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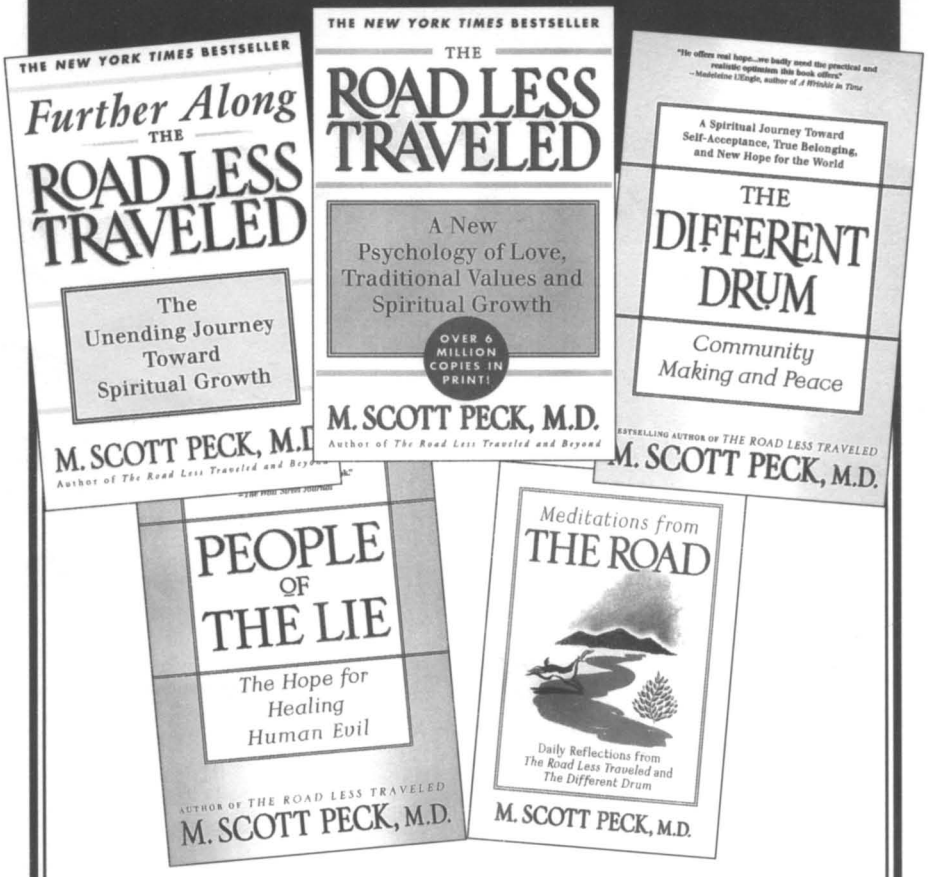

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The Road Less Traveled and Beyond

Spiritual Growth in an Age of Anxiety

M. Scott Peck, M.D.

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to my fellow travelers

Contents

Introduction

I AM SIXTY YEARS OF AGE. That statistic means different things for different people. For me, since I am not in the best of health and feel I've lived enough for three lifetimes, being sixty means that it is time I should start setting my affairs in order, as they say. It seems proper for me these days to be about the business of tying up loose ends of my life insofar as it is in my power to do so. I write this book in that endeavor.

I wrote *The Road Less Traveled* at the vigorous age of forty. It was as if a spigot had been opened, and other books have come pouring out ever since: nine, to be exact, not counting this one. Each time people have asked me what I hoped to achieve by a particular book, as if I generally had a grand strategy in mind. The truth is I wrote them not out of strategy, but simply because each book has said, "Write me." However hard she might be to define, there is such a thing as a muse, and I have always and only operated under her orders.

So it is now, but I believe a more complex explanation is in order. One of those works, a collection of my edited lectures, is entitled *Further Along the Road Less Traveled,* as is the series of audiotapes from which it was developed. The title of this one makes it sound like "The Road Less Traveled III." I worry the sound may be misleading. The fact is that my muse won't allow me to write the same book over and again no matter how commercially smart it might be to do so.

All of my books are quite different from each other. Yet not totally different. With the perspective of age I've come to real-

ize that in their own unique ways they have all been attempts to work out the same complex set of hidden themes. Looking backward, recently I discerned that I have been wrestling with these themes as far back as I can remember. At the time it felt as if *The Road Less Traveled* arose de novo when I was forty. Now I can see how I'd begun work on it and my other books before I'd even entered adolescence. Perhaps I was born working on these themes. Or perhaps I was born *to* work on them. I don't know.

What I do know is that the work was already in progress of a sort two decades before the publication of *The Road Less Traveled.* In late 1957 and early 1958, at the age of twenty-one, I wrote a college senior thesis with the egregious title of "Anxiety, Modern Science, and the Epistemological Problem." Epistemology is that branch of philosophy which addresses the question: "How do we know what we think we know? How do we know anything?" The epistemological problem is that philosophers have never succeeded in answering the question. Many in the nineteenth century thought the answer lay in science. We could know things for certain through the scientific method. As my thesis pointed out, however, perhaps the single most important discovery of modern science has been that there are limits to scientific inquiry. With a few ifs, ands, and buts, there is no more real certainty to be found in science than in theology. Yet uncertainty breeds anxiety. It is scary when our best minds are those who best know that they don't know. This is why W. H. Auden referred to our century as the Age of Anxiety—a time when the Age of Reason has proved to be just as unsettling a period as the Age of Faith.

My college thesis provided no answers, only questions, and one way or another those same questions are echoed in each and every one of my books. A major theme of all of them is the encouragement of the greatest possible range of thought in our search for their answers. Thus the third of the four sections of *The Road Less Traveled* concludes: "But just as it is essential that our sight not be crippled by scientific tunnel vision, so also it is essential that our critical faculties and capacity for skepticism

not be blinded by the brilliant beauty of the spiritual realm."

Once I put that college thesis behind me (or so I thought), I got on with the business of real life: medical school, marriage, children, specialty training in psychiatry, military and government service, and eventually private practice. Yet, without knowing that one—much less many—books would eventuate, I was beginning, almost unconsciously, to develop some cautious, tentative answers to my own questions. When enough such answers had accumulated, it came to me twenty years later to write *The Road Less Traveled.* And, as they continued to accumulate, I went on to write what I thought were very different works.

They *are* very different. Yet whether for adults or children, whether focused upon the individual or society, whether fiction or nonfiction, they all may be looked upon in part as elaborations of one or more of the key concepts in *The Road Less Traveled.* As elaborations they carry those concepts further; they look deeper; they go *beyond.* This book is entitled *The Road Less Traveled and Beyond* because it ties together many of the ways in which I have been pushed—often stumbling—to move beyond my first book in both my public writing and my personal journey over the past twenty years.

Some may consider this book a compilation, a compendium, or a summary of all my published work, but those words are inadequate. In writing the book, I found that I had to be quite selective. "Synthesis" would be a more adequate description, but still fails to capture the "beyondness" of the book. For in addition to tying up loose ends, I wanted to break new ground as well. I have been powerfully assisted in doing so by a quote attributed to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who once said: "I don't give a fig for the simplicity of this side of complexity, but I would die for the simplicity on the other side."* His profound sentiment has led me to organize this work into three sections.

*The exact origin of the quote of the quote is unknown, but I am grateful to Max DuPree for passing it on to me in his book, *The Art of Leadership.*

In Part I, "Crusade Against Simplism," I decry the primitive and effortless simplistic thinking that lies at the root of so much individual and societal sickness.

In Part II, "Wrestling with the Complexity of Everyday Life," I describe the complex choices we must continually make and remake if we are to live well.

And in Part III, "The Other Side of Complexity," I describe where we can arrive when we have been willing to pay all our proper intellectual and emotional dues.

Although the phrase "the Other Side" rings with possible intimations of heaven, I am not so bold as to suggest that we can reach heaven this side of the grave. What I do suggest, however, is that we can indeed come to exist in a closer relationship to the Holy. And that on the other side of complexity there is a kind of simplicity where we can know with humility that in the end all things point to God.

Editor's Preface

I FIRST MET M. SCOTT PECK in the summer of 1995. I had written him a letter to thank him for his book, *In Search of Stones,* and to tell him of its profound effect on my life. I had also read two of his earlier books, *The Road Less Traveled* and *People of the Lie,* which had become, as I wrote in my letter, companions—intellectual and spiritual—on my own journey of personal growth.

Three weeks later, I received a letter from Dr. Peck in which he wrote that he was in search of an editor for his new book and asked if I would like to explore the possibility of undertaking the job. I was both flattered and surprised. We spoke on the phone, later met, and then, after several long and probing conversations, we began our work together. Over the course of the next ten months, it was a challenge and an exhilarating experience to have a part in the evolution of *The Road Less Traveled and Beyond.*

Many readers of this book will be familiar with Dr. Peck's earlier works, although that is not necessary for a full comprehension of *The Road Less Traveled and Beyond.* Nevertheless, it may be useful here to mention those books and comment briefly on their major themes.

The Road Less Traveled (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978) was Dr. Peck's first book. Breaking new ground—as reflected in its subtitle, "A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth"—the book stemmed from Dr. Peck's work as a psychotherapist with patients struggling to avoid or to gain greater levels of maturity. An enormously popular and influen-

tial book, *The Road Less Traveled* helped bridge the gap between psychology and religion. In it, Dr. Peck wrote that he made little distinction between the mind and the spirit and, therefore, little distinction between the process of achieving emotional maturity and spiritual growth.

In the Italian edition, the title of *The Road Less Traveled* was translated as *Volo di Bene,* which means "The Good Path," because there is a tradition in Italy to compare the "good path" to the "bad path." So it was not coincidental that Dr. Peck, having written a book about the good path, followed it with one about the bad path. In *People of the Lie* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), he probed in depth the essence of human evil. Writing that people who are evil place themselves in direct opposition to the truth and harm others instead of facing their own failures and limitations, he dramatically demonstrated how they seek to avoid undertaking the difficult task of personal growth. Again, presenting cases encountered in his psychiatric practice, he described vivid incidents of evil in everyday life and their ramifications, as well as offering thoughts about the possibilities for healing human evil.

Dr. Peck's next book, *What Return Can I Make? Dimensions of the Christian Experience* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985) was coauthored with Marilyn von Waldner, O.C.D., and Patricia Kay. Accompanied by the spiritual music of von Waldner and the abstract drawings of Kay, the book was dedicated to the "glory of God." In it, Dr. Peck reflected on themes related to his own journey of spiritual growth into Christianity. Although it is his most evangelical work, it does not exclude those not identified as Christians. It is about the discovery of God and the mystery of faith. The book, without the art and sheet music but with the audiotape of songs by von Waldner, was republished and retitled *Gifts for the Journey: Treasures of the Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995).

In 1984, Dr. Peck, his wife, Lily, and nine others started the Foundation for Community Encouragement (FCE), a nonprofit organization for promoting the experience of commu-

nity as a means of improving human relationships among individuals, small groups, and nations. As a direct consequence of his work with FCE, Dr. Peck wrote *The Different Drum* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987) in which he challenged readers to take another journey in self-awareness to achieve a new level of "connectedness" through the creative experience of community.

In a departure from nonfiction, Dr. Peck's next book was a psychological thriller, *A Bed by the Window* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), subtitled *A Novel of Mystery and Redemption.* Superficially an account of sex, love, and death set in a nursing home, it is, as its subtitle suggests, more than a mystery story; it is an exploration of the nature of mystery itself on multiple levels.

The Friendly Snowflake (Atlanta: Turner Publishing, Inc., 1992), illustrated by Peck's son, Christopher Peck, was also a work of fiction, a story about a young girl's voyage into spiritual awareness. The book's main concerns are life, love, faith, and family.

Dr. Peck's next book, *A World Waiting to Be Born: Civility Rediscovered* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993) explored the role of civility in personal relationships and in society as a whole. Challenging us to recognize the cultural consequences of incivility, Dr. Peck wrote of the many morally disruptive patterns of behavior—both subtle and blatant—that seem ingrained in human relationships, and proposed changes that can be effected to achieve both personal and societal well-being.

Further Along the Road Less Traveled: The Unending Journey Toward Spiritual Growth (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993) elaborated on themes and concepts first explored in *The Road Less Traveled* and was a revised and edited collection of Dr. Peck's lectures.

Dr. Peck's next work was *In Search of Stones* (New York: Hyperion Books, 1995), an integration of themes related to history, travel, and autobiography. Subtitled *A Pilgrimage of Faith, Reason and Discovery,* it was the story of a three-week trip

through the countryside of Wales, England, and Scotland that becomes an adventure of the spirit and an exploration of the complexities of our journey through life.

Dr. Peck returned to fiction with *In Heaven as on Earth* (New York: Hyperion, 1996), a story whose characters inhabit an afterlife where they must confront and attempt to resolve the conflicts and complexities of their lives on earth.

And finally, Dr. Peck is now at work on a new book entitled *Denial of the Soul: Spiritual and Medical Perspectives on Euthanasia* (scheduled for publication in 1997 by Harmony Books).

Collectively, Dr. Peck's books have been a demonstration of both his unfolding consciousness and the ever-increasing courage of his thoughts. There is something in each that we may find helpful, and can emulate, as we strive to develop our own spiritual lives. This book, I feel, will provide profound new insights to guide us on this continuing journey. In its unique way—like the author and each of his books—it has a spirit of its own.

Fannie LeFlore

The names and some of the circumstances of all patients or clients herein have been altered in order to preserve their confidentiality.

PART I

Crusade Against Simplism

CHAPTER 1

Thinking

In Ireland, the Middle East, Somalia, Sri Lanka, and countless other war-torn areas around the world, prejudice, religious intolerance, greed, and fear have erupted into violence that has taken the lives of millions. In America, the damage caused by institutionalized racism is perhaps more subtle but no less devastating to the social fabric. Rich versus poor, black versus white, pro-life versus pro-choice, straight versus gay—all are social, political, and economic conflicts fought under the banner of some ideology or deeply held belief. But given the divisive and destructive results, are these ideologies and beliefs rational, or mere rationalizations for otherwise unreasonable acts? How often, in fact, do we stop to think about what we believe? One of the major dilemmas we face both as individuals and as a society is simplistic thinking—or the failure to think at all. It isn't just *a* problem, it is *the* problem.

Given the imperfections of our society and the apparent downward spiral of spiritual and moral values in recent years, thinking has become a grave issue. It is more urgent now—perhaps more urgent than anything else—because it is the means by which we consider, decide, and act upon everything in our increasingly complex world. If we don't begin to think well, it's highly likely that we may end up killing ourselves.

In one way or another, each of my books has been—symbolically and substantively—a crusade against simplistic thinking. I began *The Road Less Traveled* with the assertion that "life

is difficult." In *Further Along the Road Less Traveled,* I added that "life is complex." Here, it can further be said that "there are no easy answers." And although I believe the route to finding answers is primarily through better thinking, even this is not as simple as it may seem.

Thinking is difficult. Thinking is complex. And thinking is—more than anything else—a process, with a course or direction, a lapse of time, and a series of steps or stages that lead to some result. To think well is a laborious, often painstaking process until one becomes accustomed to being "thoughtful." Since it is a process, the course or direction may not always be clear-cut. Not all the steps or stages are linear, nor are they always in the same sequence. Some are circular and overlap with others. Not everyone seeks to achieve the same result. Given all this, if we are to think well, we must be on guard against simplistic thinking in our approach to analyzing crucial issues and solving the problems of life.

Although people are different, an all-too-common flaw is that most tend to believe they somehow instinctively know how to think and to communicate. In reality, they usually do neither well because they are either too self-satisfied to examine their assumptions about thinking or too self-absorbed to invest the time and energy to do so. As a result, it is impossible to tell why they think as they do or how they make their decisions. And when challenged, they show very little awareness of—or become easily frustrated by—the dynamics involved in truly thinking and communicating well.

Twice during my career as a lecturer, I gave an all-day seminar on thinking. At the beginning of each, I pointed out that most people think they already know how to think. At the conclusion of each, during a feedback session, someone said in sheer exasperation, "The subject is simply too large." Indeed, thinking isn't a topic that anyone can digest thoroughly in one sitting. Whole books can be (and have been) written about it. It is no surprise that many people resist the arduous efforts involved in continually monitoring and revising their thinking. And no surprise that by the end of the seminars most of the par-

ticipants felt so overwhelmed by all that is really involved in thinking that they were either numbed or horrified. Needless to say, these were not among my more popular engagements. Yet if all the energy required to think seems troublesome, the lack of thinking causes far more trouble and conflict for ourselves as individuals and for the society in which we live.

Hamlet's often quoted "To be or not to be?" is one of life's ultimate existential questions. Another question gets to the heart of how we interpret that existence. I would paraphrase Shakespeare to ask, "To think or not to think?" That is the ultimate question in combating simplism. And at this point in human evolution, it may be the very equivalent of "To be or not to be?"

From my practice as a psychiatrist and my experiences and observations in general, I have become familiar with the common errors related to the failure to think well. One, of course, is simply not thinking. Another is making assumptions in thinking, through the use of one-dimensional logic, stereotypes, and labeling. Another problem is the belief that thinking and communication don't require much effort. Another is assuming that thinking is a waste of time, which is a particular factor in the quiet rage we experience around the failure to solve many social problems.

Leonard Hodgson wrote: "It is not through trust in our reason that we go wrong, but because through our sinfulness our reason is so imperfectly rational. The remedy is not the substitution of some other form of acquiring knowledge for rational apprehension; it is the education of our reason to be its true self." Although the language is somewhat misleading, since his book dates back over fifty years, Hodgson's words are relevant to the dilemma we face today. For "reason," I would substitute the word "thinking" and all that it implies. By "sinfulness," Hodgson was referring, I believe, to our combined "original" sins of laziness, fear, and pride, which limit us or prevent us from fulfilling the human potential. In referring to "the education of our reason to be its true self," Hodgson suggests that we should allow our true self to be whatever it's capable of, to rise to its

fullest capacity. The point is not that we shouldn't trust our brain, specifically our frontal lobes. The point is that we don't use them enough. Because of our sins of laziness, fear, and pride, we don't put our brain to full use. We are faced with the task of educating ourselves to be fully human.

The Point of Having a Brain

Obvious as this may seem, we've been given a large brain so that we can think. One characteristic that distinguishes human beings from other creatures is the relatively large size of our brain, compared to our overall body weight. (The exceptions are whales and dolphins. They have larger brains in proportion to their bodies than people do, which is one reason many animal rights activists are vehement in their mission to protect these species; they believe whales and dolphins may, in fact, be smarter than we are in some ways.)

Whether in humans or other mammals, the brain consists of three components—the old brain, the midbrain, and the new brain. Each has unique functions in the orchestra of organs that work in unison to keep us alive.

The old brain—which is also called the reptilian brain—looks little different in humans than it does in worms. At the top of our spinal cord, we have an elongated bulge that's called the medulla oblongata. Throughout the brain are collections of nerve cells called neural centers. In the old brain these centers serve the purpose of monitoring physiological needs, such as controlling our respiration, heart rate, sleep, appetite, and other very basic but primitive functions.

The area known as the midbrain is larger and more complex. The neural centers of the midbrain are involved in the governance and in the production of emotions, and neurosurgeons have actually mapped out the locations of these centers. With a human being lying on an operating table under local anesthesia, they can insert electrodes or very fine needles into

the brain, from the tip of which they can deliver a millivolt of electrical current and actually produce specific emotions such as anger, euphoria, and even depression.

The new brain consists mostly of our cerebral cortex, which is also involved in primitive activities including instincts and locomotion. The biggest difference between us humans and the other mammals is the size of our new brain, and specifically of that part known as the frontal lobes. The direction of human evolution has been primarily in the growth of the frontal lobes. These lobes are involved in our ability to make judgments, and it is here that the processing of information—thinking—primarily takes place.

Just as our capacity for learning depends on thinking, our capacity for thinking well depends on learning. So another central factor that distinguishes human beings from other creatures is related to our ability to learn. While we have instincts like other animals', they don't always automatically govern our behavior to as great a degree. This factor gives us free will. We've been endowed with the combination of these frontal lobes and freedom, which enables us to learn throughout a lifetime.

Compared to that of other mammals, the period of our childhood dependency is much longer relative to our total life span. Given our relative lack of instincts, we need that time to learn before we are able to branch out on our own. Learning is crucial to our ability to grow in awareness, to think independently, and to master the knowledge necessary for surviving and thriving in life.

When we are young, our dependency on those who raise us shapes our thinking and what we learn. And given our lengthy dependence, we are at risk of developing thinking patterns that may become ingrained, even seemingly irreversible. If we have adults in our young lives who help us learn to think well, we benefit in a multitude of ways. If we have adults in our young lives whose own thinking is suspect, disordered, or otherwise limited, our thinking will be impaired by what we learn and

don't learn from them. But it would be nonsense to presume that we are doomed. As adults, we no longer have to depend on others to tell us what to think or do.

There is a distinction between healthy and unhealthy dependency. In *The Road Less Traveled,* I wrote that dependency in physically healthy adults is pathological—it is sick, always a manifestation of a mental illness or defect. It is to be distinguished, however, from what are commonly referred to as dependency needs or feelings. We all—each and every one of us, even if we try to pretend to others and to ourselves that we don't—have dependency needs and feelings. We have desires to be babied, to be nurtured without effort on our part, to be cared for by persons who are stronger than we are and have our interests truly at heart. But for most of us these desires or feelings do not rule our lives; they are not the predominant theme of our existence. When they do rule our lives and dictate the quality of our existence, we are suffering from a psychiatric illness commonly known as passive dependent personality disorder. Such dependency is, at root, a disorder related to thinking—specifically, a resistance to thinking for ourselves.

Just as the myriad of disorders that stem from resistance to thinking are complex, so also is the relationship between these disorders and our complex brain. One particularly exciting area of research has shed some light on aspects of this relationship. In the last twenty years, a major breakthrough came about as a result of split-brain research examining more deeply the well-known fact that the new brain is divided into a right and a left half. A body of fibers or white matter, the corpus callosum, connects these two hemispheres. It is now believed that the left brain is our deductive brain and the right brain is primarily involved in inductive reasoning. These patterns are not total absolutes, but more or less indicate tendencies.

Some people with epilepsy have been treated and a few cured by severing this connection between the two halves of the brain. Later, these "split-brain" patients were scientifically studied, and a very dramatic study showed that if you cover the eye of someone whose brain has been severed so that visual infor-

mation gets only to the left brain, and you show him, for instance, an electrical heater, his description of the object will be very specific and telling. He'll likely say, "Well, it's a box with a cord and filaments heated up by electricity." And he'll go on to describe various component parts with stunning accuracy. But he won't be able to name the appliance. On the other hand, if you feed information only to the right side of his brain, he will be able to name the appliance but won't be able to explain why it is what it is.

The crux of split-brain research has shown that the left side is the analytical brain, with the ability to take wholes and break them up into pieces, while the right side is the intuitive brain with the ability to take pieces and makes wholes out of them. As human beings, we have the ability to learn both of these two primary types of thinking: concrete and abstract. Concrete thinking deals with particulars in their material form. Abstract thinking deals with particulars in general and theoretical terms.

The results of split-brain research are one reason it has been suggested that gender differences go beyond mere social conditioning. Women seem to be more right-brained and men more left-brained. That's why in matters involving sex and romance, men seem more likely to be interested in parts, such as breasts, legs, and penises. Women tend to be more interested in the whole picture, which might include not only sexual stimuli but also a night out with candlelight dinner. Therefore, in the battle of the sexes, women frequently have difficulty understanding why men are so focused on these silly concrete physical parts and men likewise have difficulty understanding why women might want to waste time with all this romantic candlelight stuff before getting down to the "real business."

The research on split brains represents, I believe, the most formidable advance in the field of epistemology, suggesting that we have at least two ways of knowing, and that obviously we will know things better if we use both left-brain and right-brain thinking. That's why I'm a great proponent of androgynous thinking. Being androgynous does not imply that someone is desexed. Men do not lose their masculinity and women do not

lose their femininity if they are androgynous. Rather, they display the characteristics of both sexes. Thinking, in that sense, would imply the ability to use both sides of the brain to integrate concrete and abstract realities.

In *The Friendly Snowflake,* the main character, Jenny, epitomizes someone who is androgynous. She uses these dual aspects of her thinking capabilities as she considers the relevance that the mysterious presence of a friendly snowflake has in her life. Her brother, Dennis, on the other hand, is stereotypically left-brain-oriented. He is very much hooked on analytical and concrete facts and has less taste for mystery, which makes his vision narrower.

The ancient Sumerians, I am told, had a basic rule for guiding their thinking not unlike split-brain theory. With regard to any important decisions to be made (usually about whether or not to go to war with the Babylonians), they literally had to think twice. If the first decision had been arrived at when they were drunk, it had to be reconsidered when they were sober. If, when drunk, they said, "Let's go get those Babylonians," then later, in the clear, cool light of day, it might not look like such a smart decision. Conversely, if they were cold sober when they decided that it would be strategically clever to beat up the Babylonians, they held off and said, "First let's drink some wine." Drunk, they might come to the conclusion that "there's no need to go to war with them. Hell, we love the Babylonians."

For all they lacked in modern technology, the Sumerians had the right approach. And there's no reason why we shouldn't be able to think reasonably in this day and age. Unless there is brain damage as a result of surgery or a tumor or other disease, we have these wonderful frontal lobes at our disposal. But that doesn't mean people will use them, much less use them to their fullest capacity. Indeed, brain damage isn't the only factor contributing to thinking irrationally or not at all. It is the least of the factors. Among others, there are profound ways in which society actually discourages us from using our frontal lobes, pro-

moting one-dimensional, simplistic thinking as the normal way of functioning.

SIMPLISM AND SOCIETY

Everywhere we turn, the evidence is astounding. Simplistic thinking has become so pandemic in society that it is considered normal and conventional wisdom among some segments of the population. Recent examples of this rampant simplism were evident in the comments of two North Carolina politicians. Representative Henry Aldridge of Pitt County made the simple-minded statement that women who are raped don't get pregnant because "the juices don't flow, the body functions don't work" during an attack, as if to whitewash this horrible crime of violation. U.S. Senator Jesse Helms, in arguing why he wanted to reduce federal funding for AIDS research, said that he saw no reason to provide adequate resources because the disease is brought on by the "deliberate, disgusting and revolting conduct" of those who are gay. The reality is that in addition to being sexually transmitted—among both homosexuals and heterosexuals—AIDS has been transmitted through blood transfusions, to newborn babies through mothers infected with the virus, and to health care workers who were accidentally pricked by improperly sterilized needles used on infected patients. Thus, Helms' comment smacks not only of bigotry but of simplism as well.

Various institutions of society, in their failure to teach or demonstrate how to think well, set people up for thinking simplistically. Typically, this failure is found among the most immensely influential institutions of society including, more often than not, the family, the church, and the mass media. Given that they have the greatest impact on our lives, the deceptive messages they impart to us about what's important in life cannot be taken lightly. Because they are our cultural leaders in portraying certain ways of thinking and living as truth, these in-