Myth of the Life Plan
A Search for Happiness

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Abstract: The desire to be happy is one of the most basic motivations for behavior, cutting across culture, language, and spatial divides. Walk quickly through a bookstore and you will be struck by the proliferation of self-help guides: step by step manuals to correct or fix you so that you too can be happy. Americans have all too willingly embraced the self-improvement ideology. This is not a shocking revelation as the United States has always been fueled by a guiding belief in continual progress towards perfection. However, with the advent of capitalism, progress has become typified by commodity fetishism—an unrealistic belief that products can magically recreate our inner selves and elicit long-term satisfaction. In this article I utilize a phenomenological approach while drawing on other sociological theories and concepts to illustrate how individual happiness is dominated and impaired by the American cultural myth; a blueprint for a life plan that inextricably links success and materialism as a precursory condition to happiness. From birth, people are indoctrinated with the myth, its tenets of future-mindedness and possession repeatedly legitimated throughout culture. I argue that the American culture myth of a systematic life plan fundamentally obstructs happiness, ultimately dominating and enslaving the individual in what Georg Simmel calls the *tragedy of culture*.

PROLOGUE

It is 8:00 on an uncharacteristically warm Saturday morning in October. My partner and I are speeding up 95 North two hours to Portland, Maine. We are late. As my seasoned Hyundai reluctantly jumps to 80 mph, I internally wonder why we are doing this? Of course there are the free extrinsic rewards: an mp3 player, digital camera, and the chance to win fifteen thousand dollars. These are the "detachable" rewards that I will receive not from the actual interaction, but as an indirect benefit from it. Yet, as exchange theorists wisely tell us (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008), nothing is truly "free." In return I must sit through the vacation company's 45 minute sales presentation of their timeshares.

According to my quick calculations, between the two of us we already have two digital cameras, two mp3 players, and a greater probability of being struck by lightening than winning the cash prize. Why did we agree to sacrifice five hours of sunny leisure and enjoyment, on a Satur-

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day no less? I do not get a chance to answer because I am busily immersed in elaborate daydreams of the cash prize when we arrive at the building. Five minutes into Adam's sales presentation, I get my answer. Adam tells our group, we need to buy a vacation timeshare. Relaxation, exclusivity, hobbies, and happiness. Why, because a timeshare at a resort is what we will be dreaming of and working towards for the next forty years of our lives. We owe ourselves the dream. Adam is right.

I. Introduction

At its foundation, this autoethnography is about one of the most important human pursuits; happiness. It chronologically follows my winding quest for happiness as I piece together the cultural source of my dissatisfaction, what I call the myth of the Life Plan. In my religious studies undergraduate experience, I found myths to be the eyes of a culture. Merriam-Webster defines myth as a "usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon." Myths are frequently dismissed because they are not rooted in the objective world, nor wholly derived from empirical fact. History and anthropology have revealed to us that people who are actively living according to a myth do not believe it to be fictional. On the contrary, it is recognized to be factual, their culture's truth. It is their culture's accepted assumptive world and way of life. As people live in harmony with the myth, its precepts are enacted in the social world, continually legitimated and reproduced as truth in action.

I am a participant in such a myth. From my adolescence, I purposely shaped my life to align with my Western culture's obsessive dreams of progress and success. I was determined to professionally thrive and procure the social status befitting my efforts. At 24 years of age, I found myself in a well paying state job with prospects to advance, earning my Masters degree at a prestigious private institution, and with friends to fill the countless Thursday happy hours. For all intents and purposes, I was the dream—until one day, a restless uneasiness began to creep into my waking hours. I did my best to ignore the onslaught, but it spread. Similar to Sartre's existential nausea, a nagging discontentedness tainted my everyday functions and interactions. It was everywhere, a relentless feeling of unhappiness that could not be dismissed. It left me no choice, but to problematize the unhappiness to unravel the mystery of its origins. Like another UMass Boston graduate sociology student, Jennifer Maniates, I was inspired "to increase my consciousness of the choices I was making...[and] to understand how these choices impacted me and my relationships" (Maniates, 2005/2006: 10).

My story is not exceptional or remarkable. In some facets it may appear to be the typical experience of the single, educated, aging twentysomething-year-old struggling for a place in a simultaneously competitive and hierarchal world. From the triviality of my search for the causes of my unhappiness I began to be conscious of the overarching values that govern my goals and professional life. They were seemingly positive values; future-mindedness, blind ambition, and work ethic had unforeseen repercussions as they organized my personal life, often dictating my fulfillment. I was able to discover that these personal values are not simply indigenous to my core self, but are instead symptomatic of the "Rat Racer" character or persona my culture's myth demands. In simplest terms, the myth concerns the "notion of achieving happiness through consumption" (Roberts & Clement 2007: 79).

In this paper I assert that the myth of the life plan has instilled in me the Rat

Racer character—a character possessive of values innately predisposed to the alienation of the performer. Ben-Shahar (2007) argues that the Rat Racer self is the manifestation of an internalized "formula for success: sacrifice present enjoyment in order to be happy in the future" (17). The Rat Racer is a response to the dominant culture's association of material goods with fulfillment and status. It is a belief in the inherent need to become our idealized selves through consumption. Materialism and the status attained through goods have driven many to work longer hours and to remain in passionless occupations for prestige in order to subsidize the high costs of products. As a result, the Rat Racer self is future-oriented, continually focusing on goals and future achievement that will facilitate happiness. However, this is a destructive illusion as the sacrifice of identity development and blind pursuit of goals leave the Rat Racer unhappy once he/she reaches his/her goal. The Rat Racer then experiences what Ben-Shahar (2007) calls negative happiness—a relief and negation of the stress experienced in the realization of the goal. The Rat Racer self does not live in the present and is ultimately unfulfilled. However, we are unable to discern this harmful cycle and we continue to "chase the ever-elusive future our entire lives" (Ben-Shahar 2007: 19).

Burgeoning evidence suggests a preoccupation with money and material goods is negatively correlated with happiness. A recent study on 162 adults found that individuals ranked "materialistic were less satisfied with their 'life as a whole' as well as with the life domains of 'standard of living,' 'family life,' and 'amount of fun and enjoyment'" (Roberts and Clement 2007: 83). Additionally, a study by Kasser and Ryna (1993, 1996, 2001) found that materialism was associated with increased levels of depression, anxiety, substance abuse and few positive experiences (Robers and Clement 2007). Being extrinsically focused on acquisition and the work required to fulfill that focus significantly impairs one's satisfaction and quality of life.

For over twenty years, I lived to serve the Rat Racer character's priorities, thereby succumbing to what Georg Simmel calls the tragedy of culture. It is the circumstance in which objective culture comes to "dominate individual will or subjective culture" (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008: 243). Furthermore, as a large segment of my life was the creation or result of my Rat Racer self, I experienced, as did UMass Boston student T. Portal, the "perpetual disparity of the reality of my experience and what I, [the performer] really wanted it to be" (Portal, 2005/2006: 49). Such cognitive dissonance involved an imbalance of and incongruence between the values I felt and my actual behavior, causing my unhappiness. Poststructuralists may contend that my story is a truth, but it cannot be seen as the truth, or as a "universal claim to a total understanding of reality" (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008: 635). The cultural world is continually changing, with every transformation bringing new knowledge and subjective truths. Poststructuralism rejects society as an external sphere outside of human control, refuting an enduring truth. Instead, meaning is ever changing, charged with the multiplicity of every individual's subjective experience and personal truths. Nevertheless, subjective experiences provide valuable insight into the evolution of human beings and society as they are the gateways to understanding a culture during a given time and place.

II. FINDING THE CHARACTER: ME, "MYSELF," AND I

Initially, I chose a phenomenological approach to investigate the minute details of my routine, subjective experience (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008). After a few days, most of my daily decisions seemed

terribly mundane and perfunctory. Nonetheless, from the mediocrity of my choices two discernible patterns appeared: First, I had an all consuming aversion to unplanned free time, and second, I seemed to dislike solitary relaxation because I avoided being unoccupied and alone like the plague. I constantly made mental agendas or wrote lists to organize my activities. I rationalized that this was an essential time management tool for a busy person such as myself. Furthermore, I was not avoiding solitary leisure. I was pioneering my own version of\ relaxation. The state of being productive in every waking moment pleased me and made me feel accomplished. The outside world applauded my industriousness through promotions, a 4.0 GPA, and a sizable savings account that afforded me the latest gadgets and trends. Every day I felt successful, one step closer to all of my goals and actualizing the future I had planned. I believed my choices to be industrious and expanding my happiness, but they were not the source or entirety of my happiness.

My golden opportunity to prove this distinction unexpectedly arrived in the form of my partner and roommate leaving for a long weekend. For three days, I would not partake in "productive" work—no school or work-related activities and limited social interactions so as not to distract myself from well, myself. After one day of foreign movies and reading Harry Potter, confusion and anxiety set in. In solitude, I struggled to think of what I liked to do solely because of its intrinsic rewards, meaningful only in that it made me internally happy (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008). I knew instinctively there was something I wanted to do, but I did not know what it was. It was foggy, just out of reach. Stripped of my personal and professional presentations of my self, I did not know my core self, the performer.

The ability to ponder on my "core" identity and my awareness of its autonomy from its social characters is the essential property that defines me as inextricably human. In the 17th century, philosopher Rene Descartes stated, "I think, therefore I am." Descartes argued that the very act of wondering if a self exists proves that there is a core self in your mind to do so. Almost three centuries later, prominent sociologist George H. Mead, defined the self as what is "an object to itself" (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008: 333). Not only does the self exist, but human cognition is a reflexive exchange between the spontaneous, subjective "I" and the objective "me," a product of internalized social roles and norms from outside. The internal "I" is able to think of the "me" as an object, and gauge how to behave in conformity with and/or rebellion against internalized "me"s in an array of social situations.

The documentary, Multiple Personalities, follows Gretchen, John, and Barb, three adults living with multiple personality disorder—a disorder typified by the experience of several distinct personalities. In one scene of the film, one of Gretchen's personalities, "Myself" explains, "if Gretchen is having a hard day, I come out and go to class." "Myself" is an emotionally stronger personality who surfaces in circumstances where Gretchen feels overwhelmed. Gretchen is the reflexive "I" who scrutinizes the situation, ascertains what "me" should present, and switches to that persona. Gretchen's story may seem foreign in its peculiarity, but it exhibits the common conditions of character multiplicity within us all.

It was crucial that I learn the primary source of my characters. In learning what determined my characters' particulars, I could then break its influence and finally discern between them and my performer. Once my performer was more fully realized and defined, I could begin to make decisions native to her wishes. In doing so, I would remedy the opposition I perceived to be the cause of my consuming unhappi-

ness. I visualize the characters and the performer as separate entities because the characters are tools for impression management, while the performer is the conductor. Erving Goffman argued that impression management is an integral action in social interactions involving deliberate self-presentations, and characters are chosen and played to influence or control other's perceptions of one's self (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008). Yet, I feared I had lost my "authentic voice" (White, 2005/2006: 72). I was no longer primarily in control or acting because my performer had receded to the periphery of my mind while the supposed tools, the characters, took center stage. The performer's agency appeared to be at best limited and coerced. Even when there was no audience to bear witness, the constructed characters' wishes dominated my private consciousness, motivations, and the direction of my life.

III. EXPANDING MICRO

My journey began with an examination of my covert unhappiness, routine behaviors, and an instinctive suspicion of an inner imbalance. However, C. Wright Mills argued that one must employ the sociological imagination, the ability to see society from both a macro and micro standpoint, to understand it, the individual, and the connection in between (Mills, 1959). In the film, The Girl in the Cafe, eight leaders representing major industrialized nations meet to contemplate the seemingly insurmountable issue of child mortality in Africa. Gina, the female lead, has lost a child and begins a relationship with an assistant to one of the leaders (from Britain). Based on her personal experience of loss, she ceaselessly advocates for the children, humanizing abstract macro level statistics and forcing the men and women to temporarily perceive the issue also from a micro perspective. Gina's effort depicts

how the micro and macro are always linked, affecting each other as they are parts of the same puzzle.

I wanted to take a similar step and decipher how my personal experiences were connected to the broader forces of our society. To begin to bridge the gap I expanded my investigation and launched an informal inquiry among my childhood friends and recent friends. I needed to ascertain if others felt the same imbalance and dissatisfaction or if my unhappiness was more than theirs a personally situated dilemma. I casually asked my friends if they were happy with their lives and if they felt happy from day to day. I specifically contacted my childhood friends because I expected we shared similar lifeworlds, what Schutz described as our background "world of existing assumptions" (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008: 539). We came from the same class, thus possessing similar "opportunities for income" (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008: 166). As a result, I wanted to see if they had been motivated by analogous ideals for growth and success. Unsurprisingly, their responses highlight the commonalities of our lifeworld experiences as we were brought up with shared community cultural models and expectations.

My friend "Mike" worries his performer is "disappearing" because of the demands his reputable employment places on his time and emotional life. I asked him: "Do you find your identity disappearing into adulthood?" His reply was,

I'm bothered by the complacency that comes along with a full-time job where the highlight of the day is coming home, eating dinner, and sitting in front of the TV. I've always imagined myself moving to Europe after college, but the prospect of finding a job that pays as well, etc., etc., etc., makes it seem impossible. Who has the time? I've never experienced such redundancy in my life with the work day and post work sprawl as I do now. What does an "adult"

do for fulfillment? Have kids, buy a big house, build a solid portfolio, go on exotic vacations? Even asking those things makes me feel like I sound immature and difficult, but really—is that it?

Mike is not living the personal life he wants and envisioned. While I used workaholicism and planning for the future to busy and distract myself, Mike emotionally numbs himself with inactivity and passive entertainment. Although Mike feels trapped in the anesthetizing cycle of work and "post work," he believes he is unable to change his situation because he does not have the time to locate a job that financially rewards him equitably.

Much like Mike, my friend "Sarah" reiterates that her employment in publishing is economically lucrative, but personally taxing and redundant:

> I leave my house at 7:30 am and come home at 7:15 pm. That's if I don't have any errands to run and/ or if I make the train I need to. It's exhausting. I want to have my own hobbies, and not just a life plan. But all I do is work work work and pretend to like it like everyone around me so I don't seem like an outcast or failure. All I want to do is drink wine and fall asleep to start the next miserable day. It's awful, even though—apparently—I'm successful and I have just what I want: a high paying job, no real responsibilities outside of work, no debt, etc. I don't even know what I want anymore, which is the biggest problem of all.

Sarah acknowledges that between commuting and work, she tirelessly toils toward her "life plan" for almost 12 hours a day! Sarah laments actualizing the life plan as exhausting, leaving her devoid of the time and energy to develop her "own hobbies." The possessive wording implies Sarah's thirst for inborn activities; personally rooted and intrinsically rewarding, not driven by her work or life plan.

IV. ACTUALIZING THE MYTH

From this point on, the term "life plan" is taken to mean the normative culture's conceptual blueprint for societal success, status, and personal fulfillment. Our culture is so profoundly saturated with remnants of the life plan that it seamlessly cultivates the aforementioned Rat Racer character by instilling its values from an early age. As a working class Hispanic child growing up in a primarily white and middle class suburb, I was reminded daily of my otherness. At school, I was the only person of color in my classroom. Initially, I did not notice that I was a racial minority or "different." This changed when I began first grade and every day I was taken out of my homeroom for specialized English speech classes although I spoke English as fluently as I spoke Spanish. I was confused and embarrassed because I assumed something must be wrong with me and my English if I needed special help unlike my classmates. In his formulation of the other, Edward Said argues that the dominant group defines itself by identifying who and what are different and "inherently inferior," thereby legitimating their superiority (Appelrouth & Edles 2008: 817). The 'other,' or the construction of difference, is actually the construction of the norm.

From this experience I learned that 'different' is bad and undesirable; 'different' is equated with stupidity, incompetence, and failure. I felt isolated by the veil, the social distance between myself and my white peers (Appelrouth & Edles 2008). It is social interaction and "specifically the comparison with others that brings about an awareness of inequality and thus a motive for competition" (Slater 1997: 78). I appropriated the dominant identity and

internalized its accompanying views. I was forced to negotiate the bifurcation of my consciousness (Appelrouth & Edles 2008), whereby I saw the world through my experience and was simultaneously cognizant of the dominant perspective. I was acutely aware of my inferiority as an 'other.' I adopted a white mask while working tirelessly to be successful and distance myself from my otherness' deficiency. My experience as an other uniquely impacted why I was motivated to excel. However, we have all "inherited and been molded by some shared mentality" (Brooks 2005:122). My peers and I haven been indoctrinated with the same life plan; a hunger for and materialistic conception of success.

We derived the life plan from the institutions that were given to us in childhood, what Berger and Luckmann term institutionalized patterns (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008). Some of the patterns included the necessity for a higher education directly after high school with the primary aim of attaining the highest paying and stable job available. In the institutionalization stage, pathways of behavior are legitimated, transmitted to future generations, and ultimately undergo externalization and objectivation. At this point, the pathways are accepted as fact and immutable. They become an objectified reality.

For instance, I never questioned attending college, the first step in the adult life plan, because I did know know of an alternative. From an early age, my family and community taught or socialized me to believe higher education was a binding norm and the only pathway to success (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008: 354). As Berger and Luckmann wrote, I accepted this as "the way it is," a precondition for status and fulfillment (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008). I was socialized into believing that to contradict this pattern risked the label of failure. When I use the term "success," I am not simply referring to economic capital such as material resources, money, and

land (Appelrouth & Edles 2008). Instead, I am also referencing to symbolic capital—i.e., the prestige and social status—and to culturally bound definitions of social status. All of my friends, new and old, voiced feeling similar pressures to follow a predetermined course or model to attain success. Although the minute particulars of everyone's life plan (e.g., individual career choice) are to a degree personally tailored, the guiding objectives and values are homogenous, unified and cemented in our culture's objectified reality. In discussing personal fulfillment with my friends, I found themes in my reflections and my friend's thoughts that unveiled the composition of the life plan.

The majority of my friends voiced that there were distinct moments of their lives that made them happy, but most of the time they felt neutral followed by stressed and unhappiness. Others noted an undeniable imbalance between the importance of career at the expense of personal fulfillment. Nevertheless, the acknowledged unhappiness was defined by a resigned acceptance. One friend likened our mid to late twenties to a required tour of duty in the muddy trenches; a period of necessary, but temporary social and emotional sacrifices on the competitive road to successful careers and personal establishment. She went on to elaborate that this is the only period of time before we have families and we can sacrifice to build the infrastructure that will determine the quality of our future lives. Our eventual high incomes, bright futures, and the resulting happiness that will follow, justifies the present sacrifices. I had originally shared her sentiments and beliefs.

Like many of my peers, I drew pleasure from my growing professional achievements. As part of my busy life plan, I did not have the time to acknowledge I was sacrificing happiness or even that I was dissatisfied. My unhappiness became glaringly unavoidable when I realized I no

longer knew what made me happy. This meant I had not only traded fulfillment, but at a rudimentary level, I had become estranged from my performer. My micro examination opened my eyes to my culture's myth. The life plan existed and was directing how I chose to live my life.

V. BODY OF THE LIFE PLAN AND THE CORPORATION

The life plan is built on an intense belief in progress and perfection. Americans "have a zeal for permanent self-improvement, an impulse to move constantly toward the realization of one's perfect self" (Brooks 2005: 122). One only has to turn on the television or browse at a bookstore to see the self-improvement industry booming. Now there are a multitude of objects explicitly intended to remedy problems in order to help us transform into "better" versions of our current selves. Commodity fetishism overpowers the rational and we begin to believe products we buy have "magical powers" (Appelrouth & Edles 2008: 58). The proliferation of self-help items highlights two key beliefs: 1) a person can and should always strive to reach perfection and 2) personal improvement can be bought.

The 20th century saw the rise of new globalized forms of capitalism, the economic system in which production is privately owned and everyone has the ability to participate within the global exchange market or free market (Appelrouth & Edles 2008). The free market facilitated globalization—the mass interconnection and interdependence of nations regardless of time or location (Appelrouth & Edles 2008). Also, with technological and communication advancements, these developments have further knitted the world into what Immanuel Wallerstein called the world-system; the world as one interconnected system instead of countless individual nations (Appelrouth & Edles 2008). For instance, the Persian Empire was a massive world empire that used military and political domination to spread across Asia, Europe, and Africa (Appelrouth & Edles 2008). Nonetheless, Wallerstein believed there are different types of world-system and he labeled our current world-system as a world economy, a world-system that is not structured by political rule but instead by economic exchanges (Appelrouth & Edles 2008).

The documentary, The Corporation, is a work that explains the corporate practices in and their consequences for our world economy. It illustrates the birth of the corporation as a legal body and how corporations, specifically their products, have come to dominate our lives. Corporations utilize advertising as a vehicle to deliver subconscious messages to purchase their items. These advertisements and commercials do not just sell products, they are selling lifestyles and ideas. D. Brooks (2005) states, "what people are doing as they page through these magazines is this: They are enjoying the longing. They are constructing fantasies of what their lives might be like, using the goods and images they see in these magazines" (196). The advertisements exploit our insecurities and create needs so that we begin a pattern of constant consumption for fulfillment. Corporations rely on creating needs to push individuals to fuel the consumption cycle; the individual then consumes to satisfy that need, feels subsequently dissatisfied, and continues to consume more in an effort to ameliorate their ongoing dissatisfaction. According to Herbert Marcuse:

> …false needs become 'ways of life' through which an individual—whose psychosocial development is now pathologically circumscribed by capitalist urges—vainly searches for an authentic and via-

ble self-identity. (Woodward 2007: 48)

Marcuse correctly surmised that corporations have entered the primary group of socialization previously composed of family and peers. Corporations now play a vital role in literally shaping the psychology of individuals beginning at birth. In one scene of The Corporation, a child psychologist explains how she helps a toy company understand how to make products that appeal more to children and make them ceaselessly pester their parents for the toys. The segment depicts how corporations take conscious steps to develop materialism within children. The commercials are training children to be consumers. The early and constant exposure to advertising ingrains children with commodity fetishism. The children then further the consumption cycle by becoming adults who view products as gateways to fulfillment and achievement.

Commercials hinder our self-esteem and bombard us with messages that tell us that our current selves are imperfect and should be corrected. This incessant reminder breeds an inferiority that drives us to aspire for perfection. According to George Santayana:

Americans go through life with two worlds in their heads. In one part of their brain, they see the real world; but in the neighboring part, they see the perfect imagined world, assumed to be close by and realizable (Brooks 2005: 123).

In and of itself, a desire to evolve is not unhealthy. However, the pathological obsession with realizing one's perfection through products paralyzes self-development and identity-formation. The external orientation of success and fulfillment prevents individuals from pursuing internal growth and means of fulfillment.

Moreover, as a direct result of the emphasis on materialism, Americans have developed a tendency to become worka-holics. "The average American works 350 hours a year—nearly ten weeks—longer than the average European" (Brooks 2005: 76). As Americans, we have been forced to develop an unhealthy work ethic to afford our expensive materialistic tastes. Consequently, our work ethic is also an indication of our boundless search for personal achievement and improvement. D. Brooks continues,

Each generation understands that they shall surpass the last, and each generation has a duty to see that the next one can do the same. And so from age three, American kids grow up with a question ringing in their ears: What do you want to be when you grow up? Not what do you want to do, but what do you want to be? (2005: 136).

A life plan geared toward career and financial success is so important because our consumerist culture casts a person is these external things. It is an essentialist approach to the self whereby the self as a whole is a composition of material resources and professional mastery. Because the self is realized externally through these avenues, we become future-oriented; living and working for future goals and achievements instead of enjoying the present.

VI. TOWARD AWAKENING

The film Awakenings illustrates our failure to be mindful of the present and our compulsion to become obsessed with external objectives. The film takes place in a 1960s hospital, following the lives of several survivors of an encephalitis outbreak in the 1920s. As a result, the survivors were left in a catatonic state until the summer of 1969, when their neurologist, Dr. Sayer, gave them a new drug engineered for Parkinson's disease. Suddenly, the survivors are awakened from decades spent in an immobile, sleep-like state. The protagonist, Leonard, himself one of the

patients who 'wakes up,' is troubled and amazed to find a world full of people who have lost sight of their lives. They are in a sense asleep to the basic wonders of life, taking for granted even the most basic pleasures such as taking a walk alone. Ultimately, the drug stops working and the patients return to their catatonic states, but Leonard's message is not lost on the hospital staff. As Dr. Sayer states:

What we do know is that, as the chemical window closed, another awakening took place; that the human spirit is more powerful than any drug—and THAT is what needs to be nourished: with work, play, friendship, family. *These* are the things that matter. This is what we'd forgotten—the simplest things.

Dr. Sayer realizes that he has allowed himself to become entrenched in work and forgotten human connection. Leonard teaches Dr. Sayer to play and place value on friendships and interpersonal growth. He then finds the courage to ask his nurse out for a simple cup of coffee.

I experienced a similar awakening when I started to reflect on why I was not satisfied with my life although I was doing all the "right" things and succeeding. I became aware that the person I was externally did not match my perception of my internal self. I had forgotten who I was and what I intrinsically loved to do because I focused on who I should be. I took for granted the "simplest things," placing family, friends, and passions on the back burner. As a result, I was unhappy, continually shopping to feel better, numbing my misery with dreams of the next achievement. I was not alone in this cycle of unhappiness and success.

My unhappiness is not isolated. My entire generation has been ingrained with the notions of the life plan. This has happened because the life plan has undergone reification, a reversal of the "real relationship between man and his world…" (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008: 556). The

process of constructing the social reality is reversed as the individual no longer creates the world, but is instead impacted by the objectified world. The world is accepted to be "suprahuman"—outside of human creation and control as it determines the choices available to the individual. Our corporate society now coerces individuals into becoming the Rat Racer character: materialistic, future-oriented, workaholic, socially distant, and masochistic. A shift to a macro orientation allowed me "to see the big picture" and understand the specifications of the Rat Racer character and why it is oppositional to happiness.

VII. CONCLUSION

Even after unraveling the source of my alienation and unhappiness, it has been a struggle to maintain my awakened state. The Rat Racer self is so internalized that I often find myself acting on its values without my consciousness. For example, about a month ago I bought a new pair of Nike sneakers because they were on sale and are popular. It was not until after a few days wearing them that I recognized how I had acted against my morals. I had succumbed to the cultural pressure to be fashionable and express myself through products. Georg Simmel considers fashion as a device for identification of status and differentiation of the self (Appelrouth & Edles 2008). Although I was informed and know that purchasing mass produced products does not elevate my quality of person or make me an individual, I still acted upon the myth of consumption—the belief that material consumption is an obligatory physical and social precondition for happiness.

Now, I know I must make myself conscious of the pull of the myth. When I make a decision to buy something, I often reflect on why I want the item. This simple reflection often helps me discern if I want it

because I need it for intrinsic interest and expression or if I want it to fit into the mainstream and display my status. Moreover, I have reconsidered my major life decisions to determine if I am being true to my performer self. Brooks (2005) writes, "our exceptionalism takes the form of energy and mobility and dreams of ascent" (78). We are unique and at our best when we are realizing our dreams and channeling our idealism into our passions. I have taken this lesson to heart and have switched the direction of my life professionally and personally to better align with the things that truly matter to me.

I now make time for friends and attempt to stay in better touch with family. I am becoming a vegan and generally exercising a more sustainable lifestyle. Professionally, I plan to research and work in the animal welfare field—my oldest and deepest passion, but one I had dismissed because it would not be as lucrative as others. These changes have significantly improved my quality of life and inspired me to continue struggling against the myth of the life plan by committing the simplest of acts: living for today.

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