She's Not Alone

The Urge to Fit In

Until crises she could not have imagined began to reshape her life, Ashley would have laughed at the idea that she was simply trying to fit in. She thought of herself as assertive and independent. She could be the life of the party and did not mind being outrageous. Looking back on high school and college years, she wondered that she avoided lasting consequences. By some instinct she stopped short of risky behavior. She gave the impression of being more adventurous than she was. She could smile at her antics while wondering how she slid past serious trouble.

She had wanted to be a rebel, at least by night, and productive enough by day to get ahead in life. She succeeded and for a while could proclaim loudly that she was free to do as she pleased. She made this point to her parents and reinforced it by her behavior with friends. Later she marveled there was not more conflict at home. Now well into adulthood

and beginning to imagine how it would feel to be thirty, she could still declare her independence, while admitting to herself that she was not certain what this meant. The aggressive edge had softened. Too much had occurred. Life was not so simple. Freedom had complexities and limits.

Now Ashley was looking for something she never dreamed would be missing: a place and a group of people where she felt she belonged. Growing up she could take it for granted even as she pushed back at her world. She was starting to grasp that as a child and even as a rebellious teenager, being accepted had been her intense hope. She barely knew how much this mattered at the time, and would have been enraged if anyone suggested it. But the therapy that followed divorce began to open her eyes. She finally admitted to herself, though as yet to no one else, that all she ever wanted was to belong. Growing up, this had meant desperately trying to fit in. Belonging in a significant way meant only that: fitting in.

She wanted to be liked, maybe even admired, when she was younger. She called attention to herself in the hope of being acceptable. Peer approval meant the world to Ashley. As college and work expanded her life, the urge to fit in—to be acceptable to others—intensified. Beneath her façade was a young woman who needed to know she had a place in the world and who was not sure she did. She longed to find the setting in which she felt understood and welcomed. That was her pursuit, above all others. And it still was, even though she had been chastened by life. "The scary thing is," she mused, "I want to be real and I'm not sure I know how."

Who was the authentic Ashley? She was still discovering, only now she could smile at the thought as she finished her coffee one Sunday morning. Now she said boldly that it was not good enough to fit in; she wanted to belong, or so she was discovering. "Whatever belonging means," she shrugged to herself. Suspending her internal conversation she went to

shower and dress, and then to decide which congregation she would visit. As she left the apartment she wondered at what she was doing. Thinking of congregations to visit certainly was a change.

The intensity of this pursuit continually surprised Ashley when she considered it. But she had begun to understand it. The world in which she grew up was clearly defined by family, school, and neighborhood. Her progress through this world was easy to measure and seemed assured. The wider worlds she encountered would be faced with the same assurance, she presumed. But her presumption was wrong. The world was not what she thought, and there was more to her life than she had allowed. She could no longer fit it, because her life had changed. She could no longer fit in because she was more and life was more. But where did she truly belong? If fitting in was no longer good enough, where could she belong? Where could she be her true self in a way she had yet to discover?

> We are a culture of people who've bought into the idea that if we stay busy enough, the truth of our lives won't catch up with us.
>
> Brené Brown
>
> *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*

Ashley knew that she had become impatient. She was energized and she was in a hurry. She could no longer assume there were limitless opportunities and endless time. Now time was short and the stakes were higher, even as the direction she should take was uncertain. She had to do something. She had to create a new life. She had to find a place where her life could be shared and her possibilities could blossom. It was not a matter of "settling down" as her parent still intoned. She

had to create the right circumstances with the right people, who would understand her search and respect her for who she was. Meanwhile she felt odd and alone. She could not see that the world is full of people like her, people whose lives have changed, for whom there is no clear way to go forward. Ironically, though many like Ashley do not see it, they are not alone.

Lost in Transition

It is apparent that there are millions of young adults like Ashley who are "lost in transition." Sociologist Christian Smith has studied American young adults closely and reached troubling conclusions.[3] His particular interest is in eighteen- to twenty-three-year-olds—in other words, people at the point of transition to adulthood. Smith gives special attention to moral threads in young adult personal identity. He declares that maturity and personal well-being center on holding clear and grounded moral convictions. In a complex society people must be able to consider moral options. Decisions about moral values frame healthy relations and attune people to spiritual truths.

But the moral lives of many young adults are adrift. In some respects there are clear convictions: most young adults shun absolutism and uphold individualism. Yet most prove unable to define and defend a clear moral position. Apart from recourse to individual choice, and perceived threats to it, many have little to say. It's not that they have adopted extreme views; it's simply that they have little conviction at all. To the extent that they hold moral views, they cannot explain why they do.

More alarming, most young adults have difficulty grasping how their actions impact the lives of others or even that events may be related to actions they have taken. They may claim to

resist infringing the individuality of others and take umbrage at perceived infringements of their own lives. However, they have difficulty sorting out more complex patterns of social relations, and taking responsibility for their roles in them.

Ironically, Smith finds, for an age group that staunchly defends individualism, these young adults prize their social relations. Confusion about moral values versus individual prerogative reflects their underlying intention: they are determined to gain a place in a group. Smith observes that what begins as individualism often turns on interests of social relations. The result is that one-third of the young adults surveyed reduce moral values to what others would think.[4] For young adults who seem defined by individualism, fitting in with peers is a basic drive.

One outcome of this reality is that a striking number of young adults today have no civic or charitable involvement. They do not know how to embrace a cause and to work with others to secure it. To the extent that they have political instincts, their involvement, or even interest, is momentary. They have little capacity for sustained commitment.

Likewise their social relations prove fluid and tribal. They immerse intensely in a group for a season, until circumstances, or just whim, send them in search of the next group. Such fluidity is not always of their choosing. Life transitions abound for this age group. More than simply growing up and assimilating, they have seen wars and economic downturn, and family upheaval due to job loss and divorce. With unprecedented mobility they have found electronic avenues and amusements of dizzying sorts. The result is that questions of moral formation and of being personally and socially grounded are going unanswered.

Yet somehow, sorting out one's beliefs, securing individual prerogative, and finding the right social nexus have

become life's tasks for this age group. The pursuit of one's self always occurs in relation to others, even if tentatively. But which others? Which pursuits? The means of connecting to other people have multiplied. Adults of all ages now flock to social media where their whims find graphic display. How many "friends" can one amass? What late breaking news can one describe? How much far-flung approval can one gain? Draped in individualism, social media embody the pursuit of fitting in, of being appealing to others. For a moment it satisfies; then it is gone and the hunt for the next dramatic tidbit begins. Fitting in does not last.

The ambiguity of this pursuit does not satisfy all. A minority of young adults opt for rigid, authoritarian religious and political systems, Smith finds. The postmodern celebration of uncertainty, whim, subjectivity, self-construction, and fluidity frustrates some. In the midst of this social haze, leaders promising assurance become appealing to some. With unprecedented opportunities for individual choice, some opt for regimentation, even tight structure and restrictive lifestyles. This need accounts for the rise of religious groups more exclusivist in worldview and restrictive in what one may believe and do. Such ideas exert little abstract appeal. The lure is an image of a clear path to a genuine personal life in a demarcated set of relations to others. A reward and punishment system in isolation from the rest of the world gives personal benchmarks and a sense of transcending worldly confusions.

Though a minority may find appeal in such rigid religious structures, the impulse that draws people to it is broadly shared. Despite the seeming triumph of individualism, self-expression, and fluid values and commitments, there is a deeper urge. Ironically, individual acting out becomes a contemporary pursuit of fitting in, of gaining attention and approval of others, if only briefly.

Testing the Boundaries

What "fitting in" meant for Ashley's parents and grandparents has decidedly changed. For her grandparents, "fitting in" as we now see it, was presumed. You were born, grew up, educated, married, matured, and died in defined circumstances. If you moved, it was for education or military service, or work. In any case, the intention was to return "home" as soon as possible. To be sure, there have been periods of mass migration in American history, especially of people moving westward or to large urban areas. At times large numbers of Americans have sought fresh possibility; however, they did not intend that their lives would remain unsettled. Once a satisfactory situation was found, and it was pursued intensely, most Americans of prior generations gladly relinquished the idea of moving and turned to the task of fitting in.

Prior generations sought steady, lifelong employment in the same company or profession, a familiar neighborhood and friends, and memberships in local religious and civic groups. Fitting in meant the maintenance of a recognizable, orderly local world. They had tasted the wider world, and retained interest in it. But their local context, likely the one into which they were born, retained their loyalty. Family and friends were defined by it. Stable social relations mattered most.

This generation had children who tested the boundaries of fitting in. They became the generation of Ashley's parents and they were inclined to challenge the settled social worlds they inherited. For varied reasons they concluded that America and its role in the world were misdirected and they set out to make corrections. Causes defined these "baby boomers": civil rights became the paradigm. Then protests against the Vietnam War and for women's equality followed. For some of this generation, the result was that the nation went afield; for others, the nation did not go far enough. An intense "culture wars" flared

and its brushfires continue. The focus was social; the tasks were political. America was proving to be more diverse than most had imagined, but a powerful consensus emerged: there had to be a place at the table for everyone.

Though circumstances were broader and more fluid than in the previous generation, Ashley's parents and their generation still aspired to fit in. Their assumption about social justice was that it entailed equal opportunity to fit in for all. This pursuit was driven by an emphasis on individual rights to be sure, but recognition by society was still a goal. Eventually most of the "baby boomers" went home to jobs and families. But they made their mark. To be accepted for who one is became a fulfillment of the American dream. To a significant degree, Americans could look back on the second half of the twentieth century with feelings of accomplishment. The nation had changed. But much remained unresolved.

Even as epic struggles brought beneficial changes, disenchantment increased. There had always been American undercurrents of alienation and disaffection. The "beat generation" of the 1950s defied social norms of fitting in and cast an alternative social world. It was disengaged and sullen. Literary and artistic circles picked up the theme to a degree. As most Americans fit into jobs, neighborhoods, and families, some roamed mentally if not physically.

As protest movements galvanized, the impulse to drop out widened. In the 1960s and 1970s "turn on, tune in, and drop out" became a movement of sorts. The phrase was promoted by academic turned drug culture advocate Timothy Leary. Reflecting the idyllic innocence of the moment, Leary maintained that psychedelic drug usage would detach people from destructive social convention and bring needed cultural change. Personal freedom meant discovery of the various levels of consciousness within one's self. Drugs were thought to reduce inhibitions and release the true self. In turn, one

could discover self-reliance and the capacity to choose one's destiny apart from authority figures and institutions. The naiveté was alarming.

Unfortunately, widespread drug usage became a continuing fact of American life. A linkage between personal freedom and disdain for perceived norms had been secured. The rejection of one form of fitting in had been replaced by a far more destructive form. Sadly this impulse also has persisted. The legacy of the past half century of American life is littered with groups and cults that promised freedom and imposed destructive conformity—from Jim Jones's formation of the Peoples Temple to the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas.

Fortunately, this destructive legacy has influenced the lives of only a few. But two lessons can be learned from it: first, this legacy illustrates the extent to which people will sacrifice their freedom and individuality in order to fit in, to be acceptable to a group; second, such groups reveal the desperate spiritual search on which many Americans have embarked. Ashley is not alone, although she and her generation feel so acutely. They face agonizing, spiritual uncertainty. Opting for fitting in can be a powerful temptation; but many of them resist it.

> People are not primarily looking to cooperate with our plan for their lives.
>
> Joseph Myers
>
> *Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect*

Suspended in Spiritual Space

In a New England church one afternoon three women met with the minister to plan their father's funeral. He had lived a long and fulfilling life. The family was a mainstay of the town,

though the daughters had moved away decades ago. There had been nominal church membership with sporadic attendance and infrequent financial gifts by the father and mother. The family was known and liked, so the daughters were welcomed back with presumed familiarity.

However it soon became clear that no familiarity with the church, or Christianity, or any religion could be presumed. The minister's efforts to discuss an appropriate funeral service met with blank stares. Finally, trying to find the most basic starting point, he opened a Bible to an arbitrary page, handed it to one of the sisters, and asked: "Do you have a favorite passage?"

Twitching nervously, one of the sisters finally spoke: "What book is this?" she asked. Another sister picked up the thread: "Why are little numbers printed across these pages?" she wondered. The third sister remained silent and stared at the floor.

These women were neither hostile to religion and the church, nor conversant with them. Religious matters, and even less church ones, had played no part in their lives since early childhood. The nominal ties of their parents vanished when they became teenagers. The result was that their lives bore no religious imprint other than a vague sense of legacy. This shred of a link drew them back when their father died. But they were at a loss to understand what they were experiencing and how it could be grasped religiously. Clearly they had not seen a Bible in years.

It has become common wisdom, especially among religious leaders, that faith and faith communities are under assault from various directions at once. The most apparent challenge comes from within religious life itself. "Fundamentalism" has become a commonly used reference for a certain strand of Christianity. Similar inclinations can also be found among Hindus, Jews, and Muslims. Highly mobilized groups in all

of these faiths, following a similar pattern, perceive that official faith leaders are compromising essential beliefs and practices out of laxity or a vain hope of social relevance. Fundamentalist movements impose rigid doctrines and puritanical ethical codes. In some cases their hostility to those outside their fold erupts in violence. They are inclined to feel dishonored and to seek redress. They can generate intense commitment among a devoted few; but their extremism limits their appeal. Nevertheless they can inject themselves forcefully into social contexts and confuse public perception of a particular religion's true nature and intention.

Fundamentalists intent on dominating religious life are only one form of contemporary challenge. Less discussed but well noted, there has been a cluster of assertive writers determined to challenge all religions. These new atheists have generally confronted religion along two intellectual avenues. Some seek to undermine religion's truth claims on the basis of science. Neuroscience has been a favored platform with special interest in demonstrating that no religious basis is necessary for human beings to learn and follow moral principles. A more practical effort to make the same point takes a simple tack: some atheists argue that religion consistently fails in practice to uphold the moral ideals it claims to embody. Religion fails, these atheists hold, because it consistently contradicts itself.

In the public eye the atheist challenge is growing almost as steadily as the fundamentalist one. Both represent threats to the historic faiths and their largely moderate followings. Yet the reality of such menaces is not easy to gauge. Fundamentalism is especially elusive. Clearly there are various conservative religious groups, some of which have taken vigorous stands on social issues. Some loudly announce their fundamentalism as a mark of pride. At times they have exerted political influence, though not often decisively. Their

influence has been more to fan the flames of debate on such issues as abortion and homosexuality. There are no signs of a lasting swing in their direction, despite their capacity to promote their views.

Atheists exert far less influence and are barely growing if at all. By one survey no more than 4 percent of Americans describe themselves as atheists or agnostics, and the percentage has only inched upward in more than a decade.[5] Religious skepticism is something of an American tradition that waxes and wanes modestly from era to era. It also generates more social and intellectual smoke than fire. The result is that fundamentalism and atheism hardly threaten religion despite the force of public perceptions. These polar opposite stances must be kept in proper perspective.

If there is a threat to religious life now, it is represented by the three sisters meeting with a minister in the New England church. They don't oppose religion, nor do they intend to change it; rather, they simply ignore it. This thought might be puzzling to them, and the thought they were part of an emerging social trend might strain their credulity. In fact, over the past decade the fastest growing segment of American religious life has been the "Nones," that is, persons who hold no religious commitment. From just 2008 to 2012, the percentage of the American population with no religious affiliation increased from 15 to nearly 20 percent, and nearly 6 percent of the U.S. public is now self-described agnostics or atheists.[6] A study released early in 2013 noted that the growth rate of this group slowed in 2012. But the figure remains high and seemingly continues to grow.

These categories have arisen from inconsequential a generation ago to marking a major shift now. Also notable, more young adults claim these categories than older age groupings. One could argue that a historic trend toward lack of religious commitment is unfolding. At first glance such data

resonate with Christian Smith's study of young adult moral confusion. By whatever means, there is a growing segment of the American population that has no religious inclination.

But firm conclusions about what this data means should not be drawn quickly. For one thing, other surveys suggest that the percentage of Americans who affirm belief in God, or a higher power of some sort, has not dropped appreciably. One corollary of the recent surveys is that well over 90 percent of all Americans believe in God or a higher power.[7] Even more intriguing are survey results revealing how people think of themselves in religious terms. Over a decade ago interest in "spirituality" surged as more Americans embraced spiritual ideals as opposed to what they saw as religious dogma. For a time "religion" lost appeal because it became linked in the public mind to authoritarian systems and to moral hypocrisies.

Over the past decade, however, there has been a shift: approximately half of all Americans now call themselves "spiritual and religious." Fewer construe being religious and being spiritual as contradictory. "Spirituality" continues to gain broad appeal and "religion" now bespeaks for many the allure of faith community and faith tradition more than older images of legalistic restrictions.[8]

> We did not leave the Church, but rather, the Church left us.
>
> Andrew Sullivan
>
> "The Lost Catholic Church," *The Daily Dish*

Such a turn is not being reflected in affiliation with religious organizations. Membership in virtually all religions continues to drop. Evangelical Christians once presumed dramatic growth but can do so no more. Even the Southern

Baptist Convention, America's largest evangelical denomination, has seen its membership drop slightly in recent years. Similarly, the numbers of Roman Catholics in the United States has basically plateaued.[9] Cynics could argue that the net effect is a decline in Catholic membership because rapid Hispanic immigration has bolstered numbers. Of course the historic mainstream denominations—such as Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Lutherans—have all suffered significant membership losses over the past generation, and there are no signs of reversing this trend. Mainstream institutional decline has become something of a presumed reality which leaders are inclined to ignore or to explain away.

Paradoxically, congregations of all sorts can cite growth or at least an upsurge in activity. A study by sociologist Robert Wuthnow of Princeton has described how American congregations generally take more and better outreach initiative than ever, including notable international relief and mission efforts that are not reliant upon regional or national denominational headquarters. It is notable that as religion appears to decline, at least in its historic institutional form, "faith-based organizations" have gained public recognition. It is also notable that a majority of the "Nones" express interest in congregations because of their capacity to care for people in need. There is indeed a profound legacy of compassion in the faith traditions. We will have more to say about this legacy shortly.

"Nones" or "Maybes"?

But how can some congregations grow while many others stagnate, and while membership in denominations declines? What is the answer that resolves this paradox? The religious landscape is divided into contrasting realities: the decline of historic institutional structures and the rise of creative initiative at the grassroots. In this situation, persons who call themselves

"None" can find local possibilities for spiritual growth and affiliation. One survey doubts that a majority of the "Nones" are engaged in spiritual searches or would be interested in affiliating with a congregation under any circumstances. But the Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby has found that many persons who say they have no religious affiliation are not firmly locked into that position.[10] In other words, under the right circumstances they could find much to inform their searches in congregations. In other words, the "Nones" could be "Maybes." Recent assessments of the "Nones" reveal that over 20 percent say they pray daily, and over half say they seek spiritual meaning of some sort, many in nature.[11] The jury is still out on the outcome of their searches.

They have not firmly disassociated from religious life. Like Ashley, they are apt to test the religious water on their own terms in local contexts. Many will say, or move toward saying, as Diana Butler Bass has observed, that they are both spiritual and religious.[12] Suspicious of religious institutions, they are drawn to the thought of ancient wisdom and ancient tradition. They are also drawn to leaders and religious communities whose lives suggest that ancient ideals are being embodied today and where they find an invitation to join in this pursuit. Seeking the embodiment of faith is central for Ashley and her peers. Open doors to welcome them are crucial.

> People look for place before purpose.
>
> Joseph Myers
>
> *Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect*

The "Nones" may pay attention to religious life as they discover that they cannot find truth, much less community,

alone. Hesitant because of the images they carry of rigid systems, and the experiences that they may have had of them, they are newly attracted to testing local religious waters. They see their futures linked to the discovery of larger truth and community. They need to get over the hurdle of being introduced and welcomed to a congregation. Still wary, they are ready to discover what it means to belong.

One of the challenges in providing space for "Nones" within our congregations is that we cannot presume even a rudimentary acquaintance with faith or a positive disposition toward the sources of our faith, such as the Bible. Therefore, the framework we use to explain faith and the sources we use to support Christian values are viewed with many questions.

As a way to address this, one of our churches, which has many "Nones in search of something," recently launched "The Bible Challenge," a program many Episcopal Churches have used to read through the Bible in a year. What we quickly learned is that for this to be successful with those on the margins of the church, and even within its center, there must be the space and freedom for people to reflect honestly about what they are encountering. We cannot presume that people will find God in the text or anything sacred about it, nor we can subtly imply they should.

What we've found is that people need space to question, doubt, and even dismiss what they read. We realized that we had forgotten, if we ever knew, what it is like to try and see the sacred in shady biblical characters who are somehow doing God's will. Or how a prolonged narrative about God's "chosen people" displacing indigenous populations can be an inspiring story of faith. For many of us, our enculturation into the faith has created an interpretative autopilot that can quickly cull out the sacred. But those on the margins of the church cannot do this.

Opening the church to those outside it is messy business that leads to untidy conversations, but it is symbolizes something important about belonging. We've found through this program, and others like this, that if we are a place where there can be open and honest conversations about what people really think and feel, even if it's not the accepted position, then it may be a place where they can belong.

Exploring How to Belong

To put this quest in perspective, it is important to recall that for a generation there has been discussion of "spiritual seekers" in American life. The term has been used so often it has become unremarkable. Seekers are a given on the religious landscape and many congregations have built strategies for incorporating them and their searches. In some sense, American young adults have often been seekers. But with Ashley's generation a decided change is apparent.

Her grandparents focused on life transitions and finding a settled life that defined them. Her parents pursued specific changes in the world in order to settle down in a similar way. Now there are indications that a significant proportion of Ashley's peers are neither settling down nor intent on changing the world. Ashley and many of her peers define their lives as journeys of discovery. They are determined to find themselves and to build relations with one another in new, substantive ways. They want to find truth, not be told it. They want to build community, not be given it. They are focused less on social change and more on rebuilding themselves and their interpersonal relations. They presume this will be a lifelong pursuit and that life will continue to be dynamic in this way.

The result is not that they are dropping out of society; rather they are inclined to maintain sufficient social

participation to sustain themselves, and perhaps even thrive. Meanwhile there is a deep, intensely personal quest that continues. The ideal driving this quest is the pursuit of what is "authentic." Ashley and her peers intend to be authentic and to be with one another in authentic ways. They are living their lives on distinct and not always intersecting tracks: the one practical and immediate, the other ideal and long-term. The success of their journey will be the blending of the two tracks, and this is their intense goal. They hope to blend work and daily life with ideals of the self and relationship they are cultivating. They are flexible in terms of where they live: wherever they might approach such integration of their scattered selves. But the search for such integration of one's life is a lengthy one.

Ashley and her generation are in the midst of an extended liminal phase of their lives. Anthropologists speak of liminality as a period of transition. Usually the liminal period is a clearly defined transition, with a specific beginning and a clear goal marked by a straight path. The pledge in a sorority or fraternity is in a liminal phase. The recruit in military boot camp or the firefighter-to-be in training or the participant in any orientation program is in a liminal state. They are neither the persons they were previously, nor the persons they are intent on becoming. But their transition begins at a precise point, has a defined duration, and ends at a specific goal. Ashley's grandparents presumed such experiences, as did her parents in a more fluid way.

In a sense Ashley's generation is in a prolonged liminal state. They pursue life-changing discoveries, knowing they will arrive at a different place from where they started. Although their journeys have a defined goal, they are vaguely construed transitions. "Authenticity" is an ideal of uncertain dimensions. In addition their paths to authenticity are uncertain. Even the starting point, a general sense of discontent

and a lack of personal clarity, cannot be defined clearly. As Christian Smith pointed out, a dynamic sense of subjectivity, of focus on one's self in relation to others, absorbs this generation.[13] Their liminal period is unclear. Their journeys are as open as they are avid. They are willing to explore and to risk. But what they will find and how is uncertain. They believe they will know it when they see it. Meanwhile they intend to enjoy the pursuit.

A key sign of being in a liminal phase is a strong capacity to identify fellow travelers and to build intense ties to them, if only for a brief period. Liminality is often linked to *communitas,* an uncanny ability to build connections not meant to endure but to inform the journey. Such ties are different from social roots. They are as episodic as they are intense. Social media exemplify this style of contact. Thus, in her book *Alone Together,* Sherry Turkle describes how technology now drives many young adult relations.[14] Electronic connections have come to reflect *communitas,* a deeply revealing but brief connection between people that is ever changing. By such ties, there is a powerful capacity now to ground community in shared exploration and discovery, even if it is quickly replaced by the next experience.

But Turkle is struck by the fact that electronic connections are proving to be substitutes for face-to-face contact. Worse, electronic encounters allow many people to feel that they can create their own reality. Loneliness can be overcome in simple bursts of contact that can be contoured to reduce complexities. Fantasy can be encouraged; reality can be filtered if it proves disconcerting. Turkle finds the worst instances involve robotic toys. Electronic pets can convey the image of companionship without dying or running away. As a result she fears that more people are desensitized to what is real. They are incapable of facing and making difficult choices, especially ones where personal values must be consulted. The

line between the real and the virtual is being blurred, leaving many people emotionally stranded.

Ashley functions well in the electronic world. Her daily series of text messages to friends, the volume of e-mail she reviews, and her capacity to find information online or store her own data in a cloud all testify to her comfort. But this is information exchange, she has realized. By a fortunate instinct, she has grasped the pitfalls of posting too much information on social media. By a similar instinct she has sensed what to say, and what not to say, even to a close friend by a text. She had seen many messages forwarded too widely. She has become cautious about expressing her most private thoughts and wonderings. She liked the ability to find someone quickly. But she was hesitant to say too much.

Because they are fleeting, electronic links prove incomplete for many people, including Ashley. Out of her dissatisfaction with fleeting encounters, she began a pursuit of personal truth and ties that last. In this way religious tradition can loom as guideposts to finding oneself and authentic community. In this way Ashley and others might be spiritual and religious. They are awakening to the idea of sustained belief and community. As Smith found in his research, they are realizing that they have difficulty making choices, and need grounding as they face moral decisions.[15] The reality that they are aging, that some options have been foreclosed, and that their lives have been made worse by prior decisions, alert them to the need for a place and a framework of decision-making. Thus the stakes are high. How can they find authentic life and community? What would give their lives a lasting center of gravity?

It is clear that Ashley does not want to "fit in" as her grandparents and parents intended for themselves. Partly because of the upheavals she has experienced, and partly because she left home psychologically for good, Ashley is intent on

discovering her own authentic self and on building authentic relationships. She does not want to live a monochromatic life that reflects the expectations of a previous generation. Instead, she is intent on weighing various options, judging them by what is new and different, what she can learn, and what allows her to retain creative spontaneity in her life. She had already concluded that "fitting in" seemed an abandonment of herself and of the discoveries about life she had already made.

But if she knew clearly what she was leaving behind, toward what goal was she headed? Visits to congregations arose out of a fateful realization: she needed to belong. Fleeting and often superficial ties to other people were no longer enough. There had to be a place and a group of people interested in building the sort of life she hoped to build. Part of Ashley's dilemma was her uncertainty about what this actually meant. By now she acknowledged to herself that this was a journey and she had only found part of what she needed. One thing she knew with certainty: she had to overcome the feeling of being alone, and she had to build connections to people that would extend her search and would also prove lasting.

Ashley wanted to be known for who she was. She wanted to move beyond the crossroads where she was beginning to feel stuck. She wanted to commit herself to something larger that would make a difference. She knew she could not do this by herself. She needed to find the place where she could be accepted for who she was. Although there were lots of people around her, in the apartment building and on the streets, she felt little sense of connection. Somehow she had to connect to other people with whom she could share the journey toward purposeful, substantive life. It was not good enough to be alone together. It was not good enough to try to recapture her adolescent and college styles. She had to go forward in life. But what did that mean?

If one realization had proved frustrating, it was this: she felt stuck. She had a difficult time making choices and resisted sticking with them and with the commitments to people and to projects and ideas these decisions could imply. Ashley could not decide what she really believed, to what or to whom she was committed. Nor could she envision how she would ever decide. One thing had become certain: she could not decide alone. A big part of her dilemma was simply learning how to grasp truth and how to make life-giving choices on that basis.

No Returning Home

She had grasped that life is finite. It was no longer an infinite series of disparate, self-energizing experiences in an ageless universe. So then, where was she going and how would she know when she got there? There was no thought of "going home," as previous generations would have thought. There was no longer any consideration of fitting in, of somehow recapturing a time and people and place that once existed. Such a thought was a bad joke. She was beyond returning and trying to fit in. She had to find her true, authentic self in the company of others.

Belonging had become an ideal and she was trying to sort out what it meant, and if it could be found. She assumed that belonging meant being with people who were living in authentic ways, addressing substantive life issues openly and innovatively. She had begun to think that "tradition," whatever that meant, might offer some lessons, if it could be sifted openly. In such a situation, perhaps, she could find answers for the way of life she now knew she needed.

She was admitting to herself, painfully, that she had never truly belonged. Her deepest fear was that she never would, and that nothing would make sense or matter. Ultimately, she was afraid that she might not matter. Her search for meaning

had become profound, which should not be surprising. As David Brooks observed in *The Social Animal*, human beings must live in close relation to each other to extend our personal development.[16] It is how we learn values; what we learn is filtered through relations to others and to circumstances. But what relations do we build? What values do we learn as a result?

Honest spiritual seekers such as Ashley pursue this exact question. They seek to begin something true and purposeful, not to preserve someone else's creation. They seek not just allegiance but initiative. They envision truth as dynamic, open-ended, to be discovered. Yet they want something worthwhile to last, and they want to be a part of it. They also need a place to convene, a center of sorts, around which they can orbit, even if they do not always intersect it.

They wonder what it means, in the words of one author, to "flourish."[17] They sense it is a rhythm of life, and a pattern that has escaped them to a significant degree. They are finding that it means being engaged with others. Though anxious about the idea, they admit it revolves around trust. They are not clear who and what they trust, but they want to find out. Can they discover what they seek in a congregation? At first glance the answer to this question is not encouraging.