

ADAPTATION TO LIFE



GEORGE E. VAILLANT

WITH A NEW PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR

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George E. Vaillant

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This book is dedicated to the members of the Grant Study. Their fidelity, their difficulties, and their solutions have inspired, touched, and guided me for the past decade. My life is vastly richer for having known them.

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Adaptation to Life

Acknowledgments

The Grant Study of Adult Development was conceived in 1937 when I was three years old. I did not join the staff until 1967. In writing this book, then, I have harvested a crop that for three decades many others have planted and devotedly tended. I am deeply indebted to the foresight of William T. Grant, Earl Bond, M.D., and Arlie V. Bock, M.D., for having planned the Study. I am equally indebted to Clark W. Heath, M.D., who guided the Study for the first seventeen years of its existence, and to the many social scientists, too many to list here, who worked with him and helped him to gather its data. I am particularly thankful to Lewise W. Gregory Davies, who is the only current staff member who has been with the Study since the beginning; for almost forty years she has provided the personal warmth that cemented living men to the abstraction of a study of adult development.

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Over the decade that I have worked on the Grant Study there have been several men who have provided the intellectual climate and the institutional support needed to conceive, research, and write this book. My patrons have been Bert Boothe of the Career Investigator Grant Program of the National Institute of Mental Health and Douglas Bond and Philip Sapir of the Grant Foundation. My patient chiefs of service, Paul Myerson and then John Mack, and my institutional hosts, Dana Farnsworth, followed by Warren Wacker, have seen to it that I have had time and space in which to be curious. (In more material terms, the Grant Foundation and grants MH-10361 and MH-38798 from NIMH provided financial support.)

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The second is my wife, Caroline Officer Vaillant. Over the years she has made an invaluable contribution to this book as research associate *and intellectual critic and editor*. She has always shown an uncanny ability to ask the right questions and for years she has made time present the very best part of my life cycle.

Only the Grant Study men themselves have made a more critical contribution to the birth of this book.

Preface, 1995

Over the last twenty years, this book—which I had such fun writing—has played very differently to different audiences. To my surprise, the reviewer for the *Wall Street Journal* loved it and the reviewer for *Contemporary Psychology* did not, writing that “psychologists scientifically or professionally concerned with human development will find little in the way of evidence or insight in Vaillant’s offering.” To my immense gratification, long-term follow-up has suggested that he was quite wrong. Despite the predictions of the reviewer, the book continues to be widely cited in the scientific literature.

One major concern of many reviewers, however, and indeed of myself, was that this book reviews only the lives of an elite group of men. Do the findings of the book generalize to more diverse groups? For example, one woman wrote to me: “I am so full of feelings and thoughts I feel compelled to write you a letter. Although I found that in essence I agreed with the conclusions, and thought the book clear and interesting, I kept getting angry. The first thing that made me angry [was] the objective criteria used to classify men as best outcomes, worst outcomes, or somewhere in between. I know you apologize and explain them throughout the book, but they are pretty elitist and class bound...”

Since *Adaptation to Life* was written I have had the opportunity and privilege of studying the life courses of two contrasting groups—a cohort of very underprivileged inner-city men first studied by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck and a group of gifted women first studied by Lewis Terman and, later, by Robert Sears. The results from both groups, each of which was studied prospectively for more than half a century, have confirmed this book’s general premises. First, not only was maturity of defenses important to the mental health of all three groups, but such maturity did not appear to be the product of social class, education, or gender. The undereducated inner-city men did not seem less capable of

mature ingenious adaptation than did the Harvard graduates described in this book. And, contrary to all my expectations, the most popular defensive styles of the Harvard men were the same as those styles deployed by the gifted women and the inner-city men.

Second, the Eriksonian stages of development described in Chapter 10 apply not only to the Harvard men but also to the gifted women and the inner-city men. In short, not only mature defenses but also generativity and career consolidation are distributed more equitably within the American population than are advantages that accrue simply as a result of social class or gender bias. (These findings have been published in *Wisdom of the Ego*, Harvard University Press.)

Over the years, I have also been gratified by the fact that *Adaptation to Life*, even when it provoked the reader, also brought real pleasure. Thus, the same woman who took me to task for my biases three pages later closed her letter: "Oh well, end of my thoughts. What enormously exciting work you do. And thank you for writing the book. I haven't been so stimulated in a long time. If I take issue with a number of things, it's only because the book made me feel as if I were having a long discussion with an old friend."

Since this book was published, the Grant Study men themselves have helped me to put some of its strengths and weaknesses in perspective. One of the book's great weaknesses—and great strengths—is the degree to which it depends on the courage and generosity of the study members in granting me permission to study them without proper recompense and to publish facets of their lives even when these have been painful. For example, one man felt with understandable bitterness that he had "been exploited for research for others' aggrandizement," and he said that he felt I had watched him as "a poor specimen wiggling underneath the microscope." The wife of another man shouted at me over the telephone, "You sit back watching a man dying of alcoholism . . . and do nothing." Yet both men have continued to contribute to the Study.

Over the last twenty-five years, of course, there have been many times when the men appreciated being under the microscope. There have also been times when I and the Study have been able to make meaningful and helpful interventions in their lives. Some interventions have been direct, others indirect. For example, one Study member wrote in response to the copy of *Adaptation to Life* that I sent him:

It had a curious effect on me. Although I was not one of the sample on which the book was based, your book put me in a singularly confessional mood . . . But I will suppress most of this confessional impulse, with one exception, which has to do with the more specifically therapeutic value of your book for me . . . Reading your book led me to see a connection between the difficulty with my father and my reaction to visible success. The insight is not itself a very happy one; but somehow I feel vastly better for having reached it, and I am deeply grateful for your contribution to it. I like to think that it may give you some satisfaction to know that, even in your scientific work, you are providing direct psychiatric care.

Over the years, with his characteristic generosity toward young authors, Alan Poe, the last—and most dramatic—protagonist in the book, wrote me several letters. Let me offer excerpts from two: “When I got to the end of the section you sent, I had tears in my eyes. I *finally* made my point. Or, more properly, you made it for me with a quiet eloquence that, as a writer, I can only envy.”

Five years later in response to my continued concern that Poe’s use of alcohol was out of control and threatening both his creativity and his health, he put my concern into perspective: “Thank you for your letter of August 7th. Its great good will caused my eyes to fill. I appreciate the concern, and take it seriously . . . After getting your letter, I went back and read your report of our interview way back in 1975. In it you wrote, ‘I felt that Poe was stalked by death, suicide and skid row.’” [Next Alan Poe pointed out to me that during the five years following my gloomy prognosis, he had published three novels and created two successful off-Broadway plays.] “Now, of course,” he continued, “the prognosis of death is a pretty sure bet. I am 61 years old. Hell, I could be dead by the time you get this letter. But if I am, let it be published in Gath that—especially in the last 5 years—I sure squeezed that lemon!” A paradox.

Two years later Alan Poe died—much beloved and much mourned by a great many people. True, his death was the consequence of a senseless accident sustained in the middle of the day when he was very drunk. But when he died, he was sixty-three. His life had been full; his death had been painless; and he had sure squeezed that lemon.

Mr. Goodhart, the book's first protagonist, was also concerned with the paradoxes of studying mental health. After reading the book, he wrote to me:

Poe's remark about Goodhart's apparent lack of celebratory zest made me chuckle; I must admit that the sketch of Goodhart struck me somewhat the same way. I did share Poe's reservation about the seeming lack of connection between social values and mature adaptation. Approval of Joe McCarthy and Nixon, . . . unquestioning acceptance of the inequities of the status quo—these and like attitudes are hard for me to reconcile with emotional maturity. They seem to me more in keeping with your definition of projection. The issue is not liberalism versus conservatism, but the disparity between public and private manifestations of empathy and humaneness. . . .

I wondered if you shouldn't have put more emphasis on the contradictions, ambivalences, and ambiguities that co-exist with our dominant psychological traits. . . . Your analysis seems to suggest that the preservation of any marriage, whatever its quality, is a positive indicator. This doesn't seem to me consistent with my experience and that of some friends. My conviction, in retrospect, is that I would have shown greater emotional maturity and enhanced my personal growth if I could have brought myself to terminate my first marriage a good deal earlier than I did. The pleasure and fulfillment of my second marriage have strengthened that conviction. As I look back on it, hanging onto a troubled marriage kept me constantly in battle against feelings of guilt and lack of self-esteem, drained off energy, and interfered with my relationships with my children.

I also hope to read an equally fascinating sequel one day.

It is now 1995 and so much has changed since I first met these men at their twenty-fifth reunions. When I first got to know them, I was a thirty-three-year-old just beginning to know what I wanted to do with my life and filled with the dissociation and reaction formation of youth. They were the seasoned fathers of adolescents and at the height of their occupational powers. I was awed by their willingness to tolerate and discuss

depression, and I marveled at the breadth of their power in the real world. Now my own career has been consolidated through studying their lives. I am now a grandparent and many of them are great-grandparents. I have reinterviewed a number of them at their fiftieth reunions and have noted that perhaps some of their “power” was a product of my youthful idealization. I am far more at peace with the fact that grief is part of the human condition—to be faced, expressed, and not denied. I am working hard to understand and to put in perspective their “adaptation to aging.” As they once made me look forward to life after Harvard, they now make me look forward to life after seventy. Oh, and yes, the book that Mr. Goodhart requested is in preparation, but its publication is a few years away.

April 1995

Cast of Protagonists

Chapter 1

David Goodhart — Son of prejudiced Detroit blue-collar worker; consultant to Ford Foundation for urban affairs. Adaptive style: altruism, humor, sublimation, and suppression.

Carlton Tarrytown, M.D. — Florida ear, nose, and throat specialist; lonely; Lotus-eater; an alcoholic with a poor childhood. Adaptive style: dissociation and projection.

Chapter 4

Frederick Lion — New York magazine editor who used anger creatively. Adaptive style: sublimation.

Horace Lamb — Retired single ex-diplomat and book collector. Adaptive style: fantasy.

Casper Smythe, M.D. — University health service physician with two divorces and a not always satisfactory sexual adjustment. Adaptive style: repression and passive aggression.

George Byron, Esq. — Government AID lawyer who had an excellent marriage and a very satisfactory sexual adjustment. Adaptive style: dissociation, anticipation, suppression, and sublimation.

Chapter 6

Lieutenant Edward Keats — World War II combat pilot; subsequently an unhappily married social worker. Adaptive style: sublimation, reaction formation, and passive aggression.

Professor Dylan Bright — Pugilistic professor of poetry. Adaptive style: sublimation and dissociation.

Professor Ernest Clovis — Professor of medieval French whose wife, then his daughter, became chronically ill. Adaptive style: sublimation and suppression.

Chapter 7

Mayor Timothy Jefferson—Long Island politician whose daughter had cystic fibrosis, and who struggled to master anger. Adaptive style: suppression, anticipation, and altruism.

Dr. Jacob Hyde—A pharmacologist with a hypochondriacal mother; he beat swords into plowshares. Adaptive style: reaction formation and altruism.

William Forsythe—State Department troubleshooter. Adaptive style: anticipation.

Richard Lucky—The prototype of a happy childhood and a happy marriage; ran two corporations during the week and six miles on the weekend. Adaptive style: suppression.

Eben Frost, Esq.—Vermont farmboy turned successful corporate lawyer. Adaptive style: suppression.

Chapter 8

Richard Lucky—Introduced in Chapter 7.

Richard Stover—Basketball captain who for years never had a date but who became a warm husband and father. Adaptive style: repression.

Dean Henry Clay Penny—Parsimonious, superstitious college dean. Adaptive style: intellectualization.

Samuel Lovelace—Lonely, gentle, loyal liberal with an unhappy marriage and few social supports. Adaptive style: intellectualization.

Russell Lowell, Esq.—Boston lawyer and Stoic. Adaptive style: intellectualization and suppression.

Vice-President Richard Fearing—Computer magnate with multiple fears as a child and conversion symptoms as an adult. Adaptive style: displacement.

Judge Conrad Spratt—Chicago probate judge who grew up in Manchuria and suffered osteomyelitis. Adaptive style: reaction formation.

George Byron, Esq.—Introduced in Chapter 4.

Carlton Tarrytown, M.D.—Introduced in Chapter 1.

Chapter 9

Harry Hughes—Trade book editor who as a child learned initiative could be dangerous, and who experienced a prolonged adolescence. Adaptive style: projection and reaction formation.

Francis Oswald—Virtuous as a marine, too strict as a father, and gallant as

- a defender of the Florida Everglades. He suffered a serious depression. Adaptive style: reaction formation, projection, and delusional projection.
- Harvey Newton*—Lonely but famous physicist who built an institute to solve the riddles of the universe. Adaptive style: fantasy.
- William Mitty*—Lonely astronomer who joined the Oxford movement as a young man. Adaptive style: fantasy.
- Robert Hood*—Promiscuous alcoholic who almost became a child batterer and instead became a celibate student of T.M. Adaptive style: projection and acting out.
- John Hart*—Brilliant mathematician who developed heart pains after his father died of a coronary thrombosis. Adaptive style: hypochondriasis.
- Lieutenant Edward Keats*—Introduced in Chapter 6.
- Thomas Sawyer*—Rockefeller campaign aide who first was bullied by his mother and then by his wife. Adaptive style: passive aggression and displacement.

Chapter 10

- Robert Jordan*—A college conservative who became a fifty-year-old liberal.
- Adam Carson, M.D.*—Harvard physician who turned from research to clinical practice and illustrated the stages of the adult life cycle.
- Oliver Kane*—Orphaned corporate executive with mature ego defenses and a barren personal life. Adaptive style: intellectualization, suppression, and humor.
- Mayor Jefferson*—Introduced in Chapter 7.
- Harry Hughes*—Introduced in Chapter 9.

Chapter 11

- Robert Brooke*—A sensitive bombardier who cured a wartime neurosis through poetry. Adaptive style: evolution from repression and dissociation to sublimation.
- James O'Neill, Ph.D.*—Boston economist and statistician with happy childhood; for years was diagnosed as an "inadequate personality" due to chronic alcoholism, then recovered. Adaptive style: evolution from reaction formation and intellectualization to passive aggression and acting out, which in turn evolved into sublimation and altruism.
- Francis DeMille*—Hartford advertising man who when young was dependent on his mother and oblivious to women, but who matured

into a competent husband and father. Adaptive style: evolution from repression and dissociation to sublimation.

Herman Crabbe, Ph.D. — An industrial chemist who matured through a fortunate marriage, from an eccentric scientist, overwhelmed by a mentally ill mother, into an effective leader of a research team. Adaptive style: evolution from projection and fantasy to displacement.

Godfrey Minot Camille, M.D. — A dependent, hypochondriacal, and suicidal medical student who through prolonged medical and psychiatric treatment became an independent and giving physician and father. Adaptive style: evolution from hypochondriasis through displacement and reaction formation into altruism.

Chapter 12

Steven Kowalski — Ebullient businessman who made a success of life and a virtue of aggression. Adaptive style: suppression.

Leslie Angst — Harried banker who drank too much, worried about his chronic failure, and did not enjoy his marriage. Adaptive style: displacement.

Chapter 13

Samuel Lovelace — Introduced in Chapter 8.

William Lucky — Introduced in Chapter 8.

Oliver Kane — Introduced in Chapter 10.

Chapter 14

Francis Oswald — Introduced in Chapter 9.

Chapter 15

William Forsythe — Introduced in Chapter 7.

Adam Carson, M.D. — Introduced in Chapter 10.

Chapter 16

Alan Poe — San Francisco poet, thoughtful conscientious objector and empathic iconoclast who illustrated that mental health is not simple. Adaptive style: sublimation.

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