The Changing Landscape of Work and Family in the American Middle Class

Reports from the Field

Edited by Elizabeth Rudd
and Lara Descartes

For all the children in our lives from A to Z, including:
Alexa, Andre, Elina, Geramey, Irene, Jason, and Zeaira

6

American Dreaming

Refugees from Corporate Work Seek the Good Life

Brian A. Hoey

"Do you get told what the good life is or do you figure it out for yourself?" Alan poses the question rhetorically, but I can see that he is considering how he might answer it. His query comes in the course of animated conversation as we drink strong coffee at his kitchen table. We sit bathed in the glow of light reflected off deep drifts of snow blown in from Lake Michigan during one of many sudden squalls that blanket these northern Michigan communities during long, cold winters. It is the kind of weather that keeps the area's population from even higher rates of in-migration. A former Towncar-driving, suit-wearing, corporate manager who became a Carhartt canvas- and flannel-clad, pick-up-truck-driving jack-of-all-trades, Alan is a former self-professed "professional people hater."

After a few moments have passed sitting in thoughtful silence, Alan leans forward over his steaming cup for emphasis and answers his own question. "In corporate America I started getting told." Pausing briefly, he continues. "I look back now and I was told what the good life was: a four-bedroom colonial house in the suburbs and working for a main company, dressing in a suit every day, going to the job, weekends off, and getting to go someplace on the weekend. But I wasn't happy. I just didn't know it at the time."

I first met Alan when my wife and I were looking for a place to live while I conducted the two years of ethnographic fieldwork on which this chapter is based. Although we eventually chose to rent elsewhere, early in our search we saw an inexpensive apartment located in the broad glacial plains above Grand Traverse Bay, a long blue arm of Lake Michigan. Answering the realtor's questions in polite conversation, I described my reason for moving to the area. As I spoke, a man emerged gradually from behind the kitchen counter where he quietly was making repairs. In paint-splattered coveralls,

he stood gripping a putty knife with an expectant stare. The rapt attention was unnerving and I took a step toward the door. Why would this disheveled handyman show such interest in my research? As it turned out, he and our realtor were husband and wife. They had moved here only a few years earlier when both left jobs in metropolitan Detroit. Alan and Beth were two of many urban-to-rural migrants moving to my study area in the Grand Traverse region.

INTRODUCTION—LIFESTYLE MIGRATION AS A QUEST FOR THE GOOD

Alan felt that he underwent a kind of self-transformation that allowed him to claim what he described as a "second chance" in life. Alan claimed this in his decision to leave a self-destructive personal and professional past and move from an upscale, middle-class neighborhood 250 miles to the south. He now lives in the rural, northwestern part of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. He became one of the growing numbers of what some call "corporate refugees" (e.g., Luban 2001). Corporate refugees relocate as a way of starting over. Like Alan, they tell a story of travel made in physical and psychical worlds to find personal refuge.

Their stories are constructed in a manner akin to those of people who have undergone religious conversion.[1] When applied to non-religious phenomena or experiences, "conversion" refers to a far-reaching personal change related to adopting a new interpretive framework within which individuals structure their actions and experience them as purposeful. Conversion stories are a special form of autobiographical narrative where individuals distinguish a "real self" from an inauthentic self. This self-transformation entails the creation of a new vision of one's self when long-time social roles and self-presentations are challenged and eventually stripped away.

My research with "lifestyle migrants" examines the travel and conversion stories of corporate refugees who start over, as they move not only outwardly on asphalt roads to new places but also on the less tangible psychical paths of introspection and self-discovery that negotiations among work, family, and self blaze. I refer to these urban-to-rural migrants as lifestyle migrants to emphasize their use of relocation as a way of redefining their relationship to work and family through changes in lifestyle, the patterns of everyday life. The expression lifestyle migrant is intended to emphasize the growing importance in American lives of consumption behavior, including individual choices about how and where to live relative to production activities, such as income-generating work. Anthropologist Dean MacCannell (1999) suggests that as a term, lifestyle should be understood as "combi-

nations of work and leisure . . . replacing 'occupation' as the basis of social relationship formation, social status and social action" (6). As MacCannell reasons, lifestyle migrants may be a sign that the "affirmation of basic social values is departing the world of work and *seeking refuge* in the realm of leisure" (ibid, emphasis added). That is, seeking refuge in areas such as personal lifestyle, where the individual is thought to have greater discretion (cf. Putnam 2000, Weiss 1999, Zukin 1991). Lifestyle migrants seek personally meaningful places of refuge that they can call home, which they believe will resonate with inspiring visions of self—what I refer to as the *potential self*.

As revealed in work by sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1997), the potential self resides in some idealized, future point in time, set apart from an everyday self living in the hustle and bustle of the present. In her study of workers at a Midwestern company she calls "Americo," Hochschild found the potential self to be a set of imagined, future possibilities. These served as a substitute for, rather than preparation for, action in the lives of overscheduled individuals coping with the time squeeze of increasingly complicated work and family commitments. Removed from the uncertainties and conflicts of everyday life, imagining a potential self is one way individuals may cope with the demands of busy, self-consuming schedules. Lifestyle migration involves individuals and families who choose relocation as a way of attempting to actualize this potential self through reordering work, family, and personal priorities. Lifestyle migrants seek a kind of moral re-orientation to questions about what gives meaning, fulfillment, dignity, and self-respect to a life. In their stories, we see how individual identity and the moral dimension are profoundly intertwined in the unfolding narrative account of a personal "quest" to make sense of that life through culturally informed questions about what constitutes the good life (MacIntyre 1984, Taylor 1989). Lifestyle migrants seek to define themselves according to their own "moral narratives of self" (Hoey 2005). In these narratives, they describe their transition from one kind of life to another and their reorientation to basic life questions as a kind of self-transformative conversion experience (Taylor 1997). And, as life stories grow out of the activities of everyday life in a sequence of lived events and one's literal as well as figurative movement through both time and space, they are naturally stories of travel (de Certeau 1984).

Both voluntarily downshifted and involuntarily displaced corporate workers, or "refugees," may attempt to redefine themselves and renegotiate work and family obligations. By moving to places they believe possess qualities likely to support a more balanced and integrated life, they try to harmonize material and practical domains with their own moral and spiritual needs. Lifestyle migration entails the quest made by people like Alan and Beth for refuge. They hope to explore a more authentic, inner self through pursuing different, more deliberate work and family arrangements enacted

in new geographic and social surroundings. For those in my research, choosing to relocate to a *rural* place, with perceived elements of greater authenticity and a slower pace, is indispensable to this process.

Though generations of exodus from rural communities have embodied much of the American experience, many have *retained* a strong attachment to the rural ideal (Johnson and Beale 1998, 23). "The Rural" is an imagined place as much as a geographic category for all non-metropolitan places. It has become an object for those seeking stability within the context of an increasingly uncertain and restructuring economy (Murdoch and Day 1998). Even as people embark on quests for refuge in ways that are original and individually creative, they engage in reproducing understandings contained in a culturally informed notion of the Rural—as something good or "simple," a repository for more "authentic" ways of life (Hummon 1990, Shi 1985, 1986).

As we will learn from Alan's story of down-shifting from his high-stress corporate career, finding or believing in a place of refuge can be essential to people at crucial turning points in their lives. I have come to think of these turning points as watersheds. At these times, people's guiding belief is that they might find greater balance leading to personal harmony, happiness, and fulfillment through immersion in a new existence created in commitment to a particular lifestyle, relocation to a place of personal refuge, and a refocusing of personal goals and relationship to work.

FIELDWORK AND SETTING

Approximately 250 miles northwest of Detroit, Michigan, the Grand Traverse region is an hour's drive from the nearest highway and two hours from Grand Rapids, the nearest city. Its rolling countryside is defined by a deep, glacial bay stretching north-south over twenty miles. Although now heavily forested, a nineteenth-century lumber boom left the area almost completely denuded. After the inevitable bust in the final years of the nineteenth century and more than fifty years of relative economic stagnation, the area's economy relied heavily on agriculture and tourism in the second half of the twentieth century. Today, most of the area that is not regenerated forest is either active or idle farmland. In the past twenty years, tourism has had an increasingly large role in the local economy. Endowed with miles of sandy Lake Michigan shoreline and towering dunes, the Grand Traverse region attracts vacationers seeking recuperative rest. Nearly 70 percent of my 128 project participants vacationed here before choosing to make it home. Like many rural places once only attractive for seasonal, short-term stays, the area where I conducted research finds itself a destination today for lifestyle migrants and others who seek a more enduring,

year-round retreat (see Bonner 1997, Jobes 2000, Murdoch and Day 1998, Pindell 1995).

Lifestyle migration is the most recent expression of over thirty years of urban-to-rural migration in the United States. In some rural counties where once-dominant agriculture and natural resource extraction have declined, this migration is reversing a twentieth-century trend of population loss (Boyle and Halfacree 1998, Jobes, Stinner, and Wardwell 1992, Pandit and Withers 1999). In the last thirty years of growth, U.S. Census figures show that population increase in some study area counties approached 40 percent over ten years, with in-migration contributing four times the amount attributed to natural increase. In a recent article addressing urban-to-rural migration's contribution to this "rural rebound," sociologist Kenneth Johnson (1999) features Grand Traverse County. Calling it a "Jewel of the Great Lakes," he notes that between 1970 and 1990 its population grew 64 percent, from 39,175 to 64,273.

I conducted fieldwork from early 2000 to early 2002 in the adjoining counties of Grand Traverse, Leelanau, Antrim, and Benzie that together incorporate an area extending roughly twenty-five miles from Traverse City. I gathered the data for this chapter through in-depth, open-ended, ethnographic interviews with 128 in-migrants to these counties. These interviews emphasized personal background, reasons for leaving a job and relocating, the process of relocation decision-making, and negotiating individual identity after the move. Free-form conversations allowed migrants to present detailed narratives, often in extended monologues with minimal interruption. The large number of stories gathered in interview format allowed me to consider a wide range of personal backgrounds and relocation experiences. Some of these interviews led me to follow-up conversations and participant observation in everyday work and family life, spending time with a core group of four individuals and eight families who relocated within the previous five years. They roughly represent the full study sample of lifestyle migrants.

Reflecting basic demographics of all in-migrants to the area, lifestyle migrants in the study are overwhelmingly white and middle class. Most had professional backgrounds including having worked as managers, accountants, lawyers, social workers, and others in health care-related fields (cf. Jobes 2000, 1992, Judson, Reynolds-Scanlon, and Popoff 1999, Stinner et al. 1992). After their move, however, almost half were working in a field they considered a *significant* departure from their prior employment or field of study. Nearly 60 percent had a drop in income, with the smallest drop being 5 and the largest 40 percent of pre-relocation levels. Given a shared interest of lifestyle migrants to gain a greater sense of *control* in their lives, I was not surprised to find that nearly 40 percent started their own businesses. These ranged from home-based consultancies to retail shops with

several employees. Most, however, found salaried or hourly wage work in the local government, school system, community college, hospital, or other local businesses. Nearly 20 percent worked two part-time jobs in order to meet income goals. Of a total of 128 participants, roughly even amounts were in their thirties, forties, and fifties, respectively, with slightly more than half female. Nearly 30 percent were married with grown children who no longer lived at home full-time. Among the remainder, there was a roughly even split between those married with young children, married with school-aged children, married with no children, and single. Like Alan, approximately 60 percent of participants relocated from southeastern Michigan, while the rest were evenly split between other parts of Michigan, the Midwest, and the rest of the United States.

MORAL NARRATIVES OF SELF—TAKING BACK ONE'S LIFE, REDEFINING THE GOOD

Shortly after meeting Alan, we got together for a chat on another snowy day in early January. Alan arrived at my apartment in a beat-up pick-up with a jutting yellow snowplow. Dusting icy flakes from his jacket, he strode through the front door, thrusting his generous hand forward to deliver a confident shake. Our conversation began with the weather, a central concern in this area during the winter months. He hoped to get out and do some plowing before the snow became too deep. I hoped to join him. By this time, I had learned something of Alan's past work as a "hired gun," brought in by companies to cut costs. They did this in a number of ways, including the union busting that had occupied much of Alan's former work life.

> The objective was to keep the unions out, keep the morale up, and reduce the workforce. Kind of hard to do all that at once but that was the deal. The guy who was running the Midwest division [of a large processed foods company] said, "I want a guy like you. I don't want a team player. I've got this problem . . ." They said, "We don't care if you fire everybody because in nine months we're going to close the plant . . . but we'll keep you if we like you."

Going from that sort of work to a jack-of-all-trades fix-it man and manager tending to two out-of-date rental properties was a big shift. Alan's former work as a corporate hit man is iconic of the post-industrial economy. In whatever small way, he helped give shape to this emerging landscape of work.

> [The executives] said "Raise hell with the unions." We had three walk-outs and every time I had the factory running again in fifteen minutes because I just went into the offices and said "Come on, we're going to run this thing." I would have the [machines] making noise and stuff . . . and it got the union scared that we were going to run the thing without them. I would bring in tem-

porary labor services. I was doing everything. It took them two years to clean up all the arbitrations I started. That's what I was hired to do.

Alan spoke about a life-changing decision to break from his well-established professional career and source of social identity by relocating to the northern reach of the Great Lakes region. Residents of the Great Lakes states call this area "Up North" as a way to signify both geography and, more emphatically, a state of being. The phrase both locates one spatially and orients one ideologically. The term distinguishes the northern part of Michigan from the heavily urban and suburbanized "Down State" south of an imagined "line" that appears, in the perception of many residents, to divide the state into two distinct regions (cf. Clark and Officer 1962).

As I poured coffee, Alan described what he was learning about himself toward the end of his time living and working Down State. It became a question of personal character. It was about identifying values that he could no longer violate:

> There were things building up to the dramatic decision to make the move. I had a psychologist friend who pointed out that I was taking it all too seriously and that working in corporate America was [only] a game. What [began to bother] me about the game was how people are treated. I can give you example after example of how decisions were made. One day [an upper plant manager] told me, "You know you have to fire that guy." I asked why. "His wife has got a serious illness and the insurance is costing us a fortune." There is nothing wrong with the guy. "Well, you'll have to find something." It was an inhumane decision. Another time, this one guy got prostate cancer and the president of the company said, "Well, he's a goner. We don't have to worry about him anymore." That's corporate America. Relocating and leaving all that behind was about taking control of my life and getting my self back.

This notion of turning away from an inauthentic or somehow severely compromised or violated self in order to come "back" to a true self is a common refrain in the narratives of lifestyle migrants. In a different context, a professional couple in their late thirties told me how they left well-paying jobs and what most Americans would consider successful days spent in the suburbs of Detroit to move to Northern Michigan, "take back their lives," and reconnect with "core values." Katherine and John described how they felt increasingly "dispossessed" of the locations where they lived and worked. Although their explicit intent was to express a lack of any meaningful connection, their choice of the word "dispossession" to describe their feelings suggests being deprived of a sense of security and home. Given the desire of lifestyle migrants to feel meaningful connections to particular geographic places as a kind of personal refuge, living where this connection seems impossible or impractical can lead some people to feel "disoriented" or "adrift."

Many lifestyle migrants felt that their former jobs asked them to make decisions that over time violated their inward sense of right and wrong, finally going beyond their ability to cope. At that point, everyday life, as Alan told me, can begin "tearing you down" in ways that the occasional vacation simply cannot build back up or put back together. His decision to relocate was about being able to define himself according to his own *moral narrative*, in a new physical place that helps create a personal space where he can design a new relationship to work and family. Between swigs of hot coffee, he explained:

> I knew there was something wrong with me. My job was affecting my personality and adversely affecting me as a human being. I saw it manifesting as behavior that I knew was wrong. I was drinking too much and I was chasing around. I yelled a lot [because] that's what people reacted to. Is this the right way to treat a human being? No. But that's how you got things done. That becomes your whole life. Soon you're screaming at your wife and you're screaming at your kids. Looking back, I was trading away my value system for the job and in support of the company. You are brought up with certain morals, ethics, and values and then you may find yourself in a system that is not allowing you to live your life properly. This is on your mind, whether conscious or [not]. Looking back, it is easy for me to analyze it. I was tearing myself down.

As we talked and finished the coffee pot, Alan glanced out the window from time to time. Cold Artic air continued to push over Lake Michigan, picking up moisture from the relatively warm water. Snow was piling up deep. Alan suggested we go for a ride. Maybe do some plowing. Bracing against the wind, I followed him between drifts in the parking lot to his battered blue truck. Climbing in among scattered tools on the passenger seat and floor, I cleared myself a place to sit. After waiting a few moments for a degree of heat and relative visibility, we set off into white. It was good to be out with Alan. The drafty cab of his truck was a considerable change from the comfortable living room of my apartment and no doubt a reminder to him of how far he had come from a company-provided Lincoln Towncar. As we wound our way through mostly deserted streets, I asked Alan about what it meant for him to be taking his "second chance" at life. What did it mean for him to have made a break from a life that he felt had been slowly "tearing him down?" Alan kept his focus on the road ahead with a serious expression as he navigated through the storm. A grin spread slowly over his face and he began to speak. He described how he now acted in ways incompatible with what would have been expected from him before. As a landlord, Alan still "manages" in some manner, but now he can make decisions based on what feels right and does not violate his sense of an inner, authentic self.

> Now I can make decisions, analytical decisions, based on income or I can make decisions based on people. I'm people-oriented now. There is this handicapped guy living in one of my units. He's got his little thirteen-inch TV. He doesn't

> have much of life outside that TV. I went over to [the store] and picked up a big twenty-five inch for a hundred bucks. I went over, gave it to him, and told him that somebody left it in one of the units. He could have it. There's decisions that you do based on your faith. Some of those decisions are about what's the right thing to do. A lot of that is a people-related process. But in the corporate world, it is black and white—it's numbers.

Although his current work as business owner required him to closely watch the numbers of his own bottom line, Alan looked for ways to be more "people-oriented," such as through his gift of a TV to one of his tenants, in sharp contrast to his former role as "people-hater."

THE LARGER CONTEXT:
A POST-INDUSTRIAL, "NEW ECONOMY" [1]

The narrative accounts of relocation and starting over told by lifestyle migrants like Alan are part of a larger moral story of what constitutes the good life in America at a time when the basic social categories and cultural meanings of family, work, community, and self are changing. My research analyzes social and structural transition by exploring the meaning of *non-economic* migration by middle-class Americans away from metropolitan and suburban areas to growing rural communities.[2] The varied journeys of lifestyle migrants are not simply idiosyncratic expressions but part of a shared cultural process of change in the historical context of economic restructuring. The prevailing model for achieving the good life, born out of the corporate largesse of post-World War II boom times, is being reworked. This model is premised on a separation of work and family into domains where work is associated with competitive individualism and home is defined in opposition as a place of caring refuge. Its widespread adoption as a worldview and a definition of the good life has depended on the availability of long-term, well-paying jobs that offered a ladder for advancement and rewarded worker loyalty. This arrangement helped sustain a commitment to expanding material consumption as an expression of success as well as a way to achieve personal comfort and well-being. According to this notion of the American Dream, the pursuit of personal goals of career advancement and consumption should be seen as working for oneself, and also for the good of the company. This contribution is a source of meaning in one's life.

Alan's story provides an intimate view into a restructuring economy, its impact on the everyday life of working families, and an ongoing redefinition of the post-War boom model for work, family, and community life. Alan himself played a part in the trend toward downsizing and the shift from paternalistic companies who reward worker loyalty to employers who

do virtually anything to improve the bottom line and keep shareholders happy. In this context, it is revealing that one of the country's largest private employers is not one of the industry giants, either of the old order based on resource extraction and materials refinement, or the new order of high technology and information systems. It is in the business of selling specified, limited packets of human labor for companies increasingly interested in pursuing the "on-demand" or "just-in-time" model of business: By the early 1990s, Manpower Inc., with well over a half-million workers, had become a huge corporation and the world's largest temporary employment agency. It has flourished and its personnel swelled as traditional corporate giants such as General Motors continued to cut positions. In this context, the United States seems on the road to becoming a nation of part-timers, free-lancers, temporary workers, and independent contractors, all of whom are part of a new, *contingent* workforce. Originally restricted in its use to describe a management technique of employing workers when there was an immediate need for specific work to be done, the term "contingent work" has come to refer as well to part-time work, contracted or outsourced workers, home-based work, and even self-employment.[3]

Envisioning the future status quo for work in America, a former General Motors executive who left to start his own consultancy business said that "We are going to be moving from job to job in the same way that migrant workers used to move from crop to crop" (quoted in Castro 1993, 44). Lifestyle migrants recognize the impermanence of today's world of work. One of the reasons Alan felt insecure in his former life was due to his role as a hit man, a hired gun. Not only did he see the brutality of downsizing firsthand, he knew that his own job was only a temporary assignment. It was not a "real job" in the usual (if outdated) sense of an enduring position. Rather, he had become a kind of contractor with skills that applied to certain, transient situations. Alan became an ideal worker of this emerging economy.

> I was always brought in for an assignment. And when [it's] over, what do you do? I guess that's why I was getting more and more frustrated. There was just nothing there anymore. I've been gone five years now [from my last position] and during that time they've been through three or four guys . . . my replacements. They just keep burning through them. That's the way a lot of corporate America is these days, they just hire you for an assignment. There's no pension. You just keep job-hopping. I was watching the news the other day, and that's what people are doing. They're job-hopping. Kind of like the migrant workers who come here to pick fruit.

In today's economy, success appears to depend on individuals thinking of themselves as entrepreneurs or even as products offered in the marketplace, regardless of the kind of work they do (see Murray 2000, 155–56). Business

consultant Tom Peters argues that people need "to take a lesson from the big brands" in order to become "CEOs of our own companies" and head marketers of what he calls "Me, Inc." Peters insists that one's career should be viewed as a "portfolio of projects that teach you new skills, gain you new expertise, develop new capabilities, grow you a colleague set, and constantly reinvent you as a brand" (quoted in Murray 2000, 156). The take-home message to today's workers: You are now in business for yourself.

In this new working world, "workers increasingly feel like free agents, having to chart their own career paths" (Moen 2001, 6). Whether through downsizing or down-shifting, increasing numbers of U.S. workers are becoming free agents. In the world of sports, a free agent is a player whose contract with a particular team has come to an end and who is now free to sign with another team. In the world of work, the term free agent is used increasingly to characterize a growing number of Americans who are in some manner self-employed. In contrast to William Whyte's (1956) "Organization Man" of two generations ago, this free agent is largely an independent worker, whether small-business owner, temporary, or contract worker. Whyte explained that devoted post-World War II employees not only worked for their companies, in conformity to the old model, they willingly "belonged" to them as well. Whyte's Organization Man was white, middle-class, and suburban, with values, aspirations, and lifestyles that helped to define the second half of the twentieth century. They gave us the stubbornly persistent vision of the American Dream portrayed in the 1950s TV show *Ozzie and Harriet* with a breadwinner father, a homemaker mother, and two kids in school.

In contrast to the predictability and sameness of the Organization Man, today we have a shift toward unpredictability and diversity in work, family, and community arrangements in growing numbers of free-agent workers. The impact of economic shifts already discussed, together with a number of social changes, encourage workers to redefine their work and family roles and identities. The recent experience of women entering a male-dominated workplace, for example, provides today's free-agent New Worker with inventive models (both successful and not) of how to self-consciously negotiate obligations of work, family, and self.

The paths taken by today's free agents are manifold, but their decisions begin at a common point of experience and understanding. Like Mark and Diane in the following example, lifestyle migrants have become more pragmatic and proactive in their approach to work as they feel the trust or faith they might have had in finding and keeping a meaningful job with a single company erode. This erosion progresses as the old contract between employer and employee comes to an end. This old contract is what Moen (2001) labels an often-informal trade-off where workers with seniority in a company were awarded security by their employer in return for ongoing

loyalty. In today's economic climate, companies shed "excess" long-time employees from their payrolls in order to hire younger, often part-time and thus less expensive, staff, instead of rewarding loyalty. These younger workers enter the field at an already insecure state with virtually no guarantee and little expectation of stability in their career. While many free agents may feel there is little choice but to accept their uncertain status and adhere to a pattern of temporary, dependent work, others reject this relative passivity and struggle to employ their free-agency in a deliberately self-fulfilling and creative way. One way to do this is to go into business for yourself.

CHARTING HIS OWN COURSE: THE "PIE GUY" AS FREE AGENT

Nearly 40 percent of lifestyle migrants in this project went into business for themselves. Some started home-based businesses, such as information technology or environmental engineering consulting, while others started brick-and-mortar stores in the local communities specializing in everything from alternative health care services to gourmet pies. The story of how Mark and Diane went into business for themselves is iconic of the corporate-refugee-turned-small-business-owner. Mark told me their story in conversations we shared while spending early mornings in his prosperous pie shop, drinking coffee, and preparing vast quantities of dough for his shop's signature fruit pies. Mark grew up in Lansing, Michigan, in the 1960s and '70s when nearly everyone he knew worked in the venerable Oldsmobile plant. Whole families worked on the line through generations. Mark graduated from the state university there in the early 1980s, at a time when the auto industry had already been through several years of profound contraction. He was determined not to end up in a dead-end job. After going to California to find excitement and interesting work, Mark eventually landed a job there with a major defense contractor, flush with federal contracts spawned by Cold War fears (cf. Didion 2003).

Moving up into middle-management, Mark made a good salary with full benefits and stock options. By most American standards, he had achieved success. But in the face of sweeping changes in his workplace as the largesse of military budgets faded with the fall of the Soviet Union, Mark started wondering whether this was the life he wanted to live. He questioned a working life where he invested himself so fully in projects that started being routinely "axed" by his employer as government contracts were cancelled and funding dried up. In his account, I hear how he realized that this was now a world where the division he worked for was moved around in an elaborate game of corporate chess, only to be sold off according to an economic calculus unaffected by the concerns of working families. Reflecting the experience of many project participants, Mark's story tracks the transi-

tion from workplace as a kind of extended family to the radical dismemberment of this arrangement and the feeling that people like him had become little more than commodities or ignored costs in market discourse (see Lane 1991, Martin 1994). He spoke to me about what it meant to be a part of a tightly knit team in early projects as coworkers struggled together to solve great engineering and design problems on the scale of super-colliders and super-conducting magnets, only to have those projects and teams torn apart by powerful economic forces well outside their control.

> There was a great deal of pride. We were doing a great job. We had a really tight group . . . it was a real team effort. And to watch that team fragment when [a project] was canceled . . . it affects you to see that. [It] all started [when our division] was acquired [first by one company] and then by [another]. But back when [our company] started in San Diego we had a company campground up in the mountains. We had a park right adjacent to our plant. So if you're on a program, it was beer and pizza out in the recreational park. They had little merry-go-rounds and mini-trains. So you had a relationship with co-workers beyond your project. It was like a real family situation for thirty years since the War and up until the late '80s. [Then] to see that go away . . . the plant was sold, the park was closed and the campground sold . . . just watching this crumble. It was hard. Now it's the forces of business. It went from being really comfortable, "I can make a career here and build good projects and meet good people" to being like . . . *you feel adrift.* Things that you depended on being there . . . weren't. So do you allow yourself to be at the whim of whatever forces [are] at play . . . or do you go do something about it?

Although Mark continued to be well-compensated for his labor, what remained in the way of loyalty to the corporation quickly dissolved. It was becoming all too clear that there was no guarantee of reward for being faithful to a company looking out for its own interests and fully prepared to sacrifice workers in order to fulfill the demands of its shareholders. It became a question of *timing* for Mark. It was about staying "in the game" only so long as it made sense in that he was getting something useful out of it for the next step. Reacting to feelings of increasing anxiety as seismic shifts in corporate America set the ground in motion beneath his feet, Mark became savvier, shrewder, and more pragmatic in his thoughts about work. He would not allow himself to remain disoriented or "adrift" for long. Mark began to think of his corporate job as training for something else down the road where he could claim greater personal control. What remained in the way of loyalty to the corporation was scattered. Mark explains, "So, in the process I'm getting good training. This is like grad school to me now. I'm not loyal to the company, I'll do what they ask, but I'll work through the process and learn business."

At this point, he saw himself gaining important skills at the company's expense. He knew that they believed they owed him nothing. He acted with

what amounts to enlightened self-interest. All the while, he was rethinking where he was and where he might be going. He was taking stock and looking for a way out that made sense to him and was likely to be best for his young family:

> So there are several things happening. I don't want to do this for the rest of my life. So that's another factor—you kind of assess. I think everybody does at a certain age. Is this a livelihood? You know? I want to get into something more simple that I can get my hands around and I want to get something where I can control my own destiny instead of just sort of floating with this company.

Like every other lifestyle migrant, Mark stressed how important it was to feel this control.

During his final year with the defense contractor, Mark began to think of his skill set and of being a free agent—getting what he needed in order to move on. At the same time, he and Diane designed a business plan that would allow them to take back control. Since opening their pie shop in Traverse City in 1997, they have successfully franchised the business plan, concept, and trademark, thereby allowing others to follow their example. The Grand Traverse Pie Company now can be found in three states. Others who have come to Mark for advice on how to start over as self-employed "free-agents" have used his business plan and concept well beyond the Midwest.

As in so many other cases, owning a small business afforded the control necessary to integrate work and family life in a balanced and rewarding manner. In some respects, Mark employed his free-agency to recreate elements of an older pre-War arrangement of work and family by creating a family business and intending to leave a legacy for his children. Mark explained that this was essential to building "self-worth or self-confidence, of providing value to my family, and building a base or a foundation that will endure." Integrating work and family life meant that he and Diane could have their children working side-by-side with them.

> My son is eleven. He can help customers and run the cash register. He makes dough with me on Sundays. My daughter is sixteen and she can do any job here [and] understands the value of good work and responsibility. Those things affect the whole family. It's a real family group. Up until my mother passed away, she was my bookkeeper. My mom had failing health over the last few years. She wasn't financially independent [enough] to retire so we provided [a job for her here]. I got to see my mom, in addition to my kids, involved in the business. It was all integrated into the lifestyle. The business became part of the lifestyle versus somewhere to go for eight hours a day to make a living.

NEW AMERICAN DREAMING—ACTIVE FREE AGENCY

Alan continued to drive through the nearly blinding snow. We were now on a mission. He wanted to show me the place where he was driving a few years earlier when he decided to quit the work that seemed to be killing him and relocate in order to start a new life. Like the glacial ridge the road traverses, this place is a watershed in Alan's life story, a metaphorical point even as it is the physical location of the moment of his self-proclaimed epiphany. Thinking about how much the working world had changed during his lifetime, Alan told me in a manner a man might speak to a son, reaching out to touch my shoulder, "Brian, nowadays you got to put together your own life." In this simple statement, Alan suggests that today people need to figure out as individuals what the good life is. We might be told what it is through ubiquitous messages in popular culture, but that does not mean we should embrace these interpretations as our own.

> The old American Dream was to buy a house . . . or is it a dream of having a job, a career, and all of the things you receive because of that? If the definition of the American Dream is having a career, a job, a future . . . I didn't have a whole lot of career focus or direction growing up. I stumbled into a lot of stuff that I did. That's the reason why I have a two-year degree in criminal justice, and that four-year degree in social science, and then my MBA. You start on a path and then you realize maybe this is a good path, maybe this is the dream . . . a good job . . . a house in the suburbs and all those trappings. Then that became the Dream. This was all coming from outside of me. Because of the circumstances I fell into, it became this is the direction you should go. It was the logic of where I was.

Alan came to see that he was paying a very high price to maintain that vision of self particular to dominant and convincing interpretations of an American Dream. By not being true to an emerging sense of an authentic, inner self, he felt that he was losing his soul to a dream that was, in fact, never really his. He explained how even the dream itself is something someone might find themselves claiming over time as they stumble through different career decisions and related life choices. Alan came to see his old life as one that traded away his value system, violating his sense of his true self for the job. How important had that job been to Alan's identity? What does having left that life mean to him now? Being a corporate refugee, leaving behind a high-stress career, and relocating Up North is about being able to define himself according to his own moral narrative.

> I would say that working in corporate America was extremely important to my identity at that time. It really defined me. It really defined me for my daughter, for my family. A job title is a definition of a person. Now I view myself as a

more rounded person. I can accept the title "Dad." I can accept the title that "I am a husband." Those are important parts of me now. Before, those were all pushed to the side. I was Director of Operations. I was *also* a Dad or also a husband. Now I am a Dad, a husband, *and* a property owner. Now those other things are elevated in importance. I can actually put time against them. They're important enough that this can wait. I can go be Dad for a while and this can wait. Before, I had to put in my calendar to be Dad. It's a lot different now. What is the definition of success? Living life the way *you* want to.

For Alan, as with other lifestyle migrants, "success" is about living life on your own terms without having to sacrifice yourself to a dream that may not really be your own.

When Alan and I thought through it, making rough calculations on the back of a newspaper at his kitchen table, we figured that he put in much more time doing things related to his present work than he generally accounted. In particular, he spent much of his time in what he calls "running around talking to people" and other more informal responsibilities that come with managing apartments. He doesn't feel a need to account for this time as work. This unconcern is common among many of the lifestyle migrant small business owners I spoke with. "Running around" feels more like engaging in everyday social interaction, especially when one of the things that most characterizes small-town life is that people know each other and take time to stop, chat, and show that they care about one another. Making time for that kind of interaction is important to Alan and helps support and define his lifestyle choice.

> That's one of my *commitments to my lifestyle*. Thinking about that, you know [Laughs] . . . we laugh because growing up my daughter watched me wearing suits and driving a company car and my [much younger] son is now growing up watching me driving an old pick-up truck and plowing snow, wearing Carhartts. Man, those kids are going to have stories to share. "No, Dad was this . . . !" and "No, Dad was this . . . !"

Like other lifestyle migrants who left behind well-established careers, both voluntarily and involuntarily, Alan often used the term "retired" to describe his current social status. But this did not mean that he no longer worked. Alan is trying to make a statement about having left behind a part of his life defined by a career and the lifestyle to which that work contributed. He left this career, gave up that path, and therefore we would tend to say that he has retired, but he has by no means stopped working. He has simply chosen to define himself in opposition to that past. But like the ambiguity his youngest and oldest child might one day have about what kind of person Dad actually was while they were growing up (was Dad a suit or a Carhartt man?), Alan is not always sure himself where he is when it comes to typical categories. "To this day I don't know how to define myself. Beth

has finally acquiesced to my preferred definition [or] my preferred word, 'retired.' I prefer to say that [Laughs]. I guess I'm not . . . I'm not retired, but I find it easier to define myself that way."

PERSONAL WATERSHEDS

Still traveling with Alan in his pick-up, we round a corner and head eastward on the tree-lined Supply Road where it follows a long ridge above the Bay. Alan gazes at the countryside now visible through a brief break in the storm. After a few moments, he returns to an earlier description of how he felt stuck in his former corporate life. He explains how after a number of years of self-doubt about his life's direction, he was ready for something new. He had become entrenched through routine and the fear of uncertainty that comes with thinking of a dramatic change. As with so many lifestyle migrants, the choice came down to a single moment. Everything shifted on the very stretch of road we now traveled. He brought me here to share his story.

Nearly everyone can point to one or more junctures or divides in their lives where a certain critical event, or a series of events, may act as a catalyst that inspires a person to make far-reaching decisions about the course of their life. Typically, dramatic personal shifts are precipitated through more negative life events. These include such episodes as a death in the family, personal near-death experience or serious injury, a divorce, or being laid off from work. They also come in the form of such positive experiences as the birth of a child or a job promotion. In all of these watershed situations, people reach a point where they feel that they are out of the flow of time in the course of "normal" events. They pause to reflect on the meaning and direction of their lives.

In Alan's account, I can feel how the weight of meaningful possibilities tipped an inner scale, pushing him to embrace change, take a risk, and make a commitment to change his life. His crisis reached a breaking point. Work continued to grate on him, "tear him down," and violate his sense of right and wrong. At the same time, a personal history of a failed first marriage weighed in on his second, now threatened by many of the same patterns of behavior. Driving down this road a few years earlier, thinking about the direction his life was heading, Alan experienced a moment of clarity and insight that led to a self-transforming conversion.

> I was coming up [to Traverse City] on weekends. I'd come up here and wouldn't have anything to do. I came up here many times alone. And I said, "Gee, this is different up here. There's something different that I can't quite put my fingers on." I was not able to identify it but you can look back, reflect, and figure it out. I remember driving down Supply Road . . . and I was making a decision. My wife and I were having problems. She was going to move Up

North [permanently]. I wasn't so sure. I started looking around, looking at the trees. They were starting to change colors in September. I thought to myself, why would I leave all this for what I got down there? Maybe I should leave all that for what's up here. I remember that day as clear as a bell. I was driving down the road looking out the window and I realize that I'm fucked up. I need to keep all this. I apparently have to give up something to keep all this. So you finally say, I'm forty-five, am I gonna make it to sixty-five? Am I gonna make it to fifty-five? Am I gonna die from an ulcer or a heart attack? I was going to the doctor on a regular basis. You just finally got to make the decision.

CONCLUSION—MORAL GEOGRAPHIES

Lifestyle migrants tell travel stories of personal transformation much like conversion narratives. In stories like Alan's, watershed experiences may separate one life, or at least one lifestyle, from another. What is now seen as an inauthentic, often violated self, is left behind. Lifestyle migrants instead seek a more authentic self, one which may have been held as a distant ideal in the form of a potential self. As for other lifestyle migrants, in Alan's case, this transformation is literally the claiming of a kind of redemptive, second chance at life. Lifestyle migrants attempt to redefine their own personal relation to the good life by finding ways to harmonize the material domain in the form of pursuing a livelihood, with a moral sphere of family and social relations. It is about getting *reoriented*. Refugees from a way of life characterized by the corporate "rat race," the narrative accounts of relocation and starting over given by lifestyle migrants describe how they "got control" and "took back their lives." In so doing they reject feelings of disorientation, dispossession, and being adrift. Taking back one's life entails being able to define one's self and personal identity according to one's own moral narrative of self.

Identity is defined in part by the commitments and identifications that people make which provide the frame or horizon within which they can try "to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what [they] endorse or oppose" (Taylor 1989). To lack a personally meaningful moral narrative of self is to be without a frame in which things take on stable significance and in which a person is able to weigh possibilities as good or bad, meaningful or superfluous. An essential part of self-identity is that a person is positioned in both physical and moral space. This orientation is not only a part of how people find their bearings and locate themselves in a particular social and physical landscape, it is also how they situate themselves within a culturally informed space of questions about what is worth doing and not worth doing in their quest to find the good life. To speak of *orientation* is thus more than mere metaphor. Speaking of whether he could have enacted the fundamental personal changes

that he has realized by moving Up North had he stayed in the Detroit area, Alan explains "I'm not sure I could have. I'm not sure I could do it. When I go back there, the people act differently. For me to get my personality to where I trusted people and I liked people, I had to get away from the environment where I didn't trust people."

Relocation to new places, especially rural and small-town places, is essential for lifestyle migrants. In these places, they feel a meaningful connection that they envision will support their commitment to a new lifestyle. The choice of where to live is also one about how to live. It is not only about physical, geographic relocation, it also entails a moral reorientation. It is thus both a question of practical or economic concerns as well as of moral matters about what makes a life worth living. At a time when social and economic conditions that helped sustain an older vision of the dream are eroding, the relocation behavior of lifestyle migrants is a part of what may be a new kind of American Dreaming, one that draws on enduring values of good work and commitment to family, as it takes advantage of new opportunities and copes with new challenges.

AFTERWORD

Since veering from a more "traditional" anthropological career trajectory where one is expected to work outside their own society and culture, my status as a participant observer has never been so acute. Although the romanticized trials of foreign fieldwork are often avoided by doing work "at home," there are other, unique challenges. For instance, it can be easy to take much for granted. Born and raised in middle-class, white America, my fieldwork in northern Michigan became an ongoing exercise in making the familiar unfamiliar. Very simply, personal background and choice of fieldwork sites influence my ethnographic work. While growing up, my father worked for IBM. Our family moved frequently as IBM grew and opened new facilities. Memories of my father's experiences working for a post-war corporate giant and my own struggles with adjusting to new places combined in an enduring interest in family, work, and issues of personal identity tied to relocation.

Within anthropology over the past twenty years, interest has grown for considering the close relationship between personal history, motivation, and the particulars of ethnographic fieldwork. Specifically, how do these factors have bearing on the construction of theory and conduct of a scholarly life? Personal and professional experiences, together with historical context, lead individual researchers to their own particular methodological and theoretical approaches. Anthropological fieldwork is shaped by personal and professional identities just as these identities are inevitably shaped by

individual experiences while in the field. Unfortunately, the autobiographical dimension of ethnographic research has been downplayed historically, if not discounted altogether. This is mostly understandable given a perceived threat to the objectivity expected of legitimate science, reliability of data, and integrity of our methodology, if we appear to permit subjectivity to intervene by allowing the ethnographer's encumbered persona to appear instead of adhering to the prescribed role of dispassionate observer.

Most anthropologists today point to Bronislaw Malinowski, author of such landmark ethnographies as *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), as a kind of founding father to ethnographic fieldwork, and the practice of "participant observation." Malinowski's early-twentieth-century ethnographies were written in a voice removed and utterly unrevealing about the nature of the ethnographer and his relationship to the people studied. Since Malinowski's time, the personal account of fieldwork has been hidden away in notes and diaries. These "off-the-record" writings document the tacit impressions and emotional experiences without which we cannot, as ethnographers, fully appreciate and understand the project of our research itself. Malinowski's diaries were published after his death in a revealing autobiographical account of his inner life while in the field (1967). We learn in them that, among other details, Malinowski longed to write great novels even as his scientific writing effectively defined the practice of cultural anthropology for much of the twentieth century.

Of many important lessons for anthropologists, Malinowski's diaries hold two especially relevant ones here. First of these is that, at its heart, ethnographic writing is a means of expressing a shared interest among cultural anthropologists for telling stories—stories about what it means to be human. The other is that the explicit professional project of observing, imagining, and describing other people need not be incompatible with the implicit personal project of learning about the self. It is the honest truth of fieldwork that these two projects are always implicated in each other. Good ethnography recognizes the transformative nature of fieldwork where, as we search for answers to questions about people, we may find ourselves in the stories of others. Ethnography should be acknowledged as a mutual product born of the intertwining of the lives of the ethnographer and his or her subjects.

Just as personal background no doubt influences all aspects of ethnographic work, previous fieldwork experience informs my understanding of current research even though outwardly these projects appear quite different. In keeping with anthropological traditions of foreign-based research, as a doctoral student my interest in family, work, and relocation led me to rural Indonesia for a year of Fulbright research in 1998. I examined community-building in several migrant villages that had been established from the ground up, through the relocation of hundreds of families in a rural devel-

opment program. My research revealed the means through which migrants dealt with profound dislocations of resettlement in order to establish socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable communities. Unexpectedly, fieldwork with migrants in Sulawesi, Indonesia offered insight into how I might interpret the experiences of relocating professionals in Northern Michigan. Specifically, many resettled villagers spoke of how they used relocation to selectively "edit out" or enhance certain personal and cultural elements on an individual and group level. I revealed a similar process of editing among lifestyle migrants who relocated in order to bring about what they felt was a necessary break from established personal rituals, family routines, and practices within corporate America.

NOTES

1. See Lewis Rambo's (1993) approach to conversion as not strictly an inner event or singular moment in a person's life, but as a complex process involving varied dimensions from the social to the psychological and spiritual. Similarly, Daroll Bryant and Christopher Lamb (1999) suggest that the conversion experience can be understood as a non-religious phenomenon.

2. Research on an emergent urban-to-rural migration phenomenon in the late 1960s to 1970s challenged predominant migration models, which had relied on economic explanations: relocation behavior was thought to be driven by a desire to maximize individual earning potential (cf. Jobes, Stinner, Wardwell 1992). The term non-economic emerged as a way to describe a migration trend in which a significant number of Americans in their productive working years chose relocation to rural areas well outside centers of business and recognized forms of economic opportunity. As a term, non-economic migration was meant to distinguish the behavior of these migrants from the expected pattern of voluntary population movement where presumed rational actors were motivated by economic opportunity (cf. Williams and Sofranko 1979, Berry 1976).

3. The Bureau of Labor Statistics developed the following simple conceptual definition in 1989: "Contingent work is any job in which an individual does not have an explicit or implicit contract for long-term employment" (in Polivka and Nardone 1989). For some the term "contingent work" applies to nearly any arrangement that deviates from the standard model of a full-time wage and salaried job.

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