

SO FAR

Kai Erikson

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I once attended an annual meeting at which the convener asked us to go around the table and say a word about what we had done in the year since we last met. Howard Zinn, a wonderful historian and wonderful person, was among the last to make a report.

When his turn came he said: “If I had known I was going to be asked to do this, I might have had a different year.” That’s how I feel now. If I had known I was going to have to account for myself in this way, I might have had a different life.

But I’m going to have to sort that life out as best I can, and I thought I would take a minute or two to reflect a bit on what a life trajectory – or rather a career trajectory – is. I used to be intrigued about the way psychiatric case histories are composed. It was an interest I shared with Erving Goffman (a name that will be familiar at least to the social scientists here). He and I were both doing research in mental hospitals at the time, and we spoke about the fact that a psychiatric case history is not really a life story, not really a biography, but a collection of details drawn from the past – transitory events, thoughts, feelings – that serve to explain why a certain individual has been diagnosed as, say, “schizophrenic,” and has been (or is about to be) committed to a mental hospital. The scraps selected for inclusion in a case history are very likely to be ones about which the person in question is embarrassed – moments of incompetence, panic, loss of control, dementia – exactly the details that most of us would want to keep out of a biography if we had any choice in the matter.

I gave some thought to the idea of composing a fake life history by gathering together a wide scatter of biographical scraps, selected almost at random. This person I invented (it shall be a “he” in this telling because I need a pronoun to work with here) was an Eagle Scout, wet his bed into adolescence, won a prize for artwork, struck his brother on the head with a hammer once, took wonderful care of a pet snake, saw visions of St. Francis from time to time, was unfailingly polite to clerks, asked on occasion whether he could have been someone else in a previous life, managed a very high score in the SATs, and was sometimes beset by dark depressive moods. Imagine a hundred details of that kind. It would have been vast sprawl of items, maybe several pages long, full of things that could have been drawn out of the life history of any number of persons.

Kai Erikson retired from Yale in 2000 as the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Sociology and American Studies. During his forty-four years on the faculty, he served as master of Trumbull College, chair of the Council of Masters, editor of the *Yale Review*, and chair of both the American Studies Program and the Department of Sociology. He was twice honored for teaching in his time at Yale, receiving the Richard R. Sewall Teaching Award in 1999 and the William Clyde DeVane Medal of Phi Beta Kappa in 2002.

My plan was to show a printed set of those scraps to everyone in a classroom of students, but to attribute the set to different historical personages. Some subjects would be told that those scraps had been drawn from the life of Norman Mailer on his way to a Pulitzer Prize; others that they came from the life of Lee Harvey Oswald on his way to that book depository in Dallas; yet others that they came from the life of John Kennedy on his way to the presidency, Ezra Pound on his way to a mental hospital, Billy Graham on his way to a national pulpit, Audie Murphy on his way to a Congressional Medal of Honor, and so on. I never did draw up my cast of characters, but the roster I might have chosen from included persons thought to be inspired, gifted, demented, brilliant, absurd, or as ordinary as soap. The students would then have been asked to write a brief sketch of the person to whom the scraps had been attributed, my hypothesis being that they would reach into the list of details and use the ones that appeared to be most consonant with what the person later became. It is not hard to imagine which of those scraps are most likely to have been selected for a psychiatric case history—although even then the scrap itself might very well change its significance depending on the person to whom it was attributed. Seeing visions of St. Francis would presumably mean different things in the lives of a candidate for canonization, a candidate for hospitalization, or a candidate for some prize in literature. The point I am making, of course, is that what an individual *becomes* will provide the filter through which one sifts out the relevant details of that life.

Jean Paul Sartre knew that and was fascinated by it. At the age of eight, he tells us, he began to write his life history. He imagined for himself “a magnificent literary career.” “I chose as my future the past of a great immortal and tried to live backwards. I became completely posthumous.” He spoke of a book that impressed him greatly when he was a boy. It dealt with very ordinary children just like himself, “sensitive and pious boys who gave joy to their parents just as I did to mine.” The names of those ordinary boys were Johann Sebastian and Jean-Jacques and Jean-Baptiste, and it was not until one read to the end of the stories that one learned that their last names were Bach, Rousseau, and Molière. But Sartre, at eight, would have none of that. He saw through the device completely and wrote: “Those children lived in a state of error. They thought they were acting and talking at random, whereas the real purpose of their every remark was to announce their destiny. I read the lives of those falsely mediocre children as God had conceived them, starting at the end.” And, understanding all of this at the age of eight—or so the older philosopher remembered it, looking back—“I became my own obituary.”

An intellectual itinerary is not an obituary, but it does “start at the end,” as Sartre suggested. Donald Spence, speaking of psychiatric case histories but saying things true of any life story, wrote: “The implicit rule is that there is always an underlying thread when one traces a past. The search for meaning is especially insidious because it always succeeds.”

My reason for bringing all this up as I take my turn tracing backward along the course of my own career is that I have a hard time seeing an underlying thread in it. I remember most of the critical turning points in my life as moments of sheer chance and contingency. I remember myself as a remarkably ill-focused young person, not very well anchored, drifting this way and that. “He shows promise,” people might have been saying, but that is often what one says about young persons who are not moving in any identifiable direction and do not seem to be governed by much in the way of an inner compass. I think I know where I am now, but I have a hard time seeing the momentum that brought me to it as a coherent force.

Those of you who have been to several of these presentations know that it is almost impossible not to say a word about parents, which is quite logical. But I stiffen a bit the minute I know that I have to turn to that topic because I had a father who was well known to and admired by the generation most of us are members of. He and I were very close personally and increasingly close professionally, particularly after I became a Yale professor as a young man and he became a Harvard professor in his middle years. I have a photograph of him on the desk I work at every day. My father was one of the joys of my existence, but he was also one of its banes – not because of the kind of person he was, of course, but because if you come from a parent like that, other people will make assumptions about the shape of your life’s trajectory even before it begins. If the son of Amelia Erhardt proves to be a skillful pilot, or if the daughter of Gustav Klimt becomes a worthy artist – “in her own right,” she will hear it said – the issue of inheritance hangs in the air. That must be truer for daughters than it is for sons, but it is there nonetheless.

I’m often asked, even now: “What’s it like to be the child of Erik H. Erikson?” I stifle the urge to ask, “Well, what’s it like to be the child of your father?” – knowing this to be an unanswerable question. But I actually do have a response. I was off in college and away from home when this person I think of as Dad and others think of as Erik Erikson became well known. He was nearly fifty when his first book was published. Moreover, anyone who thinks that fathers – and especially immigrant fathers – play a dominant role in shaping the young of America have not really been paying enough attention to what is going on out there. I’m rarely asked what it’s like to be the son of my mother.

What follows, then, is that life of contingencies – an outline, a silhouette.

As an undergraduate, the only ambition I can remember thinking or dreaming of was to learn something of the world and perhaps to write about it. When asked what my long-term goals were, I spoke vaguely of journalism; but that was not a declaration so much as an evasion, a way of responding to a question that I did not know how to answer otherwise. When my junior year came around, I was told that I had to declare a major. I looked at the list of courses I had taken and chose sociology because I had already made the largest investment there. I was interested in anthropology,

philosophy, and history. Sociology seemed to sit at the center of the intellectual space those fields occupied.

Some may find this a bit hard to believe, but I think it is fair for me to say that I followed more or less that same line of reasoning right into graduate school. It was a far more relaxed time for us then than it has become for students since, and I assume that I was not alone in turning to graduate studies as a way of continuing my general education as distinct from learning a particular craft. If you had asked me then why I enrolled in a graduate program, I would probably have said that I wanted to learn more of the world, and if you had asked me what occupation I was leaning to, I would still have said something about journalism. It has to be added that enrolling in graduate programs earned young men exemption from the military draft in those days, and it is certainly reasonable to assume that this figured in my thinking.

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I went to the University of Chicago. That turned out to be far and away the best place for me, but, even so, it was another of those moments of chance. I applied to four graduate programs; Chicago was the only one that offered me admission. The others were Harvard, Michigan, and Wisconsin; and the more I learned about those programs later, the surer I became that none would have been as good a match for me.

The first day I was there I went to see a distinguished professor named Everett Cherrington Hughes, whom the social scientists here will remember as an important figure in the field. He looked at my application and noted that I had mentioned an interest in doing field work. If I was really serious, he said, I should forget the classroom and go out to get the feel of the streets. His advice was not meant literally, but my credulity was such that I bought a notebook, borrowed a car, and spent most of the next couple of months or so in the Immaculate Conception Parish in South Chicago. The community was largely made up of first- and second-generation Polish immigrants. Church bulletins were printed in Polish. Signs at the adjacent steel mill, where most of the men worked, were in Polish first, with English added almost as an afterthought.

Those months in South Chicago had a tremendous impact on me. I was from California, and the cultural enclave I was visiting could have been on another planet for all the familiarity I had of such things. When I went back to report to Everett Hughes, carrying a notebook as thick as a telephone directory, he stared at me as warily as if I had been the visitor from another planet, and he continued to look at me that way for quite a while. It had never entered his mind that I would actually do as he proposed. In the end, I am glad to be able to report, his wariness turned to something closer to an affectionate respect, but for years afterward he made gentle fun of my awkward introduction to field work.

I remained at the university for two years and earned a master's degree. One evening I was talking to some friends about draft exemptions and began to worry that I was enrolled in school for all the wrong reasons and would never learn what I wanted to do with my life so long as I let that looming reality play a governing role. So the

next morning I wrote a letter to my draft board in California announcing that I was leaving school and was thus forfeiting my deferment. I was drafted into the United States Army by what seemed like return mail and was assigned, after a brief sampling of other kinds of soldiering, to the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. We may assume that there were not very many twenty-five-year-old privates in the U.S. Army with master's degrees in one of the social sciences, so this outcome had a certain logic to it. Even so, it counts in my life as another of those moments of contingency.

At the Army Institute of Research, I became involved in a project I had played no part in designing. I just happened to be there, an available hand. A psychiatrist, with another enlisted man and myself in tow, would interview the members of an Army squad that had recently lost one of its members to a psychiatric ward with a diagnosis of schizophrenia. One would think that the squad was glad to be rid of this person. He could not perform the most elementary military task satisfactorily. He could not shine his boots. He could not make his bunk. He could not assemble or reassemble his rifle. He did not understand many of the orders given him, nor could he be given any serious responsibility. He was, in short, a burden to everyone else.

Instead of being glad that this inept fellow soldier was gone, however, every one of the squads we visited insisted that their mate was not really ill, that the psychiatrists had made a mistake in their diagnosis, and that the group would dearly like to have him back. His presence in the squad, as it turned out, had been very important to his fellows in ways we were hard put to understand. Why should that be the case? I pondered that problem for quite some time. In fact, when my two-year obligation was over and I decided to return to Chicago—this time fairly sure that I wanted to be a sociologist—I intended to write a dissertation about it. I had several cardboard cartons full of data stemming from that research on the squads, and I thought that I could make up at least some of the time I had lost to the Army if I could at least get a dissertation project out of it.

Back in Chicago, I carefully entered the data I had brought with me onto one side of a ledger that sat open on my desk, and on the other side I entered sociological ideas of various kinds that might be relevant to those data. A year passed and I still could not find a connection between the data and the ideas. The notion I wanted to pursue, put much too simply, is that deviant forms of behavior can sometimes perform a useful purpose for the groups in which they occur, as appeared to have been the case with those squads. The data I had on hand, though, could not be brought to bear on the issue I was concerned with, for reasons I should have realized far earlier than I did, and so I had to seek another way to pursue the study. Without going into the reasons why that mattered, I needed a setting in which I could develop an accurate registry of the individuals in an established social group who could reasonably be described as “deviant” by the prevailing standards of the community. That would not be feasible in most areas of the contemporary United States. But I wondered whether I might

find what I was looking for elsewhere. Parts of rural Switzerland came to mind. So did island communities in the Outer Hebrides.

While pondering such matters, it occurred to me that I might be able to find the setting I was seeking in the historical past—an unusual research site for an American sociologist in those days—and I began to read about seventeenth-century New England. The Puritans of Massachusetts Bay cared a great deal more about the nature of sin than they did about differences among the various kinds of human misdoing. For that reason one can find in Puritan court records a catalogue of virtually everything the community deemed offensive—uttering oaths, becoming intoxicated, engaging in lewd behavior, dressing inappropriately, stealing property, and so on. That was what I was looking for. From that solution came a dissertation, and from that dissertation came a book, the basic argument of which was that social orders tend to maintain a relatively stable quota of deviant behavior because it marks the outer edges—the moral boundaries—of group space. Deviant forms of conduct, that is, to employ a term no longer in use throughout the social sciences, are “functional.”

If a group of us were sitting around the dinner table, I would tell you that my first position—instructor, Department of Psychiatry, University of Pittsburgh—was decisive in many respects. That’s where I met my wife, for one thing, and that has made a greater difference than I can put into words. It was also the most exuberantly interdisciplinary workplace I have ever encountered: the faculty of the Department of Psychiatry included an anthropologist, a card-carrying philosopher, a linguist, a social psychologist, and, of course, a sociologist. Not a single one of us was qualified to help with the main work of the department—to teach methods of caring for the mentally ill. No matter. One of the major missions of the department was simply to contribute to the world’s understanding of human life in general.

Even here, the theme of contingency came into play. The day I was offered this job, the chair of the department outlined to me the responsibilities of the position. He mentioned an annual salary and asked whether that would be okay. I said something like, “That’s not a problem,” meaning that the salary number was satisfactory. He obviously took it to mean that I was accepting the position. That evening, at a banquet arranged for a different purpose, he announced my acceptance. To my way of thinking, we had only begun to negotiate, and I was planning to visit a number of other potential job sites before deciding anything. But I could see no reason to bring the subject up that evening, since I could always clarify the matter later. Now, looking back, I wonder to what extent a momentum was set into motion that evening that played a part in my taking the position. If so, I salute the momentum. I cannot imagine a better place for me to have started.

I spent four years in Pittsburgh, followed by a three-year term from 1963 to 1966 at the Department of Psychiatry at Emory University in Atlanta. My wife and I were caught up in the excitement of the civil rights movement and participated modestly in it. In 1966 I came to Yale, this time with an appointment in a Department of So-

ciology. Again, if we were sitting around the dinner table, I would spend some time talking about Wendell Bell and his role in bringing me here. I have been here ever since, tempted now and then to move to warmer climes or to take on a variety of administrative posts, but a combination of inertia and the profound respect I feel for my colleagues here has sabotaged any such enticements.

In my first years here I took on administrative responsibilities that served the very important purpose of diverting me from more scholarly rounds of life: the research ideas that had interested me the most during my time in the two medical schools were no longer absorbing, and I was wandering around, looking for inspiration. Not yet forty, I became master of one of Yale's residential colleges, and at forty I became chair of the Council of Masters – both of those tasks at a time when Yale (and the rest of the country) was living at a very high pitch of excitement. That was my preoccupation as well as my occupation for four years.

In 1972, I received a phone call from an attorney I did not know who was about to file a suit for damages on behalf of a number of people from a place called Buffalo Creek in West Virginia. Buffalo Creek was a coal mining community that had been devastated beyond easy description by a surging flood that had careened down the narrow hollow like a toboggan in a chute, killed 125 people under terrifying conditions, and left 4,000 of the valley's 5,000 residents homeless. The question asked of me over the phone was whether I had a graduate student who might be interested in doing some research on what had happened there. I was deeply curious, which may have been one of the reasons why I proposed to the attorney that I visit the hollow in order to make a more informed recommendation.

When I first came upon that dark scene of destruction, I was so drawn to it that I simply volunteered my own services. It was a stunning presumption on my part. I had never been to Appalachia, knew nothing about coal mining, had no familiarity with the literature in what was then called the sociology of disasters. But Buffalo Creek became for me a kind of compulsion. I did not realize at the time that it would become the first step in a major career shift, but that is certainly how things came out. I wrote a lengthy report to the law firm, which figured importantly enough in the action to bring it some attention, and I later converted that report into a book. The main thrust of the testimony I was prepared to offer was that the disaster had damaged the tissues of *communal* life as well as the bodies and the minds of the persons who had experienced it. Even though that argument was never offered in an actual court of law, it figured prominently enough in the settlement of the case that every plaintiff was awarded a sum of money for "loss of community." That gave the argument itself some kind of status in law, a matter I know nothing about, but it also resulted in my being invited by other law firms to do similar investigations elsewhere. There are a number of interesting and important propositions about the nature of social life that can be usefully examined in disaster settings, and in that respect my lurching off to

scenes of human misery could be reasonably understood as inquiries into the center of things.

In the next thirty years I visited a number of disaster sites, preparing at the same time to testify in courts of law and to contribute to what was by then a rapidly growing sociological specialty in disaster studies. I was the recipient of the best research grants to be found anywhere: expenses being paid by law firms with treasuries more than adequate to the purpose, and negotiations being completed, literally, in a matter of minutes. I don't want to swamp you with details, but here is a sampling of the kinds of setting involved:

- An Ojibwa Indian reserve in subarctic Canada, where a mercury spill contaminated the waterways along which the people had lived and drawn a living since the beginning of what they reckoned as historical time.

- A nuclear power plant in eastern Pennsylvania, Three Mile Island, where a near meltdown occasioned an extraordinary expression of dread on the part of persons who lived in its shadows.

- A migrant farm worker camp on the edge of the Everglades, where a number of farm workers from Haiti learned that the money they had been saving to help out families at home had simply been stolen from them.

- Native villages along the shores of Prince William Sound, Alaska, where the coastal waters were blackened for hundreds of miles by a tremendous oil spill, one that not only threatened the native economy in ways that go beyond easy calculation but threatened the native way of life altogether.

- A town in the Western Slavonia area of Croatia that was largely destroyed by the tides of civil war that swept across the Yugoslav countryside in the early 1990s.

- Several communities in Colorado that were exposed to gasoline spills that had a profound impact on the individual well-being and the sense of communality that had prevailed there before.

- A remote atoll at the outer edges of the Marshall Islands that had been visited some half a century earlier by an enormous radioactive fallout, the result of a nuclear test conducted by the United States.

- A district in northeast England, where an epidemic of hoof-and-mouth disease not only brought about the slaughter of millions of cattle – a very grisly scene – but had impacts on the residents and the farming communities in which they lived that no official had predicted.

Let me end that brief roster by mentioning Katrina, to which I plan to return in a few moments.

I think it would be reasonable for me to conclude that the career I stumbled into was not so remote from the vaguer one I was envisioning in college. I am not a journalist in any helpful sense of the term, but I have visited a number of other places to gather a feel for what happened there. The reports that resulted from these visits are

separate narratives – distinct specimens of a genus – even though they share features in common and together add up to a distinctly sociological set of data.

I would like to end with two final reflections.

The first has to do with Erik Erikson. I've never said much about him on a public occasion, but I am older now and in the company of my natural kin here. If you had asked me forty years ago, when I first came to Yale, whether I had any interest in the kinds of work he did, I would have said no. The lens through which a sociologist looks out at the world is quite different from the lens a psychoanalyst or a psychologist uses, and I would have made the most of that difference. If you had asked me if I had any interest in clinical matters, I would have said that I could not imagine for a moment sitting still for hours at a time listening to the boring stories that persons who undertake counseling often relate. But I think I have to conclude now that I have always been a good deal more psychological in my approach to social things than sociologists on the whole tend to be. And when it comes to the kinds of interview that ethnographers draw on, I have spent hundreds of hours hearing accounts in which a single kernel of usable wisdom is bought at the price of half an hour of listening.

I would not say that I acquired an interest in the subject matter I now study from him. I will suggest, however – this is a relatively new thought to me – that he and I share a quality that might be called “intellectual temperament.” He had an ability to see the pattern in things – to feel and sense them, as opposed to coming upon them as a matter of logical inference. He had an uncanny ability to see the shape of human things and the configurations that people gather into. You could almost have said that he was good at drawing pictures with words. In fact, he had been a somewhat rootless artist before he fell into (an apt expression in his case too) the extraordinary business of psychoanalysis. I may be a little like that myself, but before I venture into that tricky terrain, let me add without a trace of becoming modesty that he had a gift in that regard and I do not. I'm glad he had it, and I'm glad I do not. This does not trouble me at all. But I am speaking of habits of thought here, sets of intellectual reflex, rather than the skill with which they are applied. Among his habits of thought is that he was not all that impressed by tidiness. Aldous Huxley once wrote:

Now tidiness is undeniably a good thing, but it is a good of which it is easily possible to have too much and at too high a price. The good life can only be lived in a society in which tidiness is preached and practiced, but not too fanatically, and where efficiency is always haloed, as it were, by a tolerated margin of mess.

My father would have appreciated that quotation and have said something similar about scientific observation. The more neatly you get the observation down, the less likely it is to be accurate, because the fact that social science requires neatness does not change the fact that the world being observed is a thing in fluid motion and, for that very reason, an untidy mess.

One more observation and we are done. This past year was my seventy-fifth, and two things happened during it that bear on the trajectory I have been trying to trace

here. The first was a new edition of the book on seventeenth-century New England that was originally published forty years ago. I made no revisions to the text itself, at least in part because I had not made any effort to keep up with the historiography of New England over those four decades. Massachusetts Bay was for me a case history drawn on to serve a particular purpose. It was not a continuing interest. I did spend the better part of two weeks changing most of the pronouns because I wrote the piece at a time when “he” was an approved way to refer to all of God’s children. That usage looks to me now as both antique and absurd. The editing meant that I really had to read the text carefully for the first time in those forty years, and doing so was a bit of a shock because I realized, first, that it was better than I had remembered it being, and, second, that I am not at all sure I could do as well now. My trajectory threatened to take a full turn and return to the place where it started. Most of us imagine the trajectories of our careers sloping upward in a gentle grade from a raw beginning to a thoughtful, seasoned end. But I was not at all sure that I could accomplish in my retirement what I did in my early apprenticeship. That should have been a depressing realization.

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But in fact it was not, which leads me to my second epilogue. I was invited to take a role this year in organizing research initiatives on the disaster that we call Katrina, and I found to my surprise and delight that I was in a position to help in ways I could not have earlier when I was smarter. It had something to do with the kinds of perspective that come with time, something to do with seasoning, something to do with experience of the kind that only the process of aging can confer. I may not be as smart or as energetic or as sharply tuned as I once was. But I’m more reflective, wiser in certain respects. And that, it turns out, is what this particular project needs.

Trajectories do not come to an end until they turn into obituaries, and it is too early for that. So I won’t bring these remarks to a close. I’ll just stop talking.