighbor in Amherst, Massachusetts, was selected to be the first black woman president of Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. Not one but two of her friends celebrated the occasion by sending her pairs of white gloves, spoofing the gentility she would need to adopt, but also underlining the particularity needed in designing a new role. Johnnetta's beauty is distinctively Afro-American; she has long bones and a finely molded skull. When we spoke of her conflict with her mother back in the sixties about leaving her hair unstraightened in a compact "natural," she said to me (as one anthropologist to another) that she likes the "dolichocephalic look." Her honey-colored skin and blue-green eyes refer back to a white grandfather, a German immigrant, but they also evoke the invidious comparisons of shade that have inhibited emerging clarity about black ways of beauty.

It is not easy, putting on a new identity as a college president, to learn to express the new role without meeting a stranger in the mirror. Every day, said Johnnetta, who was once a campus radical in a black motorcycle jacket, she includes at least one detail in her clothing that defies conformity—a carved ivory Janus-faced

pendant, made as the emblem of a Liberian secret society; a cowrie-studded belt; or fabric hand-woven by a friend. All the issues of identity and presentation of self are complicated by the need to provide intelligible role models, for college presidents are supposed to project not only policies but lifestyles.

A week after Johnnetta moved to Atlanta in 1987, I arrived for a ten-day stay in Reynolds Cottage, the presidential residence that sits in the middle of the shady and gracious Spelman campus, which was tranquil and empty in the middle of summer. She showed me around what is really a mansion, her comments moving between the mementos of Spelman's past and her plans for her own tenancy. Then we took our drinks out onto a screened verandah as a storm burst and we were surrounded by sudden darkness and pouring rain, providing a curious privacy in this most public space. We were both thrown back into memories of tropical cloudbursts and started talking about Johnnetta's time as a researcher in Liberia and the Caribbean and mine in the Philippines. When the rain stopped, the smells were completely different from our memories: lawns, the trees of temperate climates, and the flowers of the South.

Johnnetta pointed out an area along the outside of the terrace, planted with the flower called impatiens, compliments of "The Cosby Show," which had taped a program two months earlier at the Spelman campus, set up as the fictional Hillman College. I wondered whether someone on the show chose that flower deliberately to refer to the long slow pace of progress in opportunity: the centuries before higher education became accessible to women until the first tentative beginnings in the 1830s, the years before the Civil War when it was illegal in Georgia to teach slaves to read, and the extra decades it has taken before the opportunities converged. Finally, it has become possible to