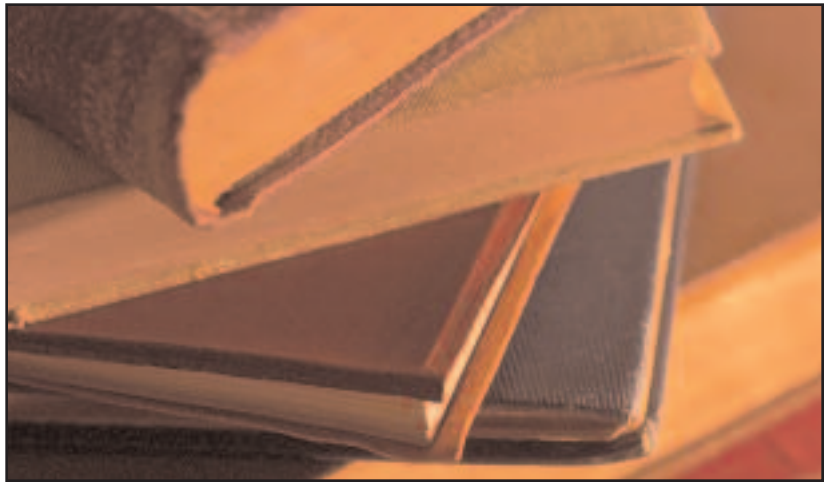
CHAPTER

3

Exploring the Self



Discovering and revealing aspects of yourself are two of the major reasons for exploratory writing. In the prewriting and drafting stages, you should probe as deeply as possible into your experiences, your ideas, your past, your hopes, your fears, your beliefs, your personality traits, your relationships with family members and friends, the details of your inner self. The point of this probing is to discover something new about yourself. When it comes time to craft those materials into a polished essay for your readers, you decide how much of what you've discovered you want to reveal to them. Throughout the final draft, you should keep referring back to yourself, to the feelings and ideas that you feel comfortable revealing.

Writer-Based Goals

There are three writer-based goals. The primary one is deceptively simple: to get to know yourself better on a profound level by practicing introspection in writing, by scrutinizing your inner self, and by verbalizing your feelings and beliefs. All other writer-based goals grow from this one.

The second writer-based goal concerns your relationship to your readers: to discover how much of yourself you are willing to reveal to them. On some level, of course, any act of writing is also an act of self-revelation. Even a biology lab report reveals some things about you: for example, your possible interest in a particular biological question, your way of approaching a problem, your skill in manipulating and interpreting data, your verbal skills.

Here, though, I'm speaking about revealing your thoughts and beliefs, your past and your relationships, your vision of yourself and of others. Revealing these to readers can seem difficult at first, and there will be some insights you do not want to share. That is fine—none of us wants to reveal everything. But discovering what you feel comfortable revealing, what you can bring yourself to reveal, and what you cannot bring yourself to reveal—those discoveries not only increase your knowledge of yourself but also help you discover how you relate to your readers.

The third writer-based goal is to explore and enhance the connection between your co-topic (your self-revelation) and the other topics which your essays will inevitably include such as events, people, concepts, and texts.

Reader-Based Goals

There are three reader-based goals: (1) to tell your readers something significant and interesting about your topic; (2) to reveal something of significance about your co-topic (yourself) to your readers; and (3) to explain that revelation fully (its sources, its significance, its implications, its expression in your life, its global significance for the readers themselves).

Who Am I?

"Who am I?" is a question that each of your essays will attempt to answer in part. Conventional wisdom says that we are the sum of our past experiences, our thoughts, hopes, fears, beliefs, physical characteristics, genetic inheritance, and the environmental influences upon us. One place to start answering this question is to label your various identities.

Labeling Identities

The following sentences come from essayist Nancy Mairs' introduction to *Carnal Acts*:

> I'm a white, middle-aged, middle-class, heterosexual, crippled feminist of a reclusive and rather bookish temperament, turned from New England Congregationalist to Roman Catholic social activist in the desert Southwest. Because I write as directly as possible out of my own experience, these traits inevitably shape my work.

At least 13 different defining traits are crammed into that amazing first sentence. Let's look more closely at the various criteria that Mairs employs:

- Her racial identity—white
- Her age identity—middle aged
- Her economic class identity—middle class
- Her sexual identity—heterosexual
- Her physical identity—crippled
- Her social identity—reclusive
- Her temperamental identity—bookish
- Her former regional identity—New England
- Her former religious identity—Congregationalist
- Her current religious identity—Roman Catholic
- Her political identity—social activist
- Her current regional identity—desert Southwest

Other categories might exist that are not included here because they are inappropriate for her purpose at the moment, but they might be very appropriate for *your* purpose.

Notice, too, that many of these are only partial identities. For example, more than just "social activist," her political identity would include at least her political party affiliation, and her temperamental identity would include such things as her depressions and her tendency to self-mockery when alone. Mairs could (and often does) explore each one of those identities in separate essays.

Another way to think about our identities is to consider the roles we play: For example, I am a husband, a father, a son, a cousin, a nephew, a teacher, a fiction writer, a textbook writer, a poet, a driver, a passenger, a consumer, a letter writer, a piano player (bad), a guitar player (worse), a singer (even worse), a collector of books, a computer user, a Celtics fan, a New York Giants fan, a walker, a chess player, a tennis player, a cross-country skier, a reader. And that is hardly an exhaustive list.

We all play many roles, and each role has profound implications. For example, why do we choose one particular role rather than another? What do we derive psychologically from that role? Here's a brief example. Since boyhood, I've been a Yankees fan in New England, a region dedicated to the Red Sox. Why did I choose that role and what did I derive from it, particularly when circumstances dictated against it? For instance, fewer opportunities existed to see the Yankees play (in my home state of Maine, the Yankees were televised only when they were featured in the "Game of the Week" or when they played the Red Sox—all of whose games were aired). All of my friends were Red Sox fans. Every day the local newspaper carried in-depth stories about the Red Sox players, never about the Yankees. So why did I decide to play the role of Yankees fan? The answer, I think, reveals something about my inner self. Even in childhood, I valued being independent, being the one who made up his own mind. I liked feeling different, probably because *being different* suggested *being special* to me. For reasons I would need to explore in a whole essay, I enjoyed the competition and friendly conflict that being a Yankees fan afforded. In those years, too, the Yankees were the winningest team in baseball. Although I hate to admit it, I probably liked being identified with a winner too. Even a somewhat silly role like baseball fan, then, can lead to important insights into the complexities of our personalities.

In short, identifying ourselves as members of particular groups or as playing particular roles can help us think about ourselves in new ways.

The Uses of Labeling Identities

The previous section encourages you to classify yourself, to label yourself as having particular identities and playing particular roles. That is an effective strategy for helping you to see yourself in ways you might not have considered before. But the labels are the beginning of the exploratory process, not its end product. Labels carry suggestions and connotations that are often not applicable to individuals within that group. The trick is to explore the implications of those labels, accepting the ones that fit, rejecting those that don't fit, and explaining why.

Here is a simple example. I am an *only child.* We all know the cultural stereotype of the only child—spoiled, selfish, and egotistical. Fortunately, I have none of those characteristics (at least, according to me). Yet my two children insist that my sense of "this is mine, that is yours" is the product of

my being an only child and therefore of my never having learned to share. They are right that I am very reluctant to share my "stuff" with others. They are wrong, I think, about the source of this reluctance. It comes, I think, from the fact that I have always felt I could live with the fact that I broke one of my things (a toy, my typewriter, my car)—a just punishment for irresponsible behavior, I suppose. But if someone else broke one of my things, I would feel both (1) stupid for having lent it in the first place and (2) upset about what to do about it.

Two aspects of my personality combine in that second element. First, I don't "do confrontation" very well, so the idea of demanding that the other person (child or adult) replace the broken item feels impossible. Second, I pride myself on being able to imagine what the other person is feeling. Part (or all) of this might be mere projection of my feelings onto the other person. But whether it is true sensitivity or neurotic projection, the point is that I believe that I know what the other person feels. If I broke something belonging to someone else, I would be overwhelmed with guilt and embarrassment. I would feel that I had violated some "sacred trust," that people could never trust or respect me again. I could write essays exploring the origins of each of these feelings, of course, but the point here is that the combination of feelings and thoughts individualizes the standard stereotypical only-child attitude of mine. So my apparent only-child emphasis on property rights comes not (I think) from only-child selfishness but rather from a dislike of confrontation and from a crippling sense of guilt when I do anything "wrong."

Of course, such causes are not true for all "only children," and that is my point entirely. Each response by anyone stems from more than what society assumes is the cause (the group we belong to, the label we wear). Exploring those causes in ourselves (and in our vision of other people) helps us understand ourselves and others even better.

Getting Personal

Writing to explore yourself requires serious thought and a willingness to revise again and again as you write. Here are some techniques for exploring yourself:

- Assume there's more complexity in you than you think.
- Ask yourself questions about your emotions and ideas.
- Ask yourself those same questions again.
- Locate the sources of your emotions and beliefs. Consider reactions opposite to yours.
- Consider reactions that differ from yours
- Explore significant relationships.

Assume Complexity

The real key to exploring ourselves is to assume that there's more complexity within us than first meets the eye. We are all made up of many layers, and our motivation has much greater depth than most of us are aware of (and perhaps want to acknowledge). For example, let's assume that David refuses to let Mary copy his history homework. It comforts David to believe that he refused because he is honest.

Period.

Forcing himself to dig into his motives, however, he might find that he also refused because Mary already owed him a favor and he wanted to be paid back first. Deeper, David might find that he fears his homework is not very good and he doesn't want to be embarrassed by letting Mary see it. Deeper still, he may fear being caught cheating, a feeling that comes from confrontation with an authority figure in his past. Even deeper, he might find that he resents Mary because she indicated a romantic interest in John instead of in him. And so on.

In short, we all have complex motives for every act that we do; exploring those motives helps us learn about ourselves and also teaches our readers something significant about the way the world works since we are, as Montaigne might say, "representative humans."

Ask Yourself Questions about Your Emotions and Ideas

After every statement or question, ask:

- Why?
- How do I know this is true?
- What's the significance of this for me emotionally and intellectually?

Write sentences or whole paragraphs answering these questions. These answers will move you deeper into yourself and will enrich your essay.

Ask Yourself Those Same Questions Again

The usual impulse is to ask ourselves those questions only once. Yet often the answers we find are not the most profound insights into ourselves that we can discover. By asking the same questions again (this time asking them of the answers we just wrote), we often find even more interesting and revealing insights. Like "double jeopardy" on the TV quiz show *Jeopardy*, the second round of questioning pays bigger dividends; in other words, you will find yourself burrowing even deeper into your emotions, motivation, and beliefs.

Locate the Sources of Your Emotions and Beliefs

The immediate source of an emotion is often highly visible in the event itself. Getting a job, for example, would probably give you a sense of relief (you don't have to keep trying to sell yourself to other employers) and joy (satisfaction that you did something well, a sense of being accepted as a person). Those emotions, however, have sources. For example, why do you hate to "sell yourself" to employers? Perhaps you are shy. But where did that shyness come from? Are you always shy, or only with strangers, or only with authority figures? If you feel insecure, why? Are you poorly trained for this particular job? If so, what is the source of your audacity in applying for it in the first place? Perhaps circumstances are a factor (you have to pay for college), but more complex explanations always exist. Does your shyness hide a deep-seated overconfidence? If you're shy, what did you do to psyche yourself into going to the interview in the first place? Who taught you those techniques?

The immediate source of a belief or an idea might be some code of behavior or some system of beliefs. Consciously or unconsciously, we have all answered the philosophical question "What is a good and moral person?" Often, though, our answers to that question are makeshift, jerry-built for particular situations. Exploratory writing will help you answer that question more cogently. At times, that answer might conflict with another answer to a question you value more highly—for example, "What is a successful person?" or "What is a happy person?" Discovering your most profound answers to such questions will teach you much about yourself.

Once you know the answers to such questions, the next task is to explore the more hidden sources of your beliefs and ideas. Some obvious answers are parents, family, friends, books, TV and movies, songs, and society in general. But dig deeper than that. Most parents try to instill many moral principles in their children; some principles take seed and grow, others don't. Why did the ones that grew in you survive and the others not? Perhaps the ones that stayed with you were the ones you saw your parents (or friends or family) actually living. Or perhaps the opposite is true—the principles you saw in action turned you off.

At times, many of us experience a conflict between the principles we think we should follow and the expedient actions we have to take in order to achieve some goal. Exploring such conflicts always leads to interesting essays.

Consider Reactions That Differ from Yours

Another way to discover more about yourself is to consider the ways other people have reacted or might react to similar situations. You might find such reactions in literature and in visual texts such as television shows and movies. Or you might role-play, considering reasons why someone would react differently from you. Or you might discuss the situation with your friends to learn their reactions and their reasons for those reactions.

In the earlier example of David's refusing to lend his homework to Mary, David decides to discuss the situation with his friends. All three friends recommend that he lend her the homework. Nnenna explains that most of the homework for that particular class is repetitious and so Mary will learn almost as much by copying his as by doing it on her own. Carlos asserts that doing Mary the favor costs David nothing and gains him Mary's appreciation. Nicola believes that Mary will never develop romantic feelings for David if he gives her grief over such an issue.

Having amassed those reactions, David reassesses his own position and motives. He sees that all of his friends make pragmatic points. For example, Nnenna makes an argument about the practical impact on Mary's learning the material, while Carlos and Nicola consider the practical impact on his continuing relationship with Mary. Seeing their emphasis on pragmatic considerations, David realizes that resentment, not morality, is one of his core reasons for refusing, an insight he had not developed before. He decides to eliminate resentment as one of the factors influencing his decision. This decision is based on another element in his own moral code that he had not considered earlier. He states that element as follows: "Decide moral questions by appeals to logic and morals, not by appeals to emotions." Of course, he still has his own pragmatic arguments—the fear of being caught cheating and his fear of being embarrassed by the quality of his homework. Whether he finally decides that his friends' arguments or his own are most convincing, he has learned more about himself through this process of examining reactions that differ from his.

Explore Significant Relationships

Closely related to beliefs about the world are our ideas about relationships. Consider how many relationships you have right now: At the very least, you probably have separate relationships with each member of your family, with friends, acquaintances, a spouse or significant other, classmates, your professors, some members of the college's administration, perhaps an employer and co-workers. Each of those relationships might be a source of some of your beliefs and emotions.

Explore a relationship as it is now, considering other elements as well, such as the relationship's history and your expectations about the relationship when it started and now. How would you like the relationship to be in the future (a year from now, five years from now)? What are the sources of those expectations and hopes?

Gaze Outward and Inward

British novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch makes an important distinction between seeing and gazing. Seeing is the act of looking at superficial details of life and at the masks that all people wear. Gazing, on the other hand, is the act of giving complete attention to another person, of trying to deal honestly with the intricate complexities that make up each human being. Seeing is not always bad, of course. It would be impossible for us to operate in the world if we tried to gaze into the soul of every person we came into incidental contact with. For example, the guest lecturer in a class, the chef in a restaurant, the pilot of the plane—each of these people deserves to be truly understood, but it is not necessarily *our* task to do the understanding.

We can adapt this concept to exploratory writing. For the people and events that you write about, try gazing instead of merely seeing. Look always for the complexity in the person, in the event, in the concept, in the text. Because you are always one of the subjects of your essay, there will be another kind of gazing—gazing inward to understand your own complexity.

A Vision of the Self

In psychological terms, we can divide the mind into three parts: (1) the conscious, (2) the preconscious, and (3) the unconscious. The conscious includes all the activity that we are immediately aware of and which we can control. The preconscious includes memories and feelings that we are not immediately aware of but which we can gain access to with some effort. The unconscious contains elements that influence our feelings and behavior but which can never be recalled or controlled by the conscious mind. Although this geography of the mind is simplistic, it serves to illustrate an important point for exploratory writing.

We all have experienced moments of insights into ourselves, suddenly realizing secondary motives for our actions. And all of us certainly have perceived other people's "hidden agendas" and "secret motives." The term *hidden agenda* has a negative connotation in our society (in part because it usually suggests a consciously hidden agenda), but we all have motives which are secret, sometimes even from our conscious mind.

Intense discussions with family and friends, professional guidance (for instance, by counselors and therapists), and—especially for our purposes in this book—the serious introspection involved in writing can often lead us into the preconscious layer. Here we discover some of the early experiences that establish our patterns of behavior. Here we find some of the sources of those awkward impulses and beliefs that we have such trouble explaining to ourselves and others.

As you prepare to write, tunneling into your history and hidden motives, imagine yourself as a miner. You chip off a piece of rock, think it might be gold, and go back to the surface to evaluate the fragment in the clear light of day. Perhaps you discover that it really is gold, in which case you return to the end of the tunnel and keep digging in the same direction. Perhaps the light reveals only pyrite (fool's gold), in which case you return to the tunnel and begin digging a branch off to the left or right.

When you do find something that seems potentially interesting (the bit of ore might be an event you have remembered, a text you respond to in an unusual way, an idea from a lecture), take it into the daylight (that is, write about it in prewriting or a first draft), turn it this way and that in the light, consider it from a number of perspectives. Unless it comes directly from the surface (which we will assume are the external details of your life), chances are whatever you've found is worth writing about, although you may have to go back into the tunnel to look for related treasures.

Using Vantage Points to Explore the Self

Here are some **vantage points** from which you can consider yourself. They are based in part on the idea expressed in Nancy Mairs' sentence quoted earlier. Notice that the following list goes from the most general category to the most specific. For each vantage point, you might list all the characteristics (for example, personality traits, needs, drives, desires, attitudes, and assumptions) that you think are caused wholly or in part by your belonging to that category. Each vantage point encourages you to develop a stereotype, a generalization about some group (for example, human beings, Americans, Democrats, mothers-in-law) based perhaps on observations of a few individuals within that group that are expanded to include all members of the group. Thus a stereotype is always a simplification (and often can be totally incorrect for all but the one or two individuals within the group who were originally observed). Nevertheless, stereotypes can be useful as a starting place when you consider yourself or a concept (for instance, fathering).

Human Vantage Point

Consider yourself as a representative human. Avoid any elements that seem to come from anything but basic human nature. Consider first the elements that unite all humans. For instance, what are the basic needs that all humans must have satisfied in order to survive? Food and shelter come quickly to mind. What about physical activity, companionship, solitude, and beauty—are they also basic human needs? Why or why not? If they are, how much of each is necessary? How much is desirable?

What are basic human traits? This is a very complex area, one that might require you to consult some sources. For instance, are humans naturally aggressive and combative? Is it basic human nature to fight? Is it basic human nature to be greedy and to look out for "Number 1" first? Or is it basic human nature to be generous and altruistic? How do you know?

Once you have established your vision of what is basic for humans, consider what needs or traits individualize you. What basic human elements would you like to eliminate if you could? Why?

Gender Vantage Point

Consider yourself as a representative of your gender. You will need to think about the traits commonly associated with your gender and the stereotypes as well. For example, men are often seen as favoring logic over emotions, as preferring aggression and physical expression to conciliation and conversation. Women, on the other hand, are seen as valuing relationships and emotions. They are perceived as nurturers. These are obvious stereotypes; you must add your own insights and observations. You might consider a hypothetical situation—for example, Chris has just discovered that Cary has been unfaithful. Cary doesn't want the relationship to end. If Chris were a man, how would he probably react to the news? What (if anything) could convince him to forgive Cary? Why would that be effective? If Cary were a woman, how would she tell Chris about her act of unfaithfulness? How would she try to convince him that she still loves him and doesn't want the relationship to end?

Then reverse the roles. If Chris were a woman, how would she probably react to the news? What (if anything) could convince her to forgive Cary? Why would that be effective? If Cary were a man, how would he tell Chris about his act of unfaithfulness? How would he try to convince her that he still loves her and doesn't want the relationship to end? Such hypothetical situations help you discover your own versions of stereotypes.

Once you've established the traits and attitudes of the typical representative of your gender, then examine yourself. What differentiates you from the "typical" members of your gender? Why? What characteristics (if any) would you eliminate from your gender if you could? Why? Which would you include from the other gender? Why?

National Vantage Point

For many people, their homeland is a place to love and honor.

When political oppression occurs, they might flee the country, but most still love the country while hating the oppressive government. In other words, they separate the government from the land itself. Further, many people accept certain tenets or values of their homeland as obvious truths. For example, I was born in the United States and believe that such things as freedom of speech and the opportunity to develop all talents are rights of every person in the world. People born under different political, philosophical, or national assumptions might disagree. Consider yourself as a representative of your nation. What tenets or values would you change if you could? Why?

Regional Vantage Point

A particular region of your homeland may also contribute elements to your personality. For instance, I come from New England and was taught to value education (New England's long heritage of education). I also picked up the Yankee keep-to-yourself mentality. Coupled with my natural shyness, this mentality kept me a bit aloof from strangers for several years. Consider yourself as a representative of your region. What elements of your personality would you change? Why?

State Vantage Point

Naturally this blends in with the regional vantage point, but differences exist. I come from Maine, a non-industrial, sparsely populated state, and was soon taught to value rugged individualism, to do for myself, to have a provincial vision of the world. Growing up, I often heard the adage "As Maine goes, so goes the nation" and was amazed to discover at age 10 that people from other states had apparently never even heard the saying (and, needless to say, didn't believe it when I informed them of it). While I was growing up, there was a "feud" between Wisconsin and Maine about who could claim Paul Bunyan as a native son. Obviously, Maine's claim to the mythical logger was more valid, I thought. Bangor, Maine, even has a statue of Paul to prove he was a Maine boy. Consider yourself as a representative of your home state. What elements of your personality might have been contributed by your growing up there? If you have lived in several different states, what elements did each state contribute to your personality?

It is also important to think about the consequences if you had been born somewhere else. If I had been born in some other New England state, would I have turned out differently? Let's say I was born in Massachusetts, which is much more heavily populated than Maine and whose people tend to be more highly educated. Further, Maine has traditionally been Republican and

conservative whereas Massachusetts has been Democrat and liberal. I might have avoided several of the struggles of conscience I went through in high school and college if I had been born and raised in Massachusetts. Or perhaps I would have had the same struggles but ended up with views and values opposite those I now have.

Hometown Vantage Point

It is not hard to imagine the differences that might have occurred had I been born and raised in a big city rather than in a town with a population of 10,000. Even my cousins who were raised in Springfield, Massachusetts, had moral values and outlooks on life significantly different from mine. Some of those differences, of course, were the result of our natural tendencies, but not all. Many were caused by the environment. Consider yourself as a representative of your hometown. Then speculate about how different (or not) you would have been if you had been raised in an environment that was its opposite.

Economic-Class Vantage Point

Each economic class has certain ideas, assumptions, and values that distinguish it from the others. For example, the middle class is often depicted as valuing material goods more than anything else. Members of the middle class are blamed for being consumers first and environmentalists second. Their values are supposed to include working hard, making a better life for their children than they themselves had, and "keeping up with the Joneses." They supposedly assume that all people in America have an equal chance to better themselves. This is a stereotype, so some or all of these traits may be erroneously assigned to the middle class. Yet it is a prevalent stereotype, so it is one that you could begin your exploration with if you come from the middle class. Of course, there are more refinements to the class structure than simply upper, middle, and lower class. For instance, there are *upper-lower class*, *lower-middle class*, *upper-middle class*, and the like. The definitions of these class distinctions seem vague, so you might consult some sources to clarify exactly what you mean when you use the terms. Do you know of other ways of breaking down economic classes? If so, use them.

Consider yourself as a representative of your economic class. What aspects of your personality resulted from being a member of that class? Which would you change?

Educational Vantage Point

The fact that you are in college suggests several things about you. Why exactly are you in college? What was its allure? What expectations and assumptions about education does your family have? How have they

influenced you and your expectations and assumptions? What are your assumptions about life, and how have your education and your assumptions about your future education influenced them?

Consider yourself as a representative student from your college. What assumptions and personality traits do you share with others on campus? Why? Which traits and assumptions of yours separate you from the other students on your campus? Explain.

Family Vantage Point

In addition to educational expectations, what assumptions and values do the members of your family have? How have those assumptions and values influenced you? Some of us accept most of our family's values. Others reject those values. What are the reasons that you either accepted or rejected your family's values? Consider yourself as a representative of your family. In what ways do you fulfill that role? In what ways do you not fulfill that role? Why?

Religious or Philosophical Vantage Point

Often religious and philosophical ideas come first from families, but they soon are influenced profoundly by other sources such as friends, teachers, mentors, writers, and politicians. Consider yourself as a representative of a religious or philosophical group. How has being a member of that group influenced you? Remember to define the terms you use: For example, what exactly do you mean by *liberal* or *conservative* or *existentialist*? What do you mean by *Protestant, Catholic, Jew, Buddhist,* or *Muslim*? What tenets of your religion, if any, do you follow without question? Which tenets, if any, do you question or not follow? Regardless of the philosophy and/or religion you identify, assume that your readers do not know much about it; thus you should explain it fully.

Personal-Experience Vantage Point

Perhaps the most individualizing vantage point is personal experience—that unique combination of occurrences that have happened only to you in just that particular way. For example, everyone has a different combination of reasons for being in college, on a particular campus, in a specific class this semester. Perhaps you decided to attend college because you are fascinated by medieval history, yet the person sitting next to you is attending college because she does not want to end up with the same lifestyle that her parents have; perhaps the person sitting in front of you is attending college because he hopes to be drafted to play professional sports and college is his "training ground." Perhaps you selected your particular college because it is far away from your hometown, while someone else chose it because it was close to home. It may be that you are here because this college offered you the best

financial package, while someone else is here in spite of having to pay his own way. One person may be in this class merely to fulfill a college requirement, while another hopes this course will be part of the process of becoming a professional writer. In short, there are a multitude of reasons and combinations of reasons why someone is a college student at this particular college.

In addition to providing motivation, personal experiences alter the way we understand the world, and they help us discover what does and what does not interest us. Which of your personal experiences have changed the way you act, the way you understand people, your vision of yourself?

Consider yourself as a totally unique individual, different from everyone else. What makes you different? Be as specific as you can. For instance, perhaps spending time at a wilderness camp was the final factor needed to convince you to become a vegetarian. Yet a similar experience might convince someone else to become a veterinarian or to avoid living anywhere except in a big city.

Feel free to add other vantage points to your list.

How important is it to think about yourself from all of these perspectives? Frankly, I want to believe that each of us is unique, that no one could predict what any of us thinks about a given topic or how any of us would react to a particular situation. If that were true, then thinking about yourself in terms of the preceding vantage points would not accomplish much. But media coverage of presidential elections has shaken my belief in the existence of total individuality. I'm still unnerved by how quickly and accurately pollsters can predict winners in elections from a very small sample of voters. When I first voted in a presidential election, I was dismayed to discover that a staggering majority of college students from New England had voted exactly the way I had. If anything, the accuracy of pollsters' predictions has improved since then. If I were a unique individual, how could pollsters anticipate my votes so easily? Apparently all the factors those pollsters considered really did influence me and did help shape my personality as well as my politics.

So, being able to see yourself from these various perspectives has got to be useful in the exploration of yourself.

Obstacles to Exploring the Self

At times, most of us have difficulty talking or writing about ourselves. Oh, sure, we don't mind telling (and retelling) how we won the big game for our high school or how we wowed them at the prom (if we did accomplish such feats). But those are only the superficial details of our lives. They may be crucial in terms of our external lives, but exploratory essays are about our inner self. The inner self is our essence as a person. It is the collection of hopes, fears, and beliefs that gives us a sense of our identity and our self-image. The inner self is our sense of who we are after all the role-playing is over and after

all pretenses have been removed. The inner self is what we see when we remove the masks we have worn to meet the day. It is the naked soul. It is our core identity.

Occasionally the fact that exploratory writing is about the inner self can create some obstacles, particularly when we write our first exploratory essays. Looking squarely at possible obstacles is the easiest way to overcome them and get on with our writing.

Embarrassment

Let's face it—some of the most interesting things that have happened to us (and which have the potential of sparking introspection) are embarrassing. At some time, for example, most of us have been rejected by someone we were attracted to, or have done something we are ashamed of, or have felt ourselves to be total jerks. We have all experienced "the worst moment in our lives," the moment we knew we could never live down, the rejection from which we would never recover, the Guinness gaffe of the century. Not surprising, most of us don't want to dwell on those moments.

Yet those experiences are the ones that test us and push us to explore our resources and our abilities. Such experiences teach us about ourselves if we're willing to learn, and telling others about them can exorcise the ghosts that haunt us. Finally, when we can write about and explore such events, they become truly ours; until then, they are merely something that happened to us.

In other words, writing about the pratfalls as well as the pinnacles of our lives helps us to learn about ourselves and helps us overcome our negative emotions. When we contemplate how we can present a moment to our readers, we are also considering other ways to present that moment to ourselves. By writing we come to understand.

We tame the moment and it is ours.

Fear That We Don't Have an Interesting Inner Self

Although some of us assume that we don't have an inner self, we all have an essence, an inner self. Exploratory writing can help us perceive it, and perhaps such writing can even influence its development.

But even after we acknowledge that we have an inner self, we might still doubt that anyone cares to read about it. We mistakenly believe that to be interesting on paper we need to have lived adventure-filled lives or to have profound insights into life. You don't have to be Indiana Jones or Aristotle to have a life filled with fascinating events and profound ideas and observations. Any event or aspect of our personality can be interesting if we reveal enough of our inner self.

How can we overcome this fear? Writing thoughts and observations in journals not only gives us glimpses of our inner self but also can help us overcome the feeling that we have nothing interesting to write about. As journals grow, we begin to be conscious of just how complex, complicated, and downright interesting we are. We begin to see that our experience of events in our life is unique, even if the events themselves are not exotic. We begin to record and to consider our reactions to people, places, and events. In fact, a good journal exercise is to write a page about one particular idea or event. The events might have just happened or might be plucked from the past.

In addition, once the ideas of our inner self are on paper, they don't seem such horrible things to reveal to others. Again, journals encourage us to play with those revelations. We get a handle on them, tame them, and mock them. If we wish, we can talk about them from the perspective of someone else, adopting that person's assumptions and beliefs to give ourselves new insights. In short, we make them ours to do with as we please.

Fear of Revealing Too Much

Most of us fear that we will reveal too much in our writing. Ideally, every exploratory essay should reveal something *to you* about yourself that you didn't know before. As you work on revisions, you may discover that you feel surprisingly comfortable about sharing that revelation with your readers. If you do, great. That revelation may become the core of your essay. If not, that is fine too. You are the writer; you are in control. You decide what to include in your final essay and what to leave out.

The key point is this: Explore the topic as deeply as you can without serious emotional distress, reveal only the parts that you feel comfortable disclosing, and leave yourself open to the possibility of revealing more if it feels comfortable to do so in the future.

One of the most crucial pieces of advice in this book is this: If pursuing a particular topic becomes emotionally distressful, stop writing about that topic. Topics are like flowers: They don't all bloom at the same time. Some topics are ready for exploration now; some will be ready later on in the semester; some will be ready next year; and some might not be ready for five years. If trying to think about or write about a topic causes you severe discomfort, stop! Move on to another topic that causes less distress.

Almost every personal topic is going to feel a bit embarrassing or "too private" to reveal at first. The idea of writing anything personal at all will probably raise the questions "Should I reveal this or not?" and "What will people think of me if they read this?" Such uneasy feelings about addressing any topic of significance are to be expected. In fact, a little discomfort is a good sign—it suggests that you are exploring and revealing parts of your inner self.

In short, never reveal more than you feel comfortable revealing, but always keep testing yourself to see what "comfortable" really is.

How to Start

Because all exploratory writing is about revealing you, each of this book's chapters suggests starting places and techniques. This chapter focuses briefly on three starting places: mental occurrences, attitudes, and external information.

Starting with a Mental Occurrence

A mental occurrence is any thought, question, dream, or fantasy you have had. To begin, record that mental occurrence quickly. Don't worry about your style—simply try to get as many details into words as possible. For example, you might wonder, "Does God exist?" Write the question on the top of a blank sheet of paper (or in your journal or at the top of your computer screen), and then write whatever comes into your mind. When you've exhausted the topic (or yourself), take a break. Then start exploring. What caused you to ask the question in the first place? What in your family background, education, or life experience has made this question an issue for you? What did you believe before you asked yourself that question? Where did that belief come from? What sources might you consult to find some cogent arguments about or discussions of this issue?

Mental occurrences can often turn into research papers, and that is fine. The God question, for example, might lead you to read some theology or philosophy and to discuss the issue with someone on campus (for example, a college chaplain, a philosopher, a sociologist, a psychologist, a teacher of comparative religion). The more you learn, the better. The point of the essay will not be to prove conclusively that there is or isn't a God; the point will be to show your thought processes, to follow your investigation, to see what questions have been raised and answered (or simply raised) by your quest.

The structure of the final essay, of course, need not be a chronological record of your investigation. Very likely, in fact, it will not be. Instead, it might begin with a quotation that captures the essence of your thought at this moment or one that sums up an opinion with which you profoundly agree or disagree. Or it might begin with an event that caused you to ask the question about God in the first place. The essay might be a narrative, an analysis, or an argument. It might be a comparison and contrast between two views of God that you have encountered, between your views before and after doing the research, between your view and your family's.

In short, when you are ready to put your materials together as a coherent essay for readers, you should consciously consider what content, what purpose, and what structure will be most effective.

The same process is true for any mental occurrence. If you have a dream, for example, record the dream as accurately as you can (and as quickly as you

can, for dreams fade fast). Then explore, focusing first on your feelings about the dream. How did you feel during the dream itself? What are your feelings now, as you look back on the dream? Then focus on your bodily sensations as you think about the dream. Is there tightness in your chest? Does your stomach feel queasy? Do your legs feel like moving, like running? What do you think those bodily sensations suggest? Finally, does the dream remind you of any experience you've had while awake? Of any other dreams? Of any experiences you've read about?

Equipped with this information, you might then start to write about the dream's meaning. Of course, by this time you might have tumbled onto another (and probably somehow) related topic. The final essay might not even mention the dream that spawned it.

Starting with an Attitude

If mental occurrences don't spark your writing, try starting with an attitude. You might begin with a current attitude you hold—perhaps you've decided that your older sister is not such a total jerk as you used to believe. Okay. What changed your mind? Exactly when did you start to doubt your original assessment of her personality? For that matter, what caused that original unfavorable belief about her? Or when did you discover what a best friend really is? Or when did you decide you wanted to be a best friend to someone? Any attitude or belief that has been called into question recently will make a great topic to consider. The very process of exploring why you questioned that attitude will reveal something about you to yourself and to your readers.

Starting with External Information

The external world is teeming with topics for exploratory writing. Keep your five senses attuned to the world around you, and you will find subjects everywhere.

For example, you might begin by recounting a conversation you overheard, a conversation that sparked your interest and raised issues about yourself in similar circumstances. A fact from a textbook or newspaper might start your speculation. You might observe your own reaction to something—the way birds fly or a teacher lectures, or perhaps a piece of information from a course that you found particularly enlightening.

And then you might try to discover the roots of your reactions, or try to argue yourself into the opposite attitude, or examine the implications of your reactions. That is the beauty of the exploratory essay: You are free to write about whatever captures your attention.

Suggestions for Writing

1. Following Mairs' sentence structure, write a sentence about yourself, plugging in the truth about you for each one of the identities she lists or substituting others more pertinent for you. Try to get as close-to-the-bone as you can. For example, don't settle for saying you are a "non-cripple." Think about which physical characteristic most defines you *in your own mind*—for example, it could be height, weight, hair color, body type, or a combination of several characteristics.
2. List as many of your personality traits as possible. Answer the following questions, but don't limit your list to the questions. Range far and wide.
   - Are you a leader or a follower? A "doer" or a "thinker"? A laugher or a crier? A practical joker or a victim?
   - Do you have an active or a passive temperament? A warm or cool temperament? A happy or sad temperament?
   - Are you primarily honest or dishonest? Reliable or unreliable? Thoughtful or impulsive? Brave or timid? Talkative or quiet? Aggressive or passive? Self-sacrificing or self-serving? Calm or temperamental? Never angry or always angry? Logical or emotional? Physical or not physical?
   - Do you usually reveal your feelings or hide them? Do you usually trust everyone or doubt everyone?
3. Using one or more of the traits or identities from the sentence or list you wrote in numbers 1 and 2, write an essay that explores that trait or identity. First, define the trait or identity in your own words. Then give examples of times when you exhibited it; give enough details so that we understand the context of each event. Were other traits or identities also involved? Would your life be better if you didn't have that trait/identity or if it were more or less dominant in your life?

Readings

Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian

Edith Maud Eaton (Sui Sin Far)

Edith Maud Eaton *(1865–1914) was the second child of a Chinese woman and an Englishman. Eaton embraced her Chinese heritage and faced a great deal of discrimination. Writing under the pseudonym of Sui Sin Far, she was the first person of Chinese heritage to write in defense of the Chinese in America. Her stories were collected in* Mrs. Spring's Fragrance.

Inward Exploration

Each of us is different in some way from the majority of people who surround us. Write at least one paragraph explaining one way in which you are different from those around you and describing the first time you realized it.

[1] When I look back over the years I see myself, a little child of scarcely four years of age, walking in front of my nurse, in a green English lane, and listening to her tell another of her kind that my mother is Chinese. "Oh, Lord!" exclaims the informed. She turns me around and scans me curiously from head to foot. Then the two women whisper together. Tho [sic] the word "Chinese" conveys very little meaning to my mind, I feel that they are talking about my father and mother and my heart swells with indignation. When we reach home I rush to my mother and try to tell her what I have heard. I am a young child. I fail to make myself intelligible. My mother does not understand, and when the nurse declares to her, "Little Miss Sui is a story-teller," my mother slaps me.

[2] Many a long year has past over my head since that day—the day on which I first learned that I was something different and apart from other children, but tho my mother has forgotten it, I have not.

[3] I see myself again, a few years older. I am playing with another child in a garden. A girl passes by outside the gate. "Mamie," she cries to my companion. "I wouldn't speak to Sui if I were you. Her mamma is Chinese."

[4] "I don't care," answers the little one beside me. And then to me, "Even if your mamma is Chinese, I like you better than I like Annie."

[5] "But I don't like you," I answer, turning my back on her. It is my first conscious lie.

[6] I am at a children's party, given by the wife of an Indian officer whose children were schoolfellows of mine. I am only six years of age, but have attended a private school for over a year, and have already learned that China is a heathen country, being civilized by England. However, for the time being, I am a merry romping child. There are quite a number of grown people present. One, a white haired old man, has his attention called to me by the hostess. He adjusts his eyeglasses and surveys me critically. "Ah, indeed!" he exclaims, "Who would have thought it at first glance. Yet now I see the difference between her and other children. What a peculiar coloring! Her mother's eyes and hair and her father's features, I presume. Very interesting little creature!"

[7] I had been called from my play for the purpose of inspection. I do not return to it. For the rest of the evening I hide myself behind a hall door and refuse to show myself until it is time to go home.

[8] My parents have come to America. We are in Hudson City, N.Y., and we are very poor. I am out with my brother, who is ten months older than myself. We pass a Chinese store, the door of which is open. "Look!" says Charlie, "Those men in there are Chinese!" Eagerly I gaze into the long low room. With the exception of my mother, who is English bred with English ways and manner of dress, I have never seen a Chinese person. The two men within the store are uncouth specimens of their race, drest [sic] in working blouses and pantaloons with queues hanging down their backs. I recoil with a sense of shock.

[9] "Oh, Charlie," I cry, "Are we like that?"

[10] "Well, we're Chinese, and they're Chinese, too, so we must be!" returns my seven-year-old brother.

[11] "Of course you are," puts in a boy who has followed us down the street, and who lives near us and has seen my mother: "Chinky, Chinky, Chinaman, yellow-face, pigtail, rat-eater." A number of other boys and several little girls join in with him.

[12] "Better than you," shouts my brother, facing the crowd. He is younger and smaller than any there, and I am even more insignificant than he; but my spirit revives.

[13] "I'd rather be Chinese than anything else in the world," I scream.

[14] They pull my hair, they tear my clothes, they scratch my face, and all but lame my brother; but the white blood in our veins fights valiantly for the Chinese half of us. When it is all over, exhausted and bedraggled, we crawl home, and report to our mother that we have "won the battle."

[15] "Are you sure?" asks my mother doubtfully.

[16] "Of course. They ran from us. They were frightened," returns my brother.

[17] My mother smiles with satisfaction.

[18] "Do you hear?" she asks my father.

[19] "Umm," he observes, raising his eyes from his paper for an instant. My childish instinct, however, tells me that he is more interested than he appears to be.

[20] It is tea time, but I cannot eat. Unobserved I crawl away. I do not sleep that night. I am too excited and I ache all over. Our opponents had been so very much stronger and bigger than we. Toward morning, however, I fall into a doze from which I awake myself, shouting:

> "Sound the battle cry;
> See the foe is nigh."

[21] My mother believes in sending us to Sunday school. She has been brought up in a Presbyterian college.

[22] The scene of my life shifts to Eastern Canada. The sleigh which has carried us from the station stops in front of a little French Canadian hotel. Immediately we are surrounded by a number of villagers, who stare curiously at my mother as my father assists her to alight from the sleigh. Their curiosity, however, is tempered with kindness, as they watch, one after another, the little black heads of my brothers and sisters and myself emerge out of the buffalo robe, which is part of the sleigh's outfit. There are six of us, four girls and two boys; the eldest, my brother, being only seven years of age. My father and mother are still in their twenties. "Les pauvres enfants," the inhabitants murmur, as they help to carry us into the hotel. Then in lower tones: "Chinoise, Chinoise."

[23] For some time after our arrival, whenever we children are sent for a walk, our footsteps are dogged by a number of young French and English Canadians, who amuse themselves with speculations as to whether, we being Chinese, are susceptible to pinches and hair pulling, while older persons pause and gaze upon us, very much in the same way that I have seen people gaze upon strange animals in a menagerie. Now and then we are stopt [sic] and plied with questions as to what we eat and drink, how we go to sleep, if my mother understands what my father says to her, if we sit on chairs or squat on floors, etc., etc., etc.

[24] There are many pitched battles, of course, and we seldom leave the house without being armed for conflict. My mother takes a great interest in our battles, and usually cheers us on, tho I doubt whether she understands the

depth of the troubled waters thru [sic] which her little children wade. As to my father, peace is his motto, and he deems it wisest to be blind and deaf to many things.

[25] School days are short, but memorable. I am in the same class with my brother, my sister next to me in the class below. The little girl whose desk my sister shares shrinks close against the wall as my sister takes her place. In a little while she raises her hand.

[26] "Please, teacher!"

[27] "Yes, Annie."

[28] "May I change my seat?"

[29] "No, you may not!"

[30] The little girl sobs. "Why should she have to sit beside a —"

[31] Happily my sister does not seem to hear, and before long the two little girls become great friends. I have many such experiences.

[32] My brother is remarkably bright; my sister next to me has a wonderful head for figures, and when only eight years of age helps my father with his night work accounts. My parents compare her with me. She is of sturdier build than I, and, as my father says, "Always has her wits about her." He thinks her more like my mother, who is very bright and interested in every little detail of practical life. My father tells me that I will never make half the woman that my mother is or that my sister will be. I am not as strong as my sisters, which makes me feel somewhat ashamed, for I am the eldest little girl, and more is expected of me. I have no organic disease, but the strength of my feelings seems to take from me the strength of my body. I am prostrated at times with attacks of nervous sickness. The doctor says that my heart is unusually large; but in the light of the present I know that the cross of the Eurasian bore too heavily upon my childish shoulders. I usually hide my weakness from the family until I cannot stand. I do not understand myself, and I have an idea that the others will despise me for not being as strong as they. Therefore, I like to wander away alone, either by the river or in the bush. The green fields and flowing water have a charm for me. At the age of seven, as it is today, a bird on the wing is my emblem of happiness.

[33] I have come from a race on my mother's side which is said to be the most stolid and insensible to feeling of all races, yet I look back over the years and see myself so keenly alive to every shade of sorrow and suffering that it is almost a pain to live.

[34] If there is any trouble in the house in the way of a difference between my father and mother, or if any child is punished, how I suffer! And when harmony is restored, heaven seems to be around me. I can be sad, but I can

also be glad. My mother's screams of agony when a baby is born almost drive me wild, and long after her pangs have subsided I feel them in my own body. Sometimes it is a week before I can get to sleep after such an experience.

[35] A debt owing by my father fills me with shame. I feel like a criminal when I pass the creditor's door. I am only ten years old. And all the while the question of nationality perplexes my little brain. Why are we what we are? I and my brothers and sisters. Why did God make us to be hooted and stared at? Papa is English, mamma is Chinese. Why couldn't we have been either one thing or the other? Why is my mother's race despised? I look into the faces of my father and mother. Is she not every bit as dear and good as he? Why? Why? She sings us the songs she learned at her English school. She tells us tales of China. Tho a child when she left her native land she remembers it well, and I am never tired of listening to the story of how she was stolen from her home. She tells us over and over again of her meeting with my father in Shanghai and the romance of their marriage. Why? Why?

[36] I do not confide in my father and mother. They would not understand. How could they? He is English, she is Chinese. I am different to both of them—a stranger, tho their own child. "What are we?" I ask my brother. "It doesn't matter, sissy," he responds. But it does. I love poetry, particularly heroic pieces. I also love fairy tales. Stories of everyday life do not appeal to me. I dream dreams of being great and noble; my sisters and brothers also. I glory in the idea of dying at the stake and a great genie arising from the flames and declaring to those who have scorned us: "Behold, how great and glorious and noble are the Chinese people!"

[37] My sisters are apprenticed to a dressmaker; my brother is entered in an office. I tramp around and sell my father's pictures, also some lace which I make myself. My nationality, if I had only known it at that time, helps to make sales. The ladies who are my customers call me "The Little Chinese Lace Girl." But it is a dangerous life for a very young girl. I come near to "mysteriously disappearing" many a time. The greatest temptation was in the thought of getting far away from where I was known, to where no mocking cries of "Chinese!" "Chinese!" could reach.

[38] Whenever I have the opportunity I steal away to the library and read every book I can find on China and the Chinese. I learn that China is the oldest civilized nation on the face of the earth and a few other things. At eighteen years of age what troubles me is not that I am what I am, but that others are ignorant of my superiority. I am small, but my feelings are big—and great is my vanity.

[39] My sisters attend dancing classes, for which they pay their own fees. In spite of covert smiles and sneers, they are glad to meet and mingle with other young folk. They are not sensitive in the sense that I am. And yet they

understand. One of them tells me that she overheard a young man say to another that he would rather marry a pig than a girl with Chinese blood in her veins.

[40] In course of time I too learn shorthand and take a position in an office. Like my sister, I teach myself, but, unlike my sister, I have neither the perseverance nor the ability to perfect myself. Besides, to a temperament like mine, it is torture to spend the hours in transcribing other people's thoughts. Therefore, although I can always earn a moderately good salary, I do not distinguish myself in the business world as does she.

[41] When I have been working for some years I open an office of my own. The local papers patronize me and give me a number of assignments, including most of the local Chinese reporting. I meet many Chinese persons, and when they get into trouble am often called upon to fight their battles in the papers. This I enjoy. My heart leaps for joy when I read one day an article signed by a New York Chinese in which he declares "The Chinese in America owe an everlasting debt of gratitude to Sui Sin Far for the bold stand she has taken in their defense."

[42] The Chinaman who wrote the article seeks me out and calls upon me. He is a clever and witty man, a graduate of one of the American colleges and as well a Chinese scholar. I learn that he has an American wife and several children. I am very much interested in these children, and when I meet them my heart throbs in sympathetic tune with the tales they relate of their experiences as Eurasians. "Why did papa and mamma born us?" asks one. Why?

[43] I also meet other Chinese men who compare favorably with the white men of my acquaintance in mind and heart qualities. Some of them are quite handsome. They have not as finely cut noses and as well developed chins as the white men, but they have smoother skins and their expression is more serene; their hands are better shaped and their voices softer.

[44] Some little Chinese women whom I interview are very anxious to know whether I would marry a Chinaman. I do not answer No. They clap their hands delightedly, and assure me that the Chinese are much the finest and best of all men. They are, however, a little doubtful as to whether one could be persuaded to care for me, full-blooded Chinese people having a prejudice against the half white.

[45] Fundamentally, I muse, all people are the same. My mother's race is as prejudiced as my father's. Only when the whole world becomes as one family will human beings be able to see clearly and hear distinctly. I believe that some day a great part of the world will be Eurasian. I cheer myself with the thought that I am but a pioneer. A pioneer should glory in suffering.

[46] "You were walking with a Chinaman yesterday," accuses an acquaintance.

[47] "Yes, what of it?"

[48] "You ought not to. It isn't right."

[49] "Not right to walk with one of my mother's people? Oh, indeed!"

[50] I cannot reconcile his notion of righteousness with my own.

[51] I am living in a little town away off on the north shore of a big lake. Next to me at the dinner table is the man for whom I work as a stenographer. There are also a couple of business men, a young girl and her mother.

[52] Some one makes a remark about the cars full of Chinamen that past [sic] that morning. A transcontinental railway runs thru the town.

[53] My employer shakes his rugged head. "Somehow or other," says he, "I cannot reconcile myself to the thought that the Chinese are humans like ourselves. They may have immortal souls, but their faces seem to be so utterly devoid of expression that I cannot help but doubt."

[54] "Souls," echoes the town clerk. "Their bodies are enough for me. A Chinaman is, in my eyes, more repulsive than a nigger."

[55] "They always give me such a creepy feeling," puts in the young girl with a laugh.

[56] "I wouldn't have one in my house," declares my landlady.

[57] "Now, the Japanese are different altogether. There is something bright and likeable about those men," continues Mr. K.

[58] A miserable, cowardly feeling keeps me silent. I am in a Middle West town. If I declare what I am, every person in the place will hear about it the next day. The population is in the main made up of working folks with strong prejudices against my mother's countrymen. The prospect before me is not an enviable one—if I speak. I have no longer an ambition to die at the stake for the sake of demonstrating the greatness and nobleness of the Chinese people.

[59] Mr. K. turns to me with a kindly smile.

[60] "What makes Miss Far so quiet?" he asks.

[61] "I don't suppose she finds the 'washee washee men' particularly interesting subjects of conversation," volunteers the young manager of the local bank.

[62] With a great effort I raise my eyes from my plate. “Mr. K.,” I say, addressing my employer, “the Chinese people may have no souls, no expression on their faces, be altogether beyond the pale of civilization, but whatever they are, I want you to understand that I am—I am a Chinese.”

[63] There is silence in the room for a few minutes. Then Mr. K. pushes back his plate and standing up beside me, says:

[64] “I should not have spoken as I did. I know nothing whatever about the Chinese. It was pure prejudice. Forgive me!”

[65] I admire Mr. K.’s moral courage in apologizing to me; he is a conscientious Christian man, but I do not remain much longer in the little town.

[66] I am under a tropic sky, meeting frequently and conversing with persons who are almost as high up in the world as birth, education and money can set them. The environment is peculiar, for I am also surrounded by a race of people, the reputed descendants of Ham, the son of Noah, whose offspring, it was prophesied, should be the servants of the sons of Shem and Japheth. As I am a descendant, according to the Bible, of both Shem and Japheth, I have a perfect right to set my heel upon the Ham people; but tho I see others around me following out the Bible suggestion, it is not in my nature to be arrogant to any but those who seek to impress me with their superiority, which the poor black maid who has been assigned to me by the hotel certainly does not. My employer’s wife takes me to task for this. “It is unnecessary,” she says, “to thank a black person for a service.”

[67] The novelty of life in the West Indian island is not without its charm. The surroundings, people, manner of living, are so entirely different from what I have been accustomed to up North that I feel as if I were “born again.” Mixing with people of fashion, and yet not of them, I am not of sufficient importance to create comment or curiosity. I am busy nearly all day and often well into the night. It is not monotonous work, but it is certainly strenuous. The planters and business men of the island take me as a matter of course and treat me with kindly courtesy. Occasionally an Englishman will warn me against the “brown boys” of the island, little dreaming that I too am of the “brown people” of the earth.

[68] When it begins to be whispered about the place that I am not all white, some of the “sporty” people seek my acquaintance. I am small and look much younger than my years. When, however, they discover that I am a very serious and sober-minded spinster indeed, they retire quite gracefully, leaving me a few amusing reflections.

[69] One evening a card is brought to my room. It bears the name of some naval officer. I go down to my visitor, thinking he is probably someone who,

having been told that I am a reporter for the local paper, has brought me an item of news. I find him lounging in an easy chair on the veranda of the hotel-a big, blond, handsome fellow, several years younger than 1.

[70] "You are Lieutenant —?" I inquire.

[71] He bows and laughs a little. The laugh doesn't suit him somehow—and it doesn't suit me, either.

[72] "If you have anything to tell me, please tell it quickly, because I'm very busy."

[73] "Oh, you don't really mean that," he answers, with another silly and offensive laugh. "There's always plenty of time for good times. That's what I am here for. I saw you at the races the other day and twice at King's House. My ship will be here for—weeks."

[74] "Do you wish that noted?" I ask.

[75] "Oh, no! Why—I came just because I had an idea that you might like to know me. I would like to know you. You look such a nice little body. Say, wouldn't you like to go out for a sail this lovely night? I will tell you all about the sweet little Chinese girls I met when we were at Hong Kong. They're not so shy!"

[76] I leave Eastern Canada for the Far West, so reduced by another attack of rheumatic fever that I only weigh eighty-four pounds. I travel on an advertising contract. It is presumed by the railway company that in some way or other I will give them full value for their transportation across the continent. I have been ordered beyond the Rockies by the doctor, who declares that I will never regain my strength in the East. Nevertheless, I am but two days in San Francisco when I start out in search of work. It is the first time that I have sought work as a stranger in a strange town. Both of the other positions away from home were secured for me by home influence. I am quite surprised to find that there is no demand for my services in San Francisco and that no one is particularly interested in me. The best I can do is to accept an offer from a railway agency to typewrite their correspondence for $5 a month. I stipulate, however, that I shall have the privilege of taking in outside work and that my hours shall be light. I am hopeful that the sale of a story or newspaper article may add to my income, and I console myself with the reflection that, considering that I still limp and bear traces of sickness, I am fortunate to secure any work at all.

[77] The proprietor of one of the San Francisco papers, to whom I have a letter of introduction, suggests that I obtain some subscriptions from the people of Chinatown, that district of the city having never been canvassed. This suggestion I carry out with enthusiasm, tho I find that the Chinese merchants and people generally are inclined to regard me with suspicion.

They have been imposed upon so many times by unscrupulous white people. Another drawback—save for a few phrases, I am unacquainted with my mother tongue. How, then, can I expect these people to accept me as their own countrywoman? The Americanized Chinamen actually laugh in my face when I tell them that I am of their race. However, they are not all "doubting Thomases." Some little women discover that I have Chinese hair, color of eyes and complexion, also that I love rice and tea. This settles the matter for them—and for their husbands.

[78] My Chinese instincts develop. I am no longer the little girl who shrunk against my brother at the first sight of a Chinaman. Many and many a time, when alone in a strange place, has the appearance of even a humble laundryman given me a sense of protection and made me feel quite at home. This fact of itself proves to me that prejudice can be eradicated by association.

[79] I meet a half Chinese, half white girl. Her face is plastered with a thick white coat of paint and her eyelids and eyebrows are blackened so that the shape of her eyes and the whole expression of her face is changed. She was born in the East, and at the age of eighteen came West in answer to an advertisement. Living for many years among the working class, she had heard little but abuse of the Chinese. It is not difficult, in a land like California, for a half Chinese, half white girl to pass as one of Spanish or Mexican origin. This the poor child does, tho she lives in nervous dread of being" discovered." She becomes engaged to a young man, but fears to tell him what she is, and only does so when compelled by a fearless American girl friend. This girl, who knows her origin, realizing that the truth sooner or later must be told, and better soon than late, advises the Eurasian to confide in the young man, assuring her that he loves her well enough not to allow her nationality to stand, a bar sinister, between them. But the Eurasian prefers to keep her secret, and only reveals it to the man who is to be her husband when driven to bay by the American girl, who declares that if the half-breed will not tell the truth she will. When the young man hears that the girl he is engaged to has Chinese blood in her veins, he exclaims: "Oh, what will my folks say?" But that is all. Love is stronger than prejudice with him, and neither he nor she deems it necessary to inform his "folks."

[80] The Americans, having for many years manifested a much higher regard for the Japanese than for the Chinese, several half Chinese young men and women, thinking to advance themselves, both in a social and business sense, pass as Japanese. They continue to be known as Eurasians; but a Japanese Eurasian does not appear in the same light as a Chinese Eurasian. The unfortunate Chinese Eurasians! Are not those who compel them to thus cringe more to be blamed than they?

[81] People, however, are not all alike. I meet white men, and women, too, who are proud to mate with those who have Chinese blood in their veins, and think it a great honor to be distinguished by the friendship of such. There are also Eurasians and Eurasians. I know of one who allowed herself to become engaged to a white man after refusing him nine times. She had discouraged him in every way possible, had warned him that she was half Chinese; that her people were poor, that every week or month she sent home a certain amount of her earnings, and that the man she married would have to do as much, if not more; also, most uncompromising truth of all, that she did not love him and never would. But the resolute and undaunted lover swore that it was a matter of indifference to him whether she was a Chinese or a Hottentot, that it would be his pleasure and privilege to allow her relations double what it was in her power to bestow, and as to not loving him—that did not matter at all. He loved her. So, because the young woman had a married mother and married sisters, who were always picking at her and gossiping over her independent manner of living, she finally consented to marry him, recording the agreement in her diary thus:

[82] "I have promised to become the wife of—on—189-, because the world is so cruel and sneering to a single woman and for no other reason."

[83] Everything went smoothly until one day. The young man was driving a pair of beautiful horses and she was seated by his side, trying very hard to imagine herself in love with him, when a Chinese vegetable gardener's cart came rumbling along. The Chinaman was a jolly-looking individual in blue cotton blouse and pantaloons, his rakish looking hat being kept in place by a long queue which was pulled upward from his neck and wound around it. The young woman was suddenly possest [sic] with the spirit of mischief. "Look!" she cried, indicating the Chinaman, "there's my brother. Why don't you salute him?"

[84] The man's face fell a little. He sank into a pensive mood. The wicked one by his side read him like an open book.

[85] "When we are married," said she. "I intend to give a Chinese party every month."

[86] No answer.

[87] "As there are very few aristocratic Chinese in this city, 1 shall fill up with the laundrymen and vegetable farmers. 1 don't believe in being exclusive in democratic America, do you?"

[88] He hadn't a grain of humor in his composition, but a sickly smile contorted his features as he replied:

[89] “You shall do just as you please, my darling. But—but—consider a moment. Wouldn’t it be just a little pleasanter for us if, after we are married, we allowed it to be presumed that you were—er—Japanese? So many of my friends have inquired of me if that is not your nationality. They would be so charmed to meet a little Japanese lady. “

[90] “Hadn’t you better oblige them by finding one?”

[91] “Why—er—what do you mean?”

[92] “Nothing much in particular. Only—I am getting a little tired of this,” taking off his ring.

[93] “You don’t mean what you say! Oh, put it back, dearest! You know I would not hurt your feelings for the world!”

[94] “You haven’t. I’m more than pleased. But I do mean what I say.”

[95] That evening the “ungrateful” Chinese Eurasian diaried, among other things, the following:

[96] “Joy, oh, joy! I’m free once more. Never again shall I be untrue to my own heart. Never again will I allow anyone to ‘hound’ or ‘sneer’ me into matrimony.”

[97] I secure transportation to many California points. I meet some literary people, chief among whom is the editor of the magazine who took my first Chinese stories. He and his wife give me a warm welcome to their ranch. They are broad-minded people, whose interest in me is sincere and intelligent, not affected and vulgar. I also meet some funny people who advise me to “trade” upon my nationality. They tell me that if I wish to succeed in literature in America I should dress in Chinese costume, carry a fan in my hand, wear a pair of scarlet beaded slippers, live in New York, and come of high birth. Instead of making myself familiar with the Chinese-Americans around me, I should discourse on my spirit acquaintance with Chinese ancestors and quote in between the “Good mornings” and “How d’ye dos” of editors:

> “Confucius, Confucius, how great is Confucius, Before Confucius, there never was Confucius. After Confucius, there never came Confucius,” etc., etc., etc.,

or something like that, both illuminating and obscuring, don’t you know. They forget, or perhaps they are not aware that the old Chinese sage taught “The way of sincerity is the way of heaven.”

[98] My experiences as an Eurasian never cease; but people are not now as prejudiced as they have been. In the West, too, my friends are more advanced in all lines of thought than those whom I know in Eastern Canada—more genuine, more sincere, with less of the form of religion, but more of its spirit.

[99] So I roam backward and forward across the continent. When I am East, my heart is West. When I am West, my heart is East. Before long I hope to be in China. As my life began in my father's country it may end in my mother's.

[100] After all I have no nationality and am not anxious to claim any. Individuality is more than nationality. "You are you and I am I," says Confucius. I give my right hand to the Occidentals and my left to the Orientals, hoping that between them they will not utterly destroy the insignificant "connecting link." And that's all.

Outward Exploration: Discussion

1. Why do you think Eaton's mother has forgotten the conversation with the nurse that alerted Eaton to the fact that she was somehow different from many of the other children (paragraph 2)?
2. In paragraph 5, why does Eaton lie about not liking Mamie?
3. In paragraph 14, Eaton says that "the white blood in our veins fights valiantly for the Chinese half of us." What does she mean by that?
4. Comment on the different reactions of Eaton's parents to their children's struggles with other children. Which (if either) is the better reaction? Explain.
5. Describe Eaton's personality as a child.
6. Why do you think "a bird on the wing" is Eaton's "emblem of happiness" (paragraph 32)?
7. As a child, why does Eaton develop such an interest in China and the Chinese rather than in the English and England? What does she learn from all of her reading?
8. Discuss the event with her employer, Mr. K. (paragraphs 51–65).
9. What strategies do the Eurasians in California use to get by?
10. Discuss Eaton's assertion that she has "no nationality" and that "individuality is more than nationality" (paragraph 100).

Outward Exploration: Writing

1. In the second paragraph, Eaton says that her mother has forgotten that eventful day when Eaton first learned "that I was something different and apart from other children." Write an essay about a significant event in your life which a parent or some participant in the event has forgotten. Make the event vivid for your readers. In addition, explore the possible reasons why that person has forgotten the event and your reactions to his or her forgetting.
2. One question that recurs throughout this essay is "Why did people from two nationalities or races marry and have children?" Beneath the question is the anguish of the children who resulted from that marriage (not only Eaton but the children of the Chinese scholar and his American wife). Such marriages are much more common today than at the end of the nineteenth century when Eaton grew up. Have the experiences of the children of such marriages changed? Do research to find the answers, and perhaps interview a friend whose parents are different nationalities (or different religions).
3. Throughout the essay, Eaton is dogged by the question of her race. What exactly is *race*, anyway? Write an essay exploring the concept of *race.* Do library research. Consider other texts in this book as well, such as those by Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, and Kate Chopin.
4. Write an essay arguing either for or against Eaton's belief and hope that someday most of the world will be Eurasian (paragraph 45). Would that be a desirable situation? Why or why not? Perhaps Eaton really wants *all* the races and nationalities (not just European and Asian) to intermarry and create one single race. Would such a mixture be a desirable situation? Why or why not?
5. Drawing on your personal experiences, write an essay either illustrating or denying Eaton's idea that "individuality is more than nationality." You might do some research to discover other people's definitions of *individuality* and *nationality.*

New Year's Eve

Charles Lamb

***Charles Lamb** (1775–1834) was an English poet, critic, and essayist. His best known works were his collections of essays entitled* Essays of Elia *(1823, 1833). Elia was the name he used to sign his essays. In early adulthood, Lamb endured a period of insanity. During a fit of madness, his sister, Mary Ann Lamb, murdered their mother in 1796. After being confined to an asylum, she was eventually released into the care of her brother. The siblings collaborated on several writing projects.*

Inward Exploration

Write at least a paragraph exploring your attitude towards your birthday and another paragraph about New Years Eve.

[1] Every man hath two birth-days: two days, at least, in every year, which set him upon revolving the lapse of time, as it affects his mortal duration. The one is that which in an especial manner he termeth *his*. In the gradual desuetude of old observances, this custom of solemnizing our proper birth-day hath nearly passed away, or is left to children, who reflect nothing at all about the matter, nor understand any thing in it beyond cake and orange. But the birth of a New Year is of an interest too wide to be pretermitted by king or cobbler. No one ever regarded the First of January with indifference. It is that from which all date their time, and count upon what is left. It is the nativity of our common Adam.

[2] Of all sounds of all bells—(bells, the music nighest bordering upon heaven)—most solemn and touching is the peal which rings out the Old Year. I never hear it without a gathering-up of my mind to a concentration of all the images that have been diffused over the past twelvemonth; all I have done or suffered, performed or neglected—in that regretted time. I begin to know its worth, as when a person dies. It takes a personal colour; nor was it a poetical flight in a contemporary, when he exclaimed

> I saw the skirts of the departing Year.

[3] It is no more than what in sober sadness every one of us seems to be conscious of, in that awful leave-taking. I am sure I felt it, and all felt it with me, last night; though some of my companions affected rather to manifest exhilaration at the birth of the coming year, than any very tender regrets for the decease of its predecessor. But I am none of those who—

> Welcome the coming, speed the parting guest.

[4] I am naturally, beforehand, shy of novelties; new books, new faces, new years,—from some mental twist which makes it difficult in me to face the prospective. I have almost ceased to hope; and am sanguine only in the prospects of other (former) years. I plunge into foregone visions and conclusions. I encounter pell-mell with past disappointments. I am armour-proof against old discouragements. I forgive, or overcome in fancy, old adversaries. I play over again *for love*, as the gamesters phrase it, games, for which I once paid so dear. I would scarce now have any of those untoward accidents and events of my life reversed. I would no more alter them than the incidents of some well-contrived novel. Methinks, it is better that I should have pined away seven of my goldenest years, when I was thrall to the fair hair, and fairer eyes, of Alice W——n, than that so passionate a love-adventure should be lost. It was better that our family should have missed that legacy, which old Dorrell cheated us of, than that I should have at this moment two thousand pounds *in banco,* and be without the idea of that specious old rogue.

[5] In a degree beneath manhood, it is my infirmity to look back upon those early days. Do I advance a paradox, when I say, that, skipping over the intervention of forty years, a man may have leave to love *himself*, without the imputation of self-love?

[6] If I know aught of myself, no one whose mind is introspective—and mine is painfully so—can have a less respect for his present identity, than I have for the man Elia. I know him to be light, and vain, and humorsome; a notorious ***; addicted to ****: averse from counsel, neither taking it, nor offering it;—*** besides; a stammering buffoon; what you will; lay it on, and spare not; I subscribe to it all, and much more, than thou canst be willing to lay at his door—but for the child Elia—that "other me," there, in the background—I must take leave to cherish the remembrance of that young master—with as little reference, I protest, to this stupid changeling of five-and-forty, as if it had been a child of some other house, and not of my parents. I can cry over its patient small-pox at five, and rougher medicaments I can lay its poor fevered head upon the sick pillow at Christ's and wake with it in surprise at the gentle posture of maternal tenderness hanging over it, that unknown had watched its sleep. I know how it shrank from any the least colour of falsehood.—God help thee, Elia, how art thou changed! Thou art sophisticated.—I know how honest, how courageous (for a weakling) it was—how religious, how imaginative, how hopeful! From what have I not fallen, if the child I remember was indeed myself—and not some dissembling guardian presenting a false identity, to give the rule to my unpractised steps, and regulate the tone of my moral being!

[7] That I am fond of indulging, beyond a hope of sympathy, in such retrospection, may be the symptom of some sickly idiosyncrasy. Or is it owing to another cause; simply, that being without wife or family, I have not learned

to project myself enough out of myself; and having no offspring of my own to dally with, I turn back upon memory and adopt my own early idea, as my heir and favorite? If these speculations seem fantastical to thee, reader—(a busy man, perchance), if I tread out of the way of thy sympathy, and am singularly-conceited only, I retire, impenetrable to ridicule, under the phantom cloud of Elia.

[8] The elders, with whom I was brought up, were of a character not likely to let slip the sacred observance of any old institution; and the ringing out of the Old Year was kept by them with circumstances of peculiar ceremony. In those days the sound of those midnight chimes, though it seemed to raise hilarity in all around me, never failed to bring a train of pensive imagery into my fancy. Yet I then scarce conceived what it meant, or thought of it as a reckoning that concerned me. Not childhood alone, but the young man till thirty, never feels practically that he is mortal. He knows it indeed, and, if need were, he could preach a homily on the fragility of life; but he brings it not home to himself, any more than in a hot June we can appropriate to our imagination the freezing days of December. But now, shall I confess a truth?—I feel these audits but too powerfully. I begin to count the probabilities of my duration, and to grudge at the expenditure of moments and shortest periods, like miser's farthings. In proportion as the years both lessen and shorten, I set more count upon their periods, and would fain lay my ineffectual finger upon the spoke of the great wheel. I am not content to pass away "like a weaver's shuttle." Those metaphors solace me not, nor sweeten the unpalatable draught of mortality. I care not to be carried with the tide, that smoothly bears human life to eternity; and reluct at the inevitable course of destiny. I am in love with this green earth; the face of town and country; the unspeakable rural solitudes, and the sweet security of streets. I would set up my tabernacle here. I am content to stand still at the age to which I am arrived; I, and my friends: to be no younger, no richer, no handsomer. I do not want to be weaned by age; or drop, like mellow fruit, as they say, into the grave. Any alteration, on this earth of mine, in diet or in lodging, puzzles and discomposes me. My household-gods plant a terrible fixed foot, and are not rooted up without blood. They do not willingly seek Lavinian shores. A new state of being staggers me. Sun, and sky, and breeze, and solitary walks, and summer holidays, and the greenness of fields, and the delicious juices of meats and fishes, and society, and the cheerful glass, and candle-light, and fire-side conversations, and innocent vanities, and jests, and irony itself—do these things go out with life?

> Can a ghost laugh, or shake his gaunt sides, when you are pleasant with him?

[8] And you, my midnight darlings, my Folios! must I part with the intense delight of having you (huge armfuls) in my embraces? Must knowledge come

to me, if it come at all, by some awkward experiment of intuition, and no longer by this familiar process of reading?

[9] Shall I enjoy friendships there, wanting the smiling indications which point me to them here—the recognizable face—the "sweet assurance of a look"—?

[10] In winter this intolerable disinclination to dying—to give it its mildest name—does more especially haunt and beset me. In a genial August noon, beneath a sweltering sky, death is almost problematic. At those times do such poor snakes as myself enjoy an immortality?

[11] Then we expand and burgeon. Then are we as strong again, as valiant again, as wise again, and a great deal taller. The blast that nips and shrinks me puts me in thoughts of death. All things allied to the insubstantial, wait upon that master feeling; cold, numbness, dreams, perplexity; moonlight itself, with its shadowy and spectral appearances, that cold ghost of the sun, or Phoebus' sickly sister, like that innutritious one denounced in the Canticles: I am none of her minions—I hold with the Persian.

[12] Whatsoever thwarts, or puts me out of my way, brings death into my mind. All partial evils, like humours, run into that capital plague-sore. I have heard some profess an indifference to life. Such hail the end of their existence as a port of refuge; and speak of the grave as of some soft arms, in which they may slumber as on a pillow. Some have wooed death—but out upon thee, I say, thou foul, ugly phantom! I detest, abhor, execrate, and (with Friar John) give thee to six-score thousand devils, as in no instance to be excused or tolerated, but shunned as a universal viper; to be branded, proscribed, and spoken evil of! In no way can I be brought to digest thee, thou thin, melancholy *Privation*, or more frightful and confounding *Positive*!

[13] Those antidotes, prescribed against the fear of thee, are altogether frigid and insulting, like thyself. For what satisfaction hath a man, that he shall "lie down with kings and emperors in death," who in his life-time never greatly coveted the society of such bed-fellows?—or, forsooth, that "so shall the fairest face appear?"—why, to comfort me, must Alice W——n be a goblin? More than all, I conceive disgust at those impertinent and misbecoming familiarities, inscribed upon your ordinary tombstones. Every dead man must take upon himself to be lecturing me with his odious truism, that "such as he now is, I must shortly be." Not so shortly, friend, perhaps, as thou imaginest. In the meantime I am alive. I move about. I am worth twenty of thee. Know thy betters! Thy New Years' Days are past. I survive, a jolly candidate for 1821. Another cup of wine—and while that turncoat bell, that just now mournfully chanted the obsequies of 1820 departed, with changed notes lustily rings in a successor, let us attune to its peal the song made on a like occasion, by hearty, cheerful Mr. Cotton.—

THE NEW YEAR

Hark, the cock crows, and yon bright star
Tells us, the day himself's not far;
And see where, breaking from the night,
He gilds the western hills with light.
With him old Janus doth appear,
Peeping into the future year,
With such a look as seems to say,
The prospect is not good that way.
Thus do we rise ill sights to see,
And 'gainst ourselves to prophesy;
When the prophetic fear of things
A more tormenting mischief brings,
More full of soul-tormenting gall,
Than direst mischiefs can befall.
But stay! but stay! methinks my sight,
Better inform'd by clearer light,
Discerns sereneness in that brow,
That all contracted seem'd but now.
His revers'd face may show distaste,
And frown upon the ills are past;
But that which this way looks is clear,
And smiles upon the New-born Year.
He looks too from a place so high,
The Year lies open to his eye;
And all the moments open are
To the exact discoverer.
Yet more and more he smiles upon
The happy revolution.
Why should we then suspect or fear
The influences of a year,
So smiles upon us the first morn,
And speaks us good so soon as born?
Plague on't! the last was ill enough,
This cannot but make better proof;
Or, at the worst, as we brush'd through
The last, why so we may this too;
And then the next in reason shou'd
Be superexcellently good:
For the worst ills (we daily see)
Have no more perpetuity,

Than the best fortunes that do fall;
Which also bring us wherewithal
Longer their being to support,
Than those do of the other sort:
And who has one good year in three,
And yet repines at destiny,
Appears ungrateful in the case,
And merits not the good he has.
Then let us welcome the New Guest
With lusty brimmers of the best;
Mirth always should Good Fortune meet,
And renders e'en Disaster sweet:
And though the Princess turn her back,
Let us but line ourselves with sack,
We better shall by far hold out,
Till the next Year she face about.

[14] How say you, reader—do not these verses smack of the rough magnanimity of the old English vein? Do they not fortify like a cordial; enlarging the heart, and productive of sweet blood, and generous spirits, in the concoction? Where be those puling fears of death, just now expressed or affected? Passed like a cloud—absorbed in the purging sunlight of clear poetry—clean washed away by a wave of genuine Helicon, your only Spa for these hypochondries—And now another cup of the generous! and a merry New Year, and many of them, to you all, my masters!

Outward Exploration: Discussion and Writing

1. In paragraph 10, what are the implications of Lamb calling himself "a snake"?
2. Using Nancy Mairs' sentence (quoted earlier in this chapter), try to write a similar sentence about Lamb based on the information in his essay.
3. What purpose is served by Lamb's quoting Cotton's poem at length?
4. Write an exploratory analysis of this essay—what can you deduce from the essay about Lamb's personality? About his attitudes towards death and himself? Compare and contrast his attitudes with your own.

Rhetoric and Style

1. Consider this sentence from paragraph 6:

   God help thee, Elia, how art thou changed!

This is the rhetorical figure of speech called *apostrophe*. The writer appears to address someone directly. In this case, Lamb is actually addressing himself since *Elia* is his created persona in his essays. Can you find other examples of apostrophe in this essay? Elsewhere? In current newspapers and magazines?

2. Consider this sentence from paragraph 8:

> Sun, and sky, and breeze, and solitary walks, and summer holidays, and the greenness of fields, and the delicious juices of meats and fishes, and society, and the cheerful glass, and candle-light, and fire-side conversations, and innocent vanities, and jests, and irony itself—do these things go out with life?

This is the rhetorical figure of addition called *polysyndeton.* It involves using several conjunctions in a row when, in normal usage, we would use only one conjunction before the last item in a series. Its effect is to slow the rhythm of the sentence and to emphasize the heaping up of items in the series. In modern usage, however, we omit the commas (so Lamb's opening would look like this: "Sun and sky and breeze and solitary walks…"). Using your own material, write a sentence that utilizes this rhetorical figure.

Plan for Perfecting Oneself

Benjamin Franklin

Benjamin Franklin *(1706–1790) was born in Boston and became one of the major figures in early American history. He was a politician, a diplomat, a statesman, an inventor (the Franklin stove, swim fins, and bifocals), a printer, a publisher, an economist, a scientist, and a writer. He was a major influence on and signer of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. One of his last public acts was writing an anti-slavery treatise in 1789. His works include* Poor Richard's Almanack *and* The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, *from which the following selection is taken.*

Inward Exploration

Write at least a paragraph about any resolution you have made and the methods you used to carry over that resolution.

[1] It was about this time I conceiv'd the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wish'd to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my care was employ'd in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason. I concluded, at length, that the mere speculative conviction that it was our interest to be completely virtuous, was not sufficient to prevent our slipping; and that the contrary habits must be broken, and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct. For this purpose I therefore contrived the following method.

[2] In the various enumerations of the moral virtues I had met with in my reading, I found the catalogue more or less numerous, as different writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name. Temperance, for example, was by some confined to eating and drinking, while by others it was extended to mean the moderating every other pleasure, appetite, inclination, or passion, bodily or mental, even to our avarice and ambition. I propos'd to myself, for the sake of clearness, to use rather more names, with fewer ideas annex'd to each, than a few names with more ideas; and I included under thirteen names of virtues all that at that time occurr'd to me as necessary or desirable, and annexed to each a short precept, which fully express'd the extent I gave to its meaning.

[3] These names of virtues, with their precepts, were:

1. TEMPERANCE. Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.
2. SILENCE. Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.
3. ORDER. Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.
4. RESOLUTION. Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.
5. FRUGALITY. Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing.
6. INDUSTRY. Lose no time; be always employ'd in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.
7. SINCERITY. Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly, and, if you speak, speak accordingly.
8. JUSTICE. Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.
9. MODERATION. Avoid extreams; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.
10. CLEANLINESS. Tolerate no uncleanliness in body, cloaths, or habitation.
11. TRANQUILITY. Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
12. CHASTITY. Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dulness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.
13. HUMILITY. Imitate Jesus and Socrates.

[4] My intention being to acquire the habitude of all these virtues, I judg'd it would be well not to distract my attention by attempting the whole at once, but to fix it on one of them at a time; and, when I should be master of that, then to proceed to another, and so on, till I should have gone thro' the thirteen; and, as the previous acquisition of some might facilitate the acquisition of certain others, I arrang'd them with that view, as they stand above. Temperance first, as it tends to procure that coolness and clearness of head, which is so necessary where constant vigilance was to be kept up, and guard maintained against the unremitting attraction of ancient habits, and the force of perpetual temptations. This being acquir'd and establish'd, Silence would be more easy; and my desire being to gain knowledge at the same

time that I improv'd in virtue, and considering that in conversation it was obtain'd rather by the use of the ears than of the tongue, and therefore wishing to break a habit I was getting into of prattling, punning, and joking, which only made me acceptable to trifling company, I gave Silence the second place. This and the next, Order, I expected would allow me more time for attending to my project and my studies. Resolution, once become habitual, would keep me firm in my endeavors to obtain all the subsequent virtues; Frugality and Industry freeing me from my remaining debt, and producing affluence and independence, would make more easy the practice of Sincerity and Justice, etc., etc. Conceiving then, that, agreeably to the advice of Pythagoras in his Golden Verses, daily examination would be necessary, I contrived the following method for conducting that examination.

[5] I made a little book, in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues. I rul'd each page with red ink, so as to have seven columns, one for each day of the week, marking each column with a letter for the day. I cross'd these columns with thirteen red lines, marking the beginning of each line with the first letter of one of the virtues, on which line, and in its proper column, I might mark, by a little black spot, every fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day.

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[6] I determined to give a week's strict attention to each of the virtues successively. Thus, in the first week, my great guard was to avoid every the least offence against Temperance, leaving the other virtues to their ordinary chance, only marking every evening the faults of the day. Thus, if in the first week I could keep my first line, marked T, clear of spots, I suppos'd the habit of that virtue so much strengthen'd and its opposite weaken'd, that I might venture extending my attention to include the next, and for the following week keep both lines clear of spots. Proceeding thus to the last, I could go thro' a course compleat in thirteen weeks, and four courses in a year. And like him who, having a garden to weed, does not attempt to eradicate all the bad herbs at once, which would exceed his reach and his strength, but works on one of the beds at a time, and, having accomplish'd the first, proceeds to a second, so I should have, I hoped, the encouraging pleasure of seeing on my pages the progress I made in virtue, by clearing successively my lines of their spots, till in the end, by a number of courses, I should he happy in viewing a clean book, after a thirteen weeks' daily examination.

Outward Exploration

1. Make a list of traits that you consider "virtues for today's world." Write an essay explaining why your list is better than, equal to, or inferior to Franklin's list. In your essay, explore the ways in which you have tried to adhere to those virtues.
2. Write an exploratory analysis of the ethos of Franklin that emerges from this selection. Give examples to support your points.
3. One branch of ethics is called "virtue" ethics; one of its most famous proponents was Aristotle, but there have been many others. After consulting a dictionary of philosophy to get an overview of virtue ethics, read one (or more) essays by one of the proponents of virtue ethics. Then, using that and Franklin as a foundation, write an argument for or against the value of virtue ethics in today's world.

Rhetoric and Style

Listing and illustrations are time-honored rhetorical methods for giving the appearance of reason and order, and Franklin makes good use of them in this selection. Have you found other examples of those techniques in other things that you have read (e.g., in textbooks, other essays)?

Key Term

vantage point