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# Creating a Christian Lifestyle

**Carl Koch**





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# 1

## Changes Ahead: Your Life Takes New Directions



### ***New Horizons***

This course is about living fully, becoming all that you can be as a person. Life is a rich adventure if we know how to be attentive to it, value it, and enter into it with our whole being.

### **Transition: Hazard and Opportunity**

Right now you are at a great turning point in your life: finishing high school, moving into legal adulthood, facing the new challenges of college or career training or a job. Life is full of promise, but you may be fraught with anxiety about what is ahead. The following cases illustrate the kinds of situations in which many seniors find themselves.

#### **Marisa**

Marisa finishes the last bit of her calculus homework. She smiles contentedly because she likes mathematics and, just as important, is very good at it. Tossing her books and papers into her book bag, she takes out the catalog from the university she wants to attend and flips to the section on electrical engineering. Although she knows that engineering is a tough major, she feels excited about it.

Unfortunately, two clouds hover over Marisa's plans. She wonders if she will encounter the kind of prejudice that she has felt in some of the advanced math classes in high school. She overheard two guys making a sarcastic remark about another Hispanic student in the same class. Disturbed, Marisa summarized the remark to the teacher: "They basically said, 'What's she doing in calculus? All she needs to know is how to count beans.'" Marisa's fury at their ridiculous prejudice is only partially able to overcome some of her self-doubts.

### **In This Chapter . . .**

#### ***New Horizons***

Transition: Hazard and Opportunity  
A Call to Be Fully Alive  
Taking Life in Stages

***Identity: A Sense of Who You Are***  
Awareness of the Unique You  
Knowing Yourself

***Autonomy:***  
***The Ability to Shape Your Own Life***  
Making Choices with Consequences  
Gaining Independence from Family  
Learning Interdependence  
Being Responsible with Freedom

***Personal Power:***  
***Flowing from Identity and Autonomy***  
The Need for Power, the Joy of Power  
A Positive, Not a Negative, Difference

***Stepping Out in Faith***



The bigger problem is money. Her mother's small salary barely covers necessities, and Marisa's father has sworn he will cut off child support when she turns eighteen. Marisa is sure she can get some kind of loan, but she still needs a well-paying summer job if she is going to make ends meet. What if she can't earn enough money? With the tight job market, finding any summer work at all could be tough.

### Joe

Joe sits at the dinner table, staring out the window into the night sky.

"Well, Joe, what do you think? Have you decided yet?" his father asks.

"I don't know. I just don't know yet," Joe answers, irritated.

His father's look is not unkind, but he adds, "You have to make up your mind one of these days."

"Yeah, I know."

After supper, Joe returns to his room, puts on his headphones, and cranks up his stereo. He opens the drawer that holds his catalogs—catalogs for the Navy, a local community college, and an area technical school. Each catalog makes promises for a full, successful future.

However, Joe's thoughts always take him in a different direction. He imagines himself having his own apartment, a car that he really wants, and enough time to hunt, ski, and fish. Further schooling and a stint in the Navy seem to be only more delays. **1**

### A Time to Stretch and Grow

A **transition**—a crossing or a passage—such as leaving high school and moving on in the world can be understood as a crisis of sorts. However, the word *crisis* need not be thought of as totally, or

### 1

Using the stories of Marisa and Joe as examples, write a brief description of the situation you are in right now as a senior, including some of the details requiring decisions.

even mostly, negative. The Chinese character for *crisis* is composed of two other Chinese characters—one for *danger* and the other for *opportunity*. Now crossing the Golden Gate Bridge into San Francisco by car can be dangerous: the bridge could collapse, you could hit another car if the fog is thick, or your car could break down in the middle. But San Francisco, with all its attractions and opportunities, waits on the other side. Finishing high school—crossing into a new world—confronts us with both dangers and opportunities, just as crossing the Golden Gate Bridge does.

Despite the tensions, pressures, and hazards, a transition may encourage us to ask more questions about life. These questions can lead to an honest process of self-discovery that brings about growth in us. Think about Marisa and Joe as they look ahead to life beyond high school. Marisa is already asking herself how she will handle the challenges of college, both in others' attitudes toward her and in financial demands. Joe has not yet focused on a goal, and the process of discovering where he wants to go and what he wants to do will require a lot more reflection than perhaps he has ever done. Both Marisa and Joe will surely be stretched and at times they will no doubt feel uncomfortable. **2**

### A Call to Be Fully Alive

Going through a transition enables us to keep growing. Growth comes naturally to all living things. Given some water and halfway decent soil, a potato sprout will grow into an edible spud. Given nurture, human beings can become fully alive too. A big difference between a potato and us, of course, is that we have a conscious part in making



### 2

Think of one transition that you have already been through. List and describe the painful or hazardous elements and the opportunities of this experience of transition. Overall, are you better off now, after the change?



*Student art: "Building Bridges," linocut by Brooke Prudhomme, St. Agnes Academy, Memphis, Tennessee*



our own growth happen. The person you will be at age eighty is, to a great extent, the person you are forming right now.

The Gift of the Present Moment

The only life we have is the one we are living right now. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who works with chronic pain sufferers and those with terminal illnesses, teaches his patients meditation. He sums up his reason for doing so this way: “Your life is the sum of your present moments, so if you’re missing lots of them, you may actually miss much of your [life].”

The gift of our life is the accumulation of present moments. If we always look into the future for living, we can get into a pattern of “Wait until . . .” thinking. Life will be good when we have accomplished X, Y, or Z. “Wait until I have my degree, then . . .” “Wait until I find the right job, then I’ll really live,” and on and on. People who know how to live fully, however, cherish each day and each moment as a gift. 3

Our Own Adventure

Being fully alive is also something we have to do for ourselves. No one else can make it happen for us. A little story about an explorer of the Amazon jungles makes the point:

The explorer returned to his people, who were eager to know about the Amazon. But how could he ever put into words the feelings that flooded his heart when he saw exotic flowers and heard the night-sounds of the forest; when he sensed the danger of wild beasts or paddled his canoe over treacherous rapids?



He said, “Go and find out for yourselves.” To guide them he drew a map of the river.

They pounced upon the map. They framed it in their town hall. They made copies of it for themselves. And all who had a copy considered themselves experts on the river, for did they not know its every turn and bend, how broad it was and how deep, where the rapids were and where the falls? (De Mello, *The Song of the Bird*, pages 32–33)

In order to be fully alive, we have to explore life ourselves—to see, listen, act, and take our own risks. This adventure does not necessarily require traveling long distances, doing dangerous deeds, or being a “lone ranger.” We embark on the great adventure of living fully as we go through the process of becoming who and what we are called to be.

3  
Write some notes in response to this statement: *For me, happiness cannot be found living in the present; it’s out in the future somewhere.*

Jesus, Model of Living Fully

For Christians, Jesus is the model of **living fully**, and he calls us to that same kind of life. He beckons his followers to fulfill their complete potential, which for every human being is to love and be loved.

God sent Jesus, his Son, to show humans how much they are loved by God and how they in turn can love others. Jesus went about healing, feeding hungry people, listening, and reminding people how valuable and beloved by God they are. Jesus summarized his desire for full life for all people in these two great commandments:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matthew 22:37–39)

Christians through the ages have understood that love builds on itself and leads to full life. As Saint Paul told the people of Ephesus:

I pray that . . . [God] may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:16–19)

Love leads to power and strength and understanding—all essential to living fully. Love gives us the energy and desire to become completely what we are capable of being. It draws us to learn new

skills and develop our talents, and to cope and grow through all the changes and stages of our life.



Taking Life in Stages

Psychologists who have studied human development have outlined the **stages** of a person’s life and growth in a variety of ways.

Eight Stages with Transitions

A typical outline of how a human life develops includes eight stages:

- 1. infancy
- 2. early childhood
- 3. play age
- 4. school age
- 5. adolescence
- 6. young adulthood
- 7. adulthood
- 8. mature adulthood





Any description of life stages is, of course, somewhat dependent on a people's culture. For instance, different cultures hold different norms for when adulthood actually begins. In some cultures adolescence is virtually nonexistent; a person passes from childhood to adulthood as soon as puberty begins. In North American society the move to adulthood takes a long time. A **transitional period**, lasting from about ages seventeen to twenty-two, leads a person out of adolescence and into young adulthood. Like any transitional phase, this one is full of challenges but essential to the process of growth. **4**

#### Lots to Do! The Passage to Young Adulthood

During the present transition in your life, you will be challenged to take on **developmental tasks** in about eleven areas. If you are aware of these tasks, you will be better equipped to understand some of the feelings and dilemmas you are having. This course will help you look at these eleven tasks:

1. developing a sense of identity
2. growing in autonomy
3. renewing oneself by learning and creating
4. gaining competencies
5. selecting a career and taking an adult job
6. constructing and living out a value system
7. integrating sexuality into one's life

8. making friends and living with intimacy
9. making loving commitments
10. reflecting on religion
11. taking part in the larger community

Clearly a person does not move through these tasks in order, nor complete them once and for all between ages seventeen and twenty-two! For instance, all through life, not just at this transition phase, people move in and out of friendships, learning more and more about how to be intimate with others. But these eleven tasks have particular prominence and importance during the phase you are in now. **5**

In this chapter we will begin looking at these significant tasks by considering what it means to develop a sense of identity and to grow in autonomy.

#### For Review

- In what sense can a transition such as leaving high school be understood as a crisis?
- What lesson about living fully can be learned from the story of the explorer in the Amazon?
- For Jesus, what did it mean to live fully?
- List the eleven developmental tasks of the transitional stage from adolescence to young adulthood.

**4** Agree or disagree with this statement, and explain your reasons in writing: *If I had my choice, I'd rather have a prolonged adolescence than none at all.*

**5** Of the eleven tasks, which one are you most eager to work on? Which one are you most anxious about? Explain your choices in writing.

## Identity: A Sense of Who You Are

In this process of becoming fully alive, as persons who can love and be loved, we need to gain a sense of who we are—a sense of identity. We need to be able to name, claim, and honor the complex person we are at any one time. We will never have a *total* grip on our identity because we keep changing and are always more than we can imagine. But having some sense of who we are helps us to make better decisions, to develop enriching relationships, and to live in greater appreciation of ourselves.

Consider this story about someone in the process of finding his own sense of identity:

Zack sat at the end of the cafeteria table, eating his ham and cheese on rye. The conversation about the coming weekend surged ahead without him. Zack's position at the table defined his role with these guys: he was at the end, on the fringe.

When the bell rang at the end of the lunch period, the group split up and headed for different classes. Zack threw his garbage into a wastebasket and walked alone down the hall. "Why didn't I say something, *anything*? All I do is just sit like a lump. What a dope!" he thought.

After Zack sat down in economics class, he flipped open his textbook to the page marked by a letter. He unfolded his letter of acceptance to the state university. Everyone else had been talking at lunch about college applications, but Zack had never found an opening to mention his own good news. "Maybe I can get involved more at the U." This was half question and half hope, spoken only in Zack's mind.

Meanwhile, down the hallway, a conversation was in progress. "Are you really going to ask him?" Jane asked. "You better be ready to talk for the two of you."

"He's quiet, but at least he has some brains."

Lisa walked quickly to economics class, wondering how Zack would react to her invitation to go to the chamber of commerce luncheon. She knew that he was shy, but she thought of him as intelligent and fairly handsome. Lisa had first noticed Zack when he nervously gave a speech in class about the need for business opportunities for women and minorities. His hands had shaken and drawn aimless circles in the air; he had stared at the back wall. However, after a timid start, conviction had strengthened his voice. Lisa wondered where Zack had been hiding for the previous three years of high school.

After economics, Lisa walked beside Zack to their English class. She never felt nervous with anyone. Some people even found her to be too blunt.

"Zack, I have to go to a chamber of commerce luncheon to give a short speech about Catholic high schools. I can invite another student to go. I don't know how the food will be, but I'd like you to go with me. What do you say?"

Stunned, Zack wondered if Lisa was kidding. "Well, sure. Great." He looked at her happily.

"I'll drive. Friday. Meet me in the school office at 11:45." Lisa stopped walking and turned back to look at Zack. "Glad you're going."

Zack's situation is not unique; many of us exist on the fringe and wish we were somebody else at least part of the time. Fortunately, many people like Lisa exist, too. They are people who give us a richer sense of who we are because they recognize



elements in our personality that we might not appreciate enough.

## Awareness of the Unique You

To be fully alive as a human being implies being aware of and appreciative of the person we are. Your dog Rover, on the other hand, is not aware of himself as a Manchester terrier. Rover just eats, sleeps, looks at you eagerly for a friendly rub behind the ears, and behaves the way instinct dictates. Essentially, he does not have any awareness of himself as a dog. Only humans are aware of themselves as unique, conscious beings. We do not simply respond to circumstances through instinct—at least most of the time.

Our **sense of identity**, then, is our sense of who we are—the marvelous combination of personality traits, abilities, strengths, weaknesses, interests, and values that is uniquely ours. Our identity is always in the process of formation and remains vaguely mysterious. In other words, we cannot be summed up as a simple list of traits; we cannot be pinned down that easily, for our uniqueness is ultimately a mystery. **6**

### Built on Past Experience

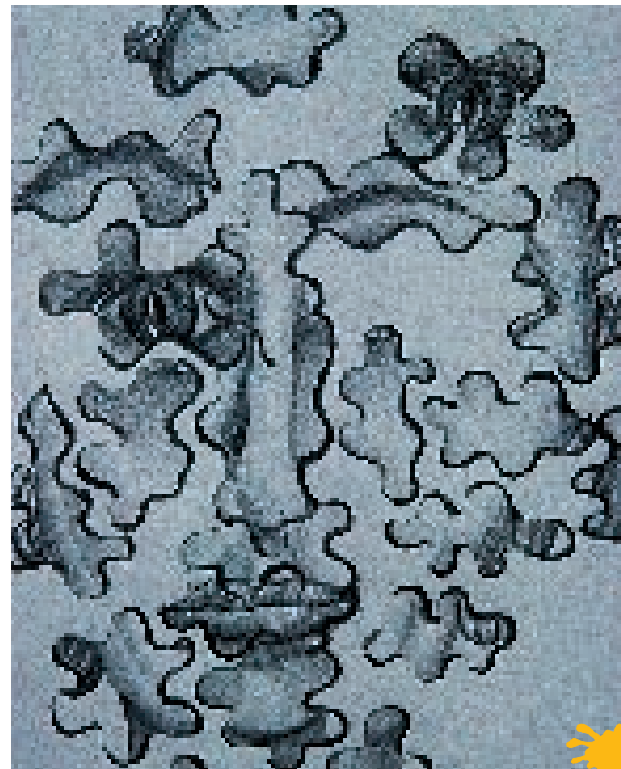
Your sense of identity is not developed in a vacuum. It is composed of millions of bits of information that you gather about yourself from events, relationships with people, work, reading, and so on. Everything that happens contributes to your sense of identity. In turn, your future is built on the foundation of this sense of who you are.

Receiving affirmation from other people, particularly from those who are significant to you, is im-

portant for achieving a strong sense of identity. If you think that you are an intelligent person but other people treat you as if you are dull-witted, you will live with a certain degree of insecurity about your intelligence. During much of your life, people have been affirming or challenging your identity, such as in the following instance:

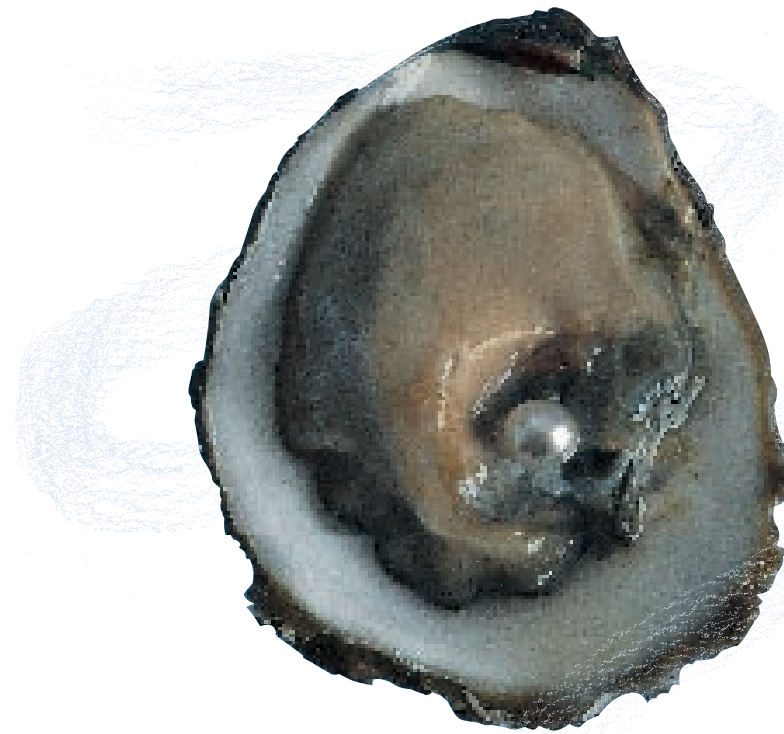
Dan plays the trumpet well, so his music teachers encourage him to apply for a university music scholarship. Competence in music becomes an affirmed part of his identity.

On the other hand, every time Dan tries to fix his car, he either strips the threads off bolts, puts wires



**6** Write fifteen sentences that begin with “I am . . .” Then pick the two sentences that best describe you, and check mark any statement that surprises you. Finally, write a summary of what you have learned about yourself from this.

**Student art:** “Find the Next Piece,” pencil drawing by Sara Bednarz, Trinity High School, Garfield Heights, Ohio



One caution: Before considering ways of gaining a stronger sense of who you are, realize that your identity is never final. Each accomplishment, every argument, and most events—the whole stream of life—continually shape us. Our identity is like a grain of sand that lodges in an oyster. Over many years layer upon layer of pearly substance builds up around the grain, until it becomes a pearl. At each stage of development the pearl has value, but it becomes more precious as it grows.

## Knowing Yourself

Knowing yourself involves honestly addressing these questions:

- What am I feeling?
- What do I want?
- What are people telling me?
- What are my talents?
- What is out of my control? within my limited control?

### What Are You Feeling?

**Feelings** or emotions are essential facets of who we are; they need to be acknowledged. Too frequently people are told to ignore how they feel: “Don’t feel that way!” Think about how ridiculous that command is. We cannot help what we feel; we just feel. Emotions are reactions, not intentions. Strong feelings do not go away; they just bubble underneath the surface of our self-control, sometimes becoming a volcano that explodes. It helps to acknowledge them before that happens.

Knowing ourselves requires us to ask in a given situation, How do I feel right now? Feelings can function either as friends or as dictators. It is best

back incorrectly, or in some way makes matters much worse. After he botches a job, the mechanic that Dan takes his car to snickers and mumbles something about, “some people have it and some people don’t.” Dan concludes that mechanical ability is not a part of his identity. **7**

### A Strong Center

A clear and realistic sense of identity enables us to go forward with life choices about a career, relationships, and so on. Self-understanding is a center of strength that helps us to cope with conflicting demands and values, significant losses, and tough choices. Conversely, faulty perceptions about ourselves may inhibit our development. An accurate sense of identity enables us to live with **self-esteem**—an understanding of our own worth and an attitude of cherishing ourselves, even when others may put us down or devalue us. **8**

**7** Picture some of your past successes, recapturing the full scene: who was there, what happened, how you felt. Successes help us to form our sense of identity. Write about one success and why you felt good about it.

**8** Imagine that you are looking in the mirror before going to school in the morning. Write a list of the mental comments you make.

- Are they positive or negative?
- What are the sources of this mental feedback?





to treat them as friends, or they will become dictators. This is illustrated in the following instance:

- *The dictator.* Sandra has the habit of making Tina look stupid in class. Tina is furious but cannot find a way to express that anger. If she says something to retaliate, Sandra's friends may come down hard on her or ridicule her. Tina is more than a little troubled, but she tries to tell herself that she is not angry anymore. Nevertheless, whenever Sandra's name comes up in conversation, Tina says something rather nasty, putting Sandra in a bad light. Tina finds herself tied in knots by her anger. Clearly her anger is operating as a dictator here, although not consciously. A feeling is dictating Tina's behavior, making her less than free.
- *The friend.* Suppose that in this situation, instead of denying her reactions, Tina treats her anger as an intimate friend who is letting her know just how hurt and humiliated she feels. Now she must decide what to do. Tina may opt to talk privately with Sandra about how the cutting comments in class affect her. Or she may choose to say nothing to Sandra. Then Tina might release her anger physically, by jogging, for example. Either way, Tina decides not to let the embarrassing remarks affect her self-image. In this situation, anger is Tina's friend, a teacher who gives her insight into herself.

By treating our feelings as friends and refusing to let them be dictators, we can learn a great deal about ourselves. **9**

### What Do You Want?

Closely related to knowing our feelings is knowing our **wants** or desires. We cannot decide what to do with our life unless we know what we want. We are barraged by other people telling us what they want us to want—in TV commercials, songs, billboards, fashion magazines, and even in conversations with our family and our friends. As a consequence, knowing what we want is difficult. The tendency is to falsify our desires, to pretend that we want something in order to please someone important to us or to conform to some social norm.

Some people wake up at age forty realizing that they have never done anything that they wanted to do. In *That Hideous Strength*, by British novelist C. S. Lewis, the character Mark comes to such a terrible realization:

He looked back on his life not with shame, but with a kind of disgust at its dreariness. . . . When had he ever done what he wanted? Mixed with the people whom he liked? Or even eaten and drunk what took his fancy? . . .

. . . He was aware, without even having to think of it, that it was he himself—nothing else in the whole universe—that had chosen the dust and broken bottles, the heap of old tin cans, the dry and choking places. (Pages 287–288)

What we want forms our identity and shapes our life. Jesus recognized this fact when he said to his disciples, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:34). **10**

### What Are People Telling You?

Every conversation with another person, even the "Hello! How are you?" type, tells you something about yourself. "Hello! How are you?" is, at least, a recognition by the other person that you exist. If the other person says, "Hello, Pat!" you know that you are acknowledged in an individual way. If the same person stops, looks attentively at you, and then says, "Hello, Pat! How are you?" you sense that you are significant in that person's eyes.

Your relationships provide millions of pieces of data about yourself, some of them affirmative and

some of them negative. All these pieces contribute to your sense of who you are. However, this information should not be accepted without examination. In other words, we do not necessarily gain an accurate sense of ourselves merely by picking up other people's perceptions of us and living as they expect us to. If a student has been marked by others as a wild troublemaker because of a couple of instances of poor judgment, that student can either choose to accept that evaluation and continue to act that way, or decide not to live out the negative image people have. Freedom and uniqueness



**Student art:** "Sarah at the Palace," watercolor by Amy Westerman, Holy Cross High School, Louisville, Kentucky

**9**  
What feeling is hardest for you to express? Why? What feeling is easiest for you to express? Why? Write a personal goal about how you would like to handle your feelings.

**10**  
Write "I want to" fifteen times in a column, skipping a line after each phrase. Then complete the statements, noting longings that will help you be fully alive. For example, "I want to learn how to cross-country ski."

**Student photo:** Untitled, black-and-white photo by Lisa Olivieri, Northwest Catholic High School, West Hartford, Connecticut



require that we listen to what other people tell us about ourselves and then decide within ourselves whether we accept those evaluations. **11**

What Are Your Talents?

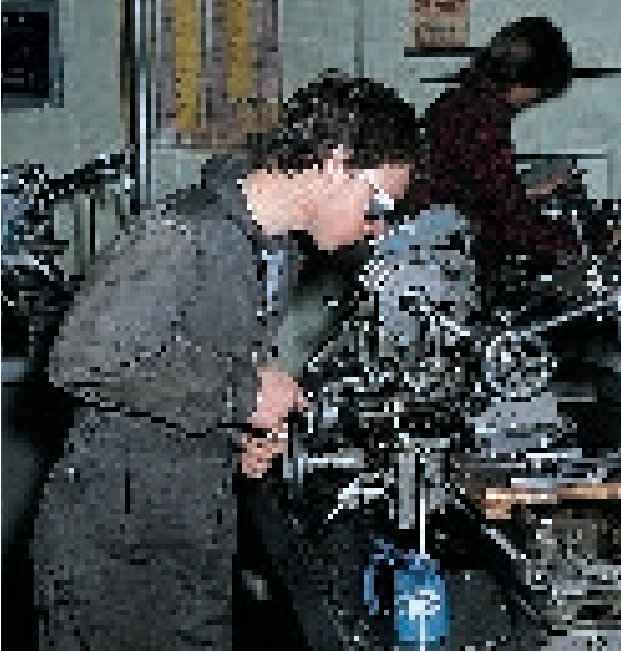
A **talent** is an ability or an aptitude that has value; it is often thought of as a gift, in the sense that a person seems to be born with it. A violinist does not choose to have perfect pitch; she or he is born with it. A great gymnast is born with a certain kind of body. The discipline and practice needed to create a master violinist or a great gymnast have to be combined with the genetic gifts of musical aptitude or a certain body structure.

Talents are not just physical or intellectual. Aspects of personality can also be unique gifts. Some people are excellent listeners. Other people are witty or always seem to take the initiative. Unfortunately, people commonly forget about the gifts of personality. School letters are given to athletes and band members, but few awards are given to recognize the talent of being a good friend, listening with understanding, or acting with kindness.

Before talents can be developed, they first must be acknowledged. Saint Paul urged the Corinthians to recognize their individual talents as gifts from God:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord. . . . All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. (1 Corinthians 12:4,11)

Each of us is gifted in some way. To be full persons we need to take some time to reflect on exactly what our gifts are. **12**



What Is Out of Your Control?  
Within Your Control?

To the extent that talents are inherited, they represent an area that is out of our control. However, what we do with our talents is within our limited control. In coming to a sense of identity, we would do well to sort out which factors that make us unique may be out of our control and which are more within our control. The factors that are out of our control include such variables as these:

**Cosmic.** Our birth was a unique event over which we exercised no power. Likewise, someday we will die. We are influenced by occurrences out of our control, such as earthquakes and hurricanes, gentle rains and clean, new-fallen snow.

**Genetic.** Genes have a strong influence on who a person is. Certainly we are a unique combination of our parents' genes, but a combination nonetheless. This may affect our appearance, our health, our aptitudes and talents, even to some degree our personality traits. Few forwards on basketball teams are the offspring of short, stocky parents.

**Cultural.** We have no control over the culture into which we were born and raised—as a member of a particular family, living in a certain country and region, and as part of a particular religious, ethnic, and economic setting. These cultural factors have much to do with our identity.

**Circumstantial.** Finally, we are shaped to a degree by circumstances—major historical events, accidents, chance meetings—occurrences that seem to be pure luck or pure misfortune. You probably know or have heard about someone who became paralyzed by an accident; that one event has had a profound effect on that person's life and identity.

In summary, our identity is influenced by cosmic, genetic, cultural, and circumstantial factors over which we have no control. However, *we do*



*have some control over our response* to these factors. Our identity is in our hands to the degree that we understand where we have come from and can react consciously to that background.

The Apostle **Saint Peter**, as portrayed in the Christian Testament, serves as a good example of someone who shaped his identity rather than letting it be totally the product of his background. He was a Jewish fisherman, married, and probably illiterate. Peter lived in a land under Roman dictatorship. His work was hard. Some days his catch was good, and other days his nets were empty.

One day, along came a stranger, Jesus, who invited Peter to follow him (Matthew 4:18–20). Peter was not a likely candidate to be the first Apostle or the “rock” upon which Jesus would build his church. Nevertheless, Peter overcame the parts of his background that would have kept him a fisherman and used the facets of his being that allowed him to be brave, impulsive, and resolute. Rather than letting genetics, culture, and circumstances largely determine the life we lead, we can grow, like Peter, by using the traits we have in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. In Peter's case, and in ours, it is a matter of moving with the grace God offers us.

For Review

- What is a sense of identity?
- What is self-esteem?
- Explain why our feelings need to be acknowledged.
- What is a talent?
- What factors are out of our control in making us who we are? What is in our control?

**11**  
List five comments that other people typically make about you. Next to each comment, describe how you feel about the remark. Do you accept or reject their opinion?

**12**  
Inventory your talents and skills. Write “I can” fifteen times in a column, skipping a line after each phrase. Then complete the statements. For example, “I can relax with most people and become their friend.”



Autonomy: The Ability to Shape Your Own Life

A strong sense of identity generally produces **autonomy**, a healthy ability to shape our own life and actions. In turn, acting responsibly and shaping our own affairs brings about a more secure sense of identity. Therefore, a strong sense of identity and autonomy reinforce each other.

Making Choices with Consequences

Making choices that have consequences—with the realization that you will have to live with those consequences, both positive and negative—is the stuff of autonomy. Robert Frost expressed such choices symbolically in his poem “The Road Not Taken”:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;  
  
Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,  
  
And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

When we exercise autonomy, we go ahead and make a choice, knowing that we cannot necessarily take it back, nor can we have it both ways. We might feel terribly pressured to make a choice that everyone else approves of. We may want to watch others to see what they do and imitate them. But if we are autonomous, we make the choice according to our best understanding of things, and let the approval or disapproval of others fall where it may.

Not relying on the approval of other people does not mean that an autonomous person is insensitive to the needs, wishes, or opinions of other people; a



Student art: “Facing the Future,”  
linocut by Joanna D’Gerolamo, St.  
Agnes Academy, Memphis, Ten-  
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mature person naturally takes others into account in decision making. In this sense, autonomy is different from **independence**, a state of relying on ourselves, not on others, to fulfill our needs or to give insight. The autonomous person is able to rely on his or her own judgment and competencies to make decisions and meet his or her needs, but that person is also able to rely on others and to have a sense of give-and-take with them. Autonomy includes **interdependence**, that delicate and healthy blend of independence and dependence. **13**

Gaining Independence from Family

At this stage in your life, you are probably gaining increased independence from your family, an important part of eventually becoming autonomous. Perhaps you are already on the journey of learning to function capably on your own. Here are some examples of young adults who are trying to gain independence, with varying degrees of success:

- Jeffrey, a high school student, commits himself to earning a significant part of his college tuition during the summer months. “It’s important to me to rely on my own earning ability.”
- Becky’s mother threw her out of the house because Becky disapproved of her mother’s live-in boyfriend and was always arguing with him. Now Becky lives with a friend, works after school, and struggles to finish her senior year. She is determined to go to college at least part-time. But it is a hard life, and Becky realizes she misses her mom and being a regular kid at home.
- After graduating from technical school, Rob could not get a job that paid well, so he went back home

to live with his folks. Now Rob avoids his parents, staying in his room and rarely talking with them. “It feels like I’m in high school again.”

- Cheryl is so delighted about having no curfew in her first year of college that she stays out every night until two or three in the morning. She is exhausted most of the day and skips many morning classes. Finally, Cheryl admits, “This is crazy. My days and nights are reversed. I’ve got to get my schedule back to normal, or I won’t be able to stay in school.”



Becoming financially self-reliant, coping with hurtful family relationships, having the freedom to learn from our mistakes, and struggling with frustrations to our independence—all of these are part of the journey to gain independence from family. **14**

**13**  
Think about a recent situation in which you were too dependent on other people (for example, parents or friends). Write about that situation.

**14**  
Write about recent situations in which you (a) acted independently, resulting in personal growth, and (b) acted independently, with negative results.





### False Autonomy

A couple of forms of false autonomy exist, behaviors that offer the illusion of independence from family.

**Groupthink.** Sometimes people in the transitional period into young adulthood make a sharp break from their parents or family by taking on the practices and views of a different group of people. For example, persons who join cults or gangs often do so to assert their independence from the values and lifestyles of their parents or family, but in fact they may be trading one form of dependency for another. Even a fraternity or sorority can function this way. Dependent people feel the need for a group to give them a sense of belonging and identity. In too many of these organizations, senseless initiations or dehumanizing practices are the prices a person pays to assume the identity of the group.

**“Jailbreak” pregnancy or marriage.** Another false form of autonomy is the “jailbreak” pregnancy or marriage. A young woman may be under the illusion that having a baby will cut her free from her family. Then she can have someone who needs *her*; she imagines she will have a life of her own with her baby. Thus she takes on the tremendous

task of parenting without the necessary maturity and life skills to make it work. Similarly, both young men and young women may see a teenage marriage as their way to escape their family of origin, especially if life with their family has been very difficult.

### Learning Interdependence

Genuinely autonomous people are neither lone warriors facing the world nor cold machines that operate unfeelingly. They are interdependent, capable of give-and-take, trusting both themselves and others. Here are some of the lessons of interdependence we can discover:

- learning to be strong enough to be sensitive to the needs of other people
- growing into a firm identity that allows us to consider other points of view and to change
- becoming aware of our own resources—talents, skills, knowledge, and feelings—so that we can be confident, not threatened, when involved in conflict
- recognizing that we sometimes need help and that our own identity will not be compromised by accepting aid from others when we need it

To be interdependent means to function well on our own while realizing our need for others and their need for us. Interdependence also implies that others help us to learn working knowledge and skills—from repairing flat tires and using computers to entertaining guests and listening well. We rely on others to teach us hundreds of practical life skills, and we teach others as well. This interdependent lifestyle builds our sense of identity. **15**

### Paul’s Balance

**Saint Paul**, the Jewish leader who became Christianity’s apostle to the Gentiles, is a useful example of the balance between independence and dependence, which is essential to autonomy. In his second letter to the Christians at Corinth, Paul told them about some of his trials:

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger. . . . And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant? (2 Corinthians 11:24–29)

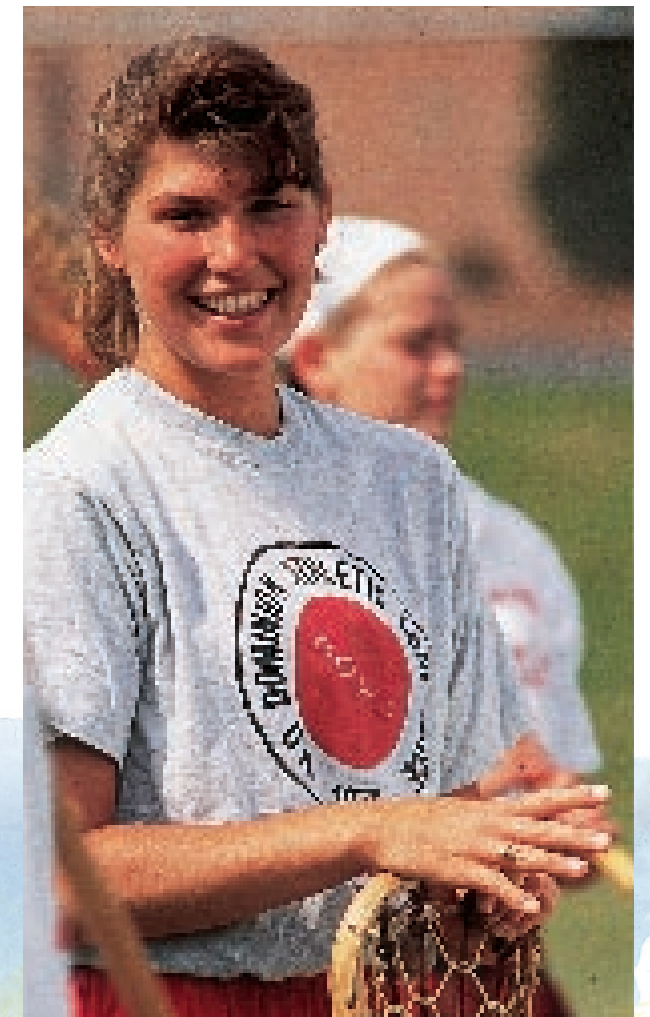
No doubt, Paul was tough, yet he was in touch with the feelings of the Christians.

Paul’s faith in God made him strong. His recognition of his own weaknesses made him sympathetic: “So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul needed God’s help and boasted about it. His letters to the Christian communities are filled with requests for help.

Like Paul, we can be interdependent. In fact, living in this way is part of growth.

### Different for Every Relationship

While we are considering the delicate balance between independence and dependence, we need to recognize that we can never be completely interdependent with all people in all situations. No one is. We may feel more give-and-take with a close friend than with our younger brothers and sisters, who might take more than they give. Our relationships differ one from another, so our experiences of interdependence will vary according to who we are relating to. It helps to be aware of the dynamics at work so that we may grow toward relating interdependently wherever possible.



### 15

Write about a way you have been successfully interdependent, that is, involved in a give-and-take relationship.



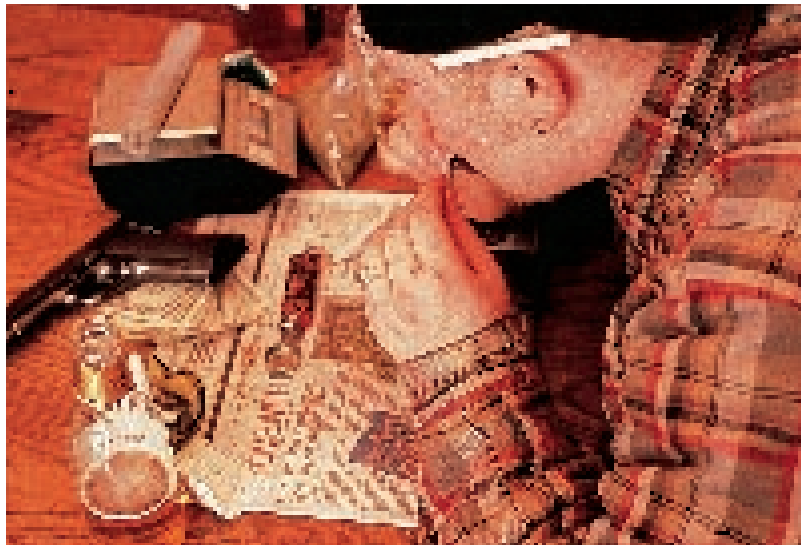
## Being Responsible with Freedom

Autonomy implies freedom from coercion or constraint. Such freedom is essential to our own life and development. However, we do not live alone; we live in a society of people who have rights and needs, who are all free. The freedom of all people requires that we respect and respond to the needs and rights of others.

**Christian freedom** means that we can see the big picture beyond our own narrow interests, and are able to respond to the needs of real situations and real people. Freedom includes responsibility. If we are confined to the prisons of our own whims and wishes, we are not free. Freedom means that we grow and express ourselves within the context of others' needs as well as our own. When freedom becomes unlimited choice without regard to others, it is no longer freedom but license.

For instance, a person racing a car down a city street at fifty miles per hour because she or he wants to see how fast the car can go is not acting freely. She or he is simply a prisoner to compulsion and whim. The driver is not taking into account the real situation, which might include other cars or a child who wanders into the path of the speeding car.

On the other hand, if the driver is speeding to the hospital because his or her grandfather has had a stroke while riding in the car, the driver might be choosing the most responsible free action. Considering the whole situation—life hanging in the balance, little traffic, and few pedestrians on the street—to drive slowly might be irresponsible. In other words, acting freely means that we consider the entire situation and respond accordingly for the good of all.



For Christians, freedom is seen in the context of freedom from sin and freedom to love. In one of his Epistles, Saint Peter sharply rebuked people who lead others into error and perversity: “They promise [others] freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for people are slaves to whatever masters them” (2 Peter 2:19). Sin—selfishness, injustice, abuse of others, and so on—can dominate our life. The promise of Jesus’ Resurrection is that sin can be overcome and that people can be free to love. **16**

### For Review

- What is autonomy? How are autonomy and a strong sense of identity related?
- What is interdependence? How is autonomy not the same thing as independence?
- Describe two forms of false autonomy.
- What is the difference between freedom and license?

### 16

Write a goal for your growth in autonomy. For example, develop your judgment about study time so you do not wait until the last minute to do assignments. Then list the concrete steps that will help you to reach your goal.

## Personal Power: Flowing from Identity and Autonomy

Growing in a sense of identity and in autonomy produces a welcome result—**personal power**, the ability to influence our own life and the people and events around us.

### The Need for Power, the Joy of Power

Being powerful—that is, bringing about change in the world around us—is not something that Christians should shy away from. We are meant to be powerful people who also empower others. Consider some examples of what happens when people are powerless:

- Because they received no response to their repeated cries, many babies in a severely overcrowded orphanage in Peru stopped crying; they gave up on expressing their needs. Although the babies were being fed regularly, some of them died because they could no longer communicate their physical distress. The inability to influence the world around them in this most basic way became fatal.
- People who are abused as children experience a terrifying form of powerlessness. When they become adults, some are more apt than other people to abuse their own children, out of a distorted need to assert their own power.

We need power. The deprivation of power, as demonstrated in the previous examples, can lead to violence and tragedy. People need to know that their own actions and voice can make a difference in the world.

To go from hesitancy and a feeling of having no impact to a sense of being filled with strength can be a joyful experience. Mary, Jesus’ mother, and the Apostles felt this joy when they recognized that the power of the Holy Spirit had come into them at **Pentecost**. This power erased their fears: “And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind. . . . All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts of the Apostles 2:2–4).

The joy of Mary and the Apostles at Pentecost was not unlike the joy that we know when we realize our own power to reach out and make a difference in the world around us. This power has a positive effect on our sense of identity and autonomy. From a Christian point of view, people must be able to help shape their own lives and influence events—that is, they must have power—if they are to become fully alive persons.

### A Positive, Not a Negative, Difference

The word *power* often carries negative connotations. We may think of power as destructive or evil rather than constructive. Think of the contexts in which the word is used: “a powerful lobby,” which imposes its interests on the public good; “a powerful dictator,” who dominates an entire nation with his or her own will; “powerful multinational corporations,” which can exploit cheap labor in poor countries; “a power-hungry corporate climber,” who seeks to amass control while stepping over others.

Those are all examples of **negative power**, or power used badly. This is a limited notion of power. Power can be positive if it is used to influence





one's own life and the lives of others in growth-producing, healthy ways. Two positive kinds of power are nurturing power and shared power.

### Nurturing Power

Power used to foster another person's well-being is **nurturing power**. Parents exercise this kind of power for their children by feeding them, changing their diapers, and later teaching them how to ride a bicycle. The power to nurture comes from a genuine concern for those who have little power of their own—children, sick people, and poor people.

### Shared Power

When our personal power is used to complement or increase other people's power, we have **shared power**. This kind of power can be seen in Jesus, who passed on his mission to the Apostles, sharing with them his power to build the Kingdom. God's grace is evident when power is shared.

Listen to the excitement conveyed by this young man in talking about a meeting during which power was shared:

- It was a different kind of meeting. First of all, we were working on something we all believed in—raising money to help Katie's family with medical bills when she got so sick. We all jumped in with suggestions. When it came to actually deciding which projects we should do, everyone spoke up

and also listened; no one insisted on having it their way. By the end, we settled on two projects, and everyone took a piece of the responsibility. These people are great to work with.

Shared power is evident in many friendships. For instance:

- Susan encourages Tuan to try out for the school play and even listens to him practice because she knows that he would be excellent in it. Susan does this despite knowing that if Tuan gets the part, he may be too busy to spend much time with her. She wants to see him use his potential because Tuan has supported Susan on things that were important to her.

Sometimes shared power means speaking out or taking a stand so that others have a chance to better themselves—to use their own power. Consider the example of **Nelson Mandela**, the black South African leader who went from being a prisoner of the racist apartheid regime to, in 1994, being the first president elected freely by South Africans of all races. He used his power not only to speak out for his own race but also to build bridges of trust with the white government so that whites could release their grip of control over the majority black population. In the process, all South Africans gained power, in the sense of making a positive difference in the world. God's grace was surely at work in this transformation. **17**

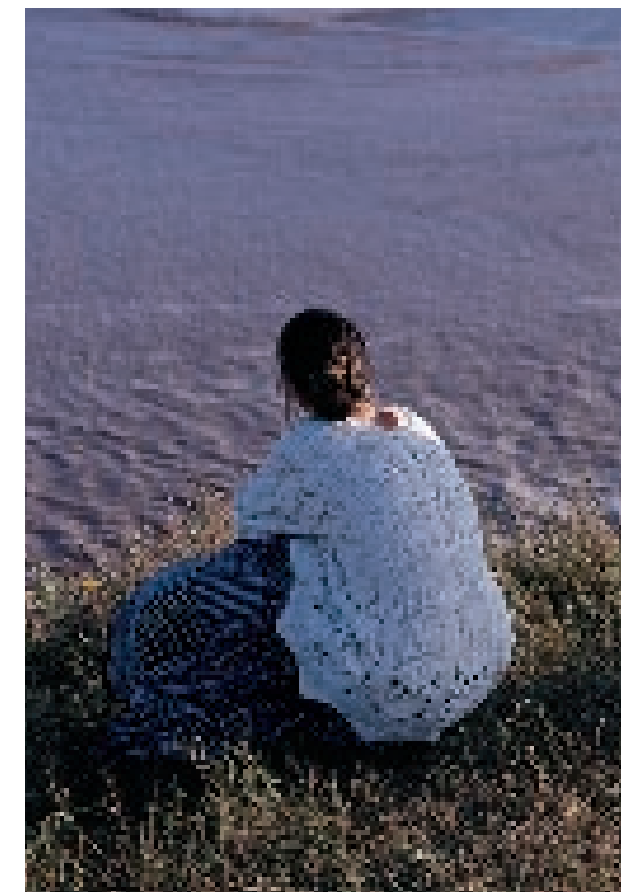
### For Review

- What is personal power?
- Describe two kinds of positive power.

## Stepping Out in Faith

Giving shape to our life is a great adventure full of risks, growth, pain, and joy. We are creating a lifestyle, a way of living in the world. The way ahead may seem hazardous at times. Yet we are not alone in stepping out on this journey. Jesus is with us, ready to hold us up when the going gets tough. We are a bit like Saint Peter, who, in Matthew's Gospel story (14:23–33), sets off to walk across the water, confident that he will reach Jesus. But when the wind comes up and the sea gets choppy, Peter loses his nerve and begins to sink—only to be saved from drowning by Jesus. Let us step out in faith like Peter:

Spirit of Jesus, give us courage to make this journey  
into the future that holds so much promise  
but also so much anxiety.  
Help us grow into a strong sense of who we are  
as unique persons gifted and loved by God,  
meant to make a difference in the world.  
When we get scared in the times ahead,  
don't let us lose heart.  
Hold us up when we lose our nerve,  
and fill us with a passion to live life fully. Amen.



**17**

Complete these two sentences with as many examples as you can think of for each:

- I used my power to nurture others when . . .

- I shared my power with others when . . .

Then review your lists. How would you evaluate your sense of your own power?