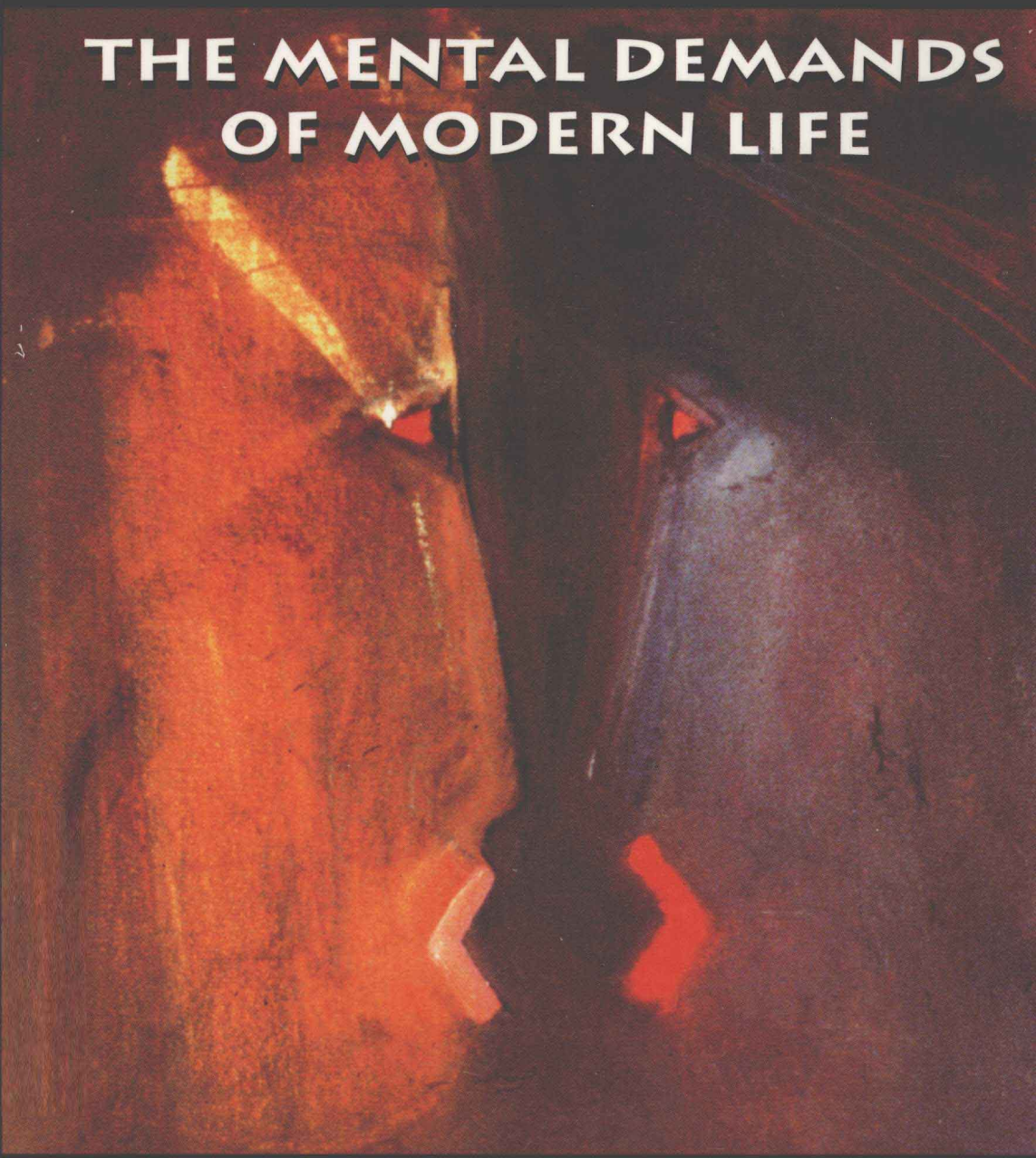
IN OVER OUR HEADS

THE MENTAL DEMANDS OF MODERN LIFE



ROBERT KEGAN

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The Mental Demands of Modern Life

Robert Kegan

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For Barbara, Lucia, and Joshua
the home team
with love

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Prologue

As I imagine readers beginning this book, I am reminded of a story about Jascha Heifetz on tour. Apparently he had been scheduled to perform in a town where there had been a major snowstorm, and when he came on stage he looked out onto an audience of exactly eight people. "Well, this is kind of silly," Heifetz was reported to have said. "Why don't you all just come back to my hotel room with me and we'll have a drink?" "Oh, no," called out someone in a very disappointed voice. "I've come hundreds of miles just to hear you. C'mon, Jascha, sing *something!*"

Although I am not a singer or a violinist, I always feel something of this uncertainty about just what people might be expecting in the opening moments of a sustained encounter with ideas. For that reason, I would like to use this prologue to welcome readers into the long story that is this book, to prepare them to join me in it, and to lay in some supplies for our journey. For, having written all of three books in twenty years, I have learned that although the writer is the one who starts the book, the reader is the one who finishes it. I won't know how this one is going to come out until I learn what readers make of it.

In my twenties I wrote a book about a collection of modern novels that intrigued me.[1] I was thrilled that someone wanted to publish it and took pride in its appearance. Its completion was the nearest I could come to making something for others' pleasure with my own hands. As it turned out, my feeling that I had completed it was righter than I knew. I never heard a word from a single person who had read the book, which quickly went out of print, and I came to feel that I had the distinction of being the only person to have read it. I started it and I ended it.

In my thirties I wrote *The Evolving Self*,[2] proposing a view of human being as meaning-making and exploring the inner experience and outer

contours of our transformations in consciousness throughout the lifespan. Although the book was published over a decade ago, it is still rare for two weeks to go by without someone putting pen to paper to write me about it. Some years ago, when I proudly told my father that it was being translated into German and Korean, he said, "That's great! Now when is it going to be translated into *English?*" And in truth, these fortnightly letters from readers occasionally have a similar theme:

> Dear Dr. Kegan,
> We had to read your book in our psychology class. I can't believe the publishers let the thing out in this condition. No one in our class understands what you are saying. Not even our teacher, and he assigned it! Who are you trying to impress with all those big words? I got so mad reading your book I wanted to come to Boston and break your teeth.
> Sincerely,
> [writer's name]

I appreciated the "sincerely."

But most of the letters have not been of this sort. And what is most satisfying about them is their ongoing invention in the context the book creates. Far from swallowing whole what the book offers up, these readers clearly found a way to stay in relation to it and were letting me in on their own continuing experience with it. This ongoing remaking of the book both inspired me and left me feeling completely uninterested in writing another book unless I had the same kind of opportunity to offer.

So here I am again, hoping to have made something that will be a context for readers' ongoing invention. It is meaning-making and the evolution of consciousness that preoccupies me, but this time as these relate to the culture's claims on our minds. This book comes to what I believe are important discoveries and offers a new way of seeing ourselves, this time in relation to the demands of our environment. It neither expects its arguments to be swallowed whole nor hopes that they will be. I have written it in the same strange two-toned voice that one moment draws its authority from analytic criteria, the next from aesthetic ones. I respect both these sources and frankly suspect all writing that is all one or the other. In either mode, I've tried my best to write more accessibly. I am in my forties now and I want to keep my teeth.

As these thoughts would suggest, my core professional identity is that of teacher. Although this book draws on my experiences as a researcher, a theorist, a therapist, a director of an institute on lifelong education,

and a consultant to work life and professional development, the binding theme is teaching. Writing creates a context for learning, and although this book is about consciousness and culture, perhaps the quickest way to grasp its passion is through the educational metaphors of "curriculum" and "school."

After twenty-five years of teaching, I realize what I have come to see as its greatest reward: it allows me to live much of my life in a state of sympathetic friendliness. I suppose the impulse to throw a sympathetic arm around the burdened shoulders of a hard-working neighbor will be regarded as a generous one. And I suppose the gradual training of one's sympathies in the effective friendliness that marks good teaching will be seen as a valuable resource. But I doubt that anyone benefits quite as much as teachers themselves. What animates this book is my impulse to throw a sympathetic arm of disciplined friendliness across the burdened shoulders of contemporary culture. If the reader is willing to look at contemporary culture as a kind of "school" and the complex set of tasks and expectations placed upon us in modern life as the "curriculum" of that school, then this book is really a generalized form of the friendly sympathy the teacher extends to the student feeling the discouragement, fear, anger, helplessness, confusion, or dissociation that can go along with the experience of not succeeding in one's studies.

We extend a generalized form of this friendly sympathy to the young all the time in real schools, school systems, national educational associations, and even graduate schools of education when we turn our attention to the curriculum itself and ask: What is it, really, that we are asking of our students here? Are these expectations sensible, fair, or appropriate? What capacities is this curriculum assuming and are these assumptions warranted? One of the great benefits of research programs that describe the evolving complexity of the child's mind is that they have led school people to consider whether curricula for a given age are appropriate to the child's expected mental capacities. Everything from reading readiness to when to teach the Constitution or the concept of number has been informed by this knowledge. As researchers have extended this work to the study of how children's mental capacities enable and constrain their social and emotional understanding, school people have in turn considered the appropriateness of curricula aimed at broader aspects of a child's life. When should a Catholic child make her first confession? Well, when can she really understand what "right" and "wrong" mean so that ideas about doing better and resisting temptation

can make any sense? Is it appropriate for an exasperated preschool teacher to expect her charges to think about how she feels when they ask her to do six things at once? Well, not if she actually expects them to understand what she means and alter their behavior accordingly.

Such considerations of our expectations, the mental demands we make of our children, have been extended beyond the school to the wider culture itself. Perhaps the best example is our general concern about whether we are putting too much pressure on our children and giving them responsibilities before they are ready for them. These include the responsibility to fend for themselves after school because their parents are working, to care for or make decisions about even younger siblings, to work hard and get ahead in school lest they fall behind in the race for academic success in which they are unwittingly or unwillingly entered. The specter that presents itself is of childhood lost, or as David Elkind puts it, "a hurried childhood."[3] It feels somehow unnatural—a kind of violation of nature—not to give childhood its due, its proper freedom from too much responsibility and the need for self-protection or self-promotion.

This sharp sense of childhood's due comes from the widespread view of childhood as an era distinct from adulthood. However natural and obvious it may seem to us, this view is actually a relatively recent one, as Philippe Ariès has taught us.[4] Only a few centuries ago, as demonstrated in cultural creations as diverse as oil paintings depicting children as miniature adults and labor practices permitting ten-year-olds in factories, children seemed not to be granted so distinct a status. What, after all, is the true nature of the wrong we suspect we might be doing to children by hurrying them? We are responsive to an alarm about the hurried child because, whether we know it or not, we already believe that the mind of a child is different from the mind of an adult. We can feel an immediate sympathy, a wish to protect, or a feeling of outrage in response to the specter of little people being asked or expected to handle tasks beyond their capacities. "That's just too much to ask!" something inside us says. We don't know which to feel worse about, the children who collapse under the pressure or the ones who bravely carry on, feeling all the while overwhelmed, lonely, and confused in ways they cannot themselves decry or understand. Yet it does not occur to us to write books about how these children might better cope with the stress of their lives. Instead we write, as Elkind did, books that remind us that children are only children. They have their limits. There are depths

beyond which they cannot go. Take them there and they will be in over their heads. Leave them there and even the most resilient of them will only be able to tread water in perilous exhaustion.

But if in the last few hundred years we have succeeded in recognizing a qualitative distinction between the mind of the child and the mind of the adult, it may still remain for us to discover that adulthood itself is not an end state but a vast evolutionary expanse encompassing a variety of capacities of mind. And if we have been able to extend a disciplined sympathy to children, evoked by our analytic exploration of their capacity to meet the challenges of the various curricula we create for them, it remains for us to extend the same disciplined sympathy to adult experience. *It remains for us to look at the curriculum of modern life in relation to the capacities of the adult mind.* That is what this book is about.

Most adults become partners in an intimate relationship they seek to sustain over many years. Most adults parent children. Most adults take up paid employment. Many adults pursue their own expansion through schooling or psychotherapy. All adults in contemporary America share citizenship with people whose skin color, gender, age, social position, sexual orientation, and physical capacity differ from their own. These activities present us with a vast variety of expectations, prescriptions, claims, and demands. Even the ever-accelerating flow of information to our eyes and to our ears—information competing for our attention, our allegiance, and our money—makes a claim on us to *do* something with it, and, even before that, to *decide* about it, since there is no possible way we can do even a fraction of what we are asked.

These expectations are chronicled, and even shaped, in the growing collection of cultural documents academics call (with no irony) "literatures": "the marriage literature," "the management literature," "the adult education literature," and the like. After reading widely in these literatures I have come to two conclusions: First, the expectations upon us that run throughout these literatures demand something more than mere behavior, the acquisition of specific skills, or the mastery of particular knowledge. They make demands on our minds, on *how* we know, on the complexity of our consciousness. The "information highway" we plan for the next century, for example, may geometrically increase the amount of information, the ways it can be sent, and the number of its recipients. But our experience on this highway may be one of exhaustion (a new kind of "rat race" or "gridlock") rather than admiration for the ease and speed of a new kind of transport if we are unable to assert

our own authority over the information. No additional amount of information coming into our minds will enable us to assume this authority; only a qualitative change in the complexity of our minds will.

Second, for the most part, these literatures do not talk to each other, take no account of each other, have nothing to do with each other. People who write, teach, and shape the discourse about management apparently do not read the literature about intimacy. The people who create the leadership literature do not read the parenting literature. All these people are trained in different professions, each with distinct identities, modes of analysis, heroes and heroines, and ways of framing the questions that need answering. Even if each of these professions is itself doing a good job, there is no place to look to consider what is being asked of the adult as a whole. An adult is not only a worker, only a spouse, only a parent. An adult may be all of these things. The result—if we continue the metaphor of the culture as school—is that we may have a school in which each of the departments is passionately engaged in its demands upon its students, but no one is considering the students' overall experience, their actual course of study and the meaning for them of the curriculum as a whole.

This book takes the first observation as the key to the second. It submits the expectations of a variety of literatures on adult life to a common analysis of the demands they make upon adult minds. My intention is to make the experience of contemporary adulthood more coherent than we have thought possible by showing that the demands upon us are more cohesive than we have realized. While each of our professions shares the common goal of enhancing the individual and collective life of real adults, what we need is a new way of seeing in order to end the compromised pursuit of this goal by disconnected, noncommunicating sources of authority and exhortation.

In order for us to look at what it is we are asking of our minds in this new way, we need an analytic tool. We need a way of discerning the mental complexity inherent in social expectations. We need a way of looking at human development that considers not only people's changing agendas but their changing capacities. I am not assuming that readers of this book will have read *The Evolving Self*, but those who have will see that I am taking the theory first presented there—a philosophy-laden theory, a theory of the psychological evolution of meaning-systems or ways of knowing, in short, a theory of the development of consciousness—and using it as an analytic tool to examine contempo-

rary culture. It will enable us to consider the fit, or lack of fit, between the demands our cultural curriculum makes on our consciousness on the one hand, and our mental capacities as "students" in this ongoing school on the other.

The theory has matured in the ten years since *The Evolving Self.* Readers, graduate students in my classes at Harvard and the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology, dissertation writers and researchers at these and other schools throughout the world, and a small group of precious friends and collaborative colleagues over the years are responsible for these changes. The development of a reliable instrument for studying these structures of mind (the "Subject-Object Interview"), the production of a research manual explaining how to use the instrument and analyze its data,[5] the empirical work the instrument has enabled, including the many studies of adult development I refer to in this book, have also contributed to its maturity.

The theory's central premises and distinctions remain unchanged, but they are clearer and better supported. The principles of mental organization according to which emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal experiencing is constellated are much more thoroughly spelled out. The similarities in form between our thinking and feeling, between our relationship to parts of ourselves and our relationship to others, are explicated here rather than merely claimed. What the theory addresses and what it does not have become clearer. What the theory addresses: the forms of meaning-regulation, the *trans*formation of consciousness, the internal experience of these processes, the role of the environment in this activity, are less confused with what it does not: personality types, the preoccupying concerns or central motivations of a given order of consciousness, personality "style" or "voice."

Those familiar with the theory will see that I have not shied away from the most familiar challenges to constructive-developmental psychology but have turned directly toward them. In a day when we are becoming increasingly aware of issues of diversity and the way systems of knowledge are inevitably susceptible to being used as a means to gain advantage or maintain power, it may seem anachronistic to be speaking of "adults," "evolution," "the culture," or "a theory." Which adults do I mean? Whose conception of evolution? In what sense do white people and people of color, gay people and straight people, men and women share a culture? A theory that privileges whom and valorizes what? Is the theory a Western theory? Isn't it hierarchical? Does it propose a

lockstep conception of growth? Does it assume that people are consistent in their use of a single meaning system across all domains and circumstances of experience? Isn't a theory of structures passé in a "poststructuralist" age? These questions are directly and enthusiastically addressed here. This book reflects the influence over the last ten years of several intellectual currents, especially the study of gender differences, the diversity movement, and the postmodern critique of knowledge creation. It also reflects my hope that my line of thinking may, in turn, be of use to the fuller flow of each of these intellectual currents.

To those readers for whom this is a first meeting, I extend welcome to an intellectual discipline I have come to think of as "the psychology of admiration." The root of admiration is *wonder*, as the Latin (*mirar*, to wonder) suggests. And "wonder" is as two-sided, as dialectical, as ambisexual as human beings themselves. "Wonder" is "wondering *at*" and "wondering *about*." "Wondering at" is watching and reverencing; "wondering about" is asking and reckoning. "Wondering at" is Eastern, receptive, contemplation as an end in itself; "wondering about" is Western, acting upon, a means to an end. "Wondering at" is aesthetic, the inspiration of the humanities, *anima*, blessed by a feminine god; "wondering about" is analytic, the inspiration of the sciences, *animus*, blessed by a masculine god. The mode of attending to our lives that we are about to enter in these pages does not champion or choose one of these ways over the other. It does not favor the analytic or the aesthetic. It does not regard science as evil or as a savior. It does not castigate or canonize the stirrings of the human heart. It is dedicated instead to drawing deeply from both of these kinds of wisdom. If we may continue to make use of the prevailing metaphor of *school*, we might consider that the lifeblood of wholesome teaching consists in just this two-sided way of admiring. An educating intention that is too exclusively wondering about inspires a measuring mentality in which teaching standards, national examinations, and a canonical approach to curriculum predominate. But a way of teaching that is imbalanced toward *wondering at* replaces awe with zeal, and is reminiscent of the passion of Miss Jean Brodie celebrating the courage of her students—which courage is then as easily offered up to the cause of the Loyalists as to that of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War regardless of their respective allegiances to fascism and democracy.

If as a culture we have grown disenchanted with the capacity of sci-

ence to save us from ourselves, we might do well to consider that science will serve us well if we will only treat it as a servant and be its conscientious master. If we are currently charmed by calls to recover our humanism, sounded in various intellectual quarters championing our "courage" and our capacity for "caring," we might do well to remember that courage and caring, by themselves, can be as life-stealing as life-giving, that every tyrant and tyrannical movement in human history draws energy not from fear alone but from the courage and caring of its adherents.

The social sciences in contemporary culture are at a crossroads. Will they continue to be essentially a puny force, founded on no civilization of their own, borrowing from, and buffeted by the powerful civilizations of science and the humanities? Will the social sciences continue to be reminiscent of Freud's hapless infantile ego, appearing to be a player in personality but in reality swamped by the contending forces of conscience and desire? Or will the social sciences grow up and, like the mature conception of the ego, become capable of integrating the contending powers and thereby creating a third original force that can really *be* a player in human personality or contemporary culture? Such an integration in psychology would realize the fuller promise of the word itself—*psyche* and *logos*, spirit and reckoning.

In this book, I bring the psychology of admiration to the study of the relationship between two fascinating phenomena, one psychological, and one cultural. The psychological phenomenon is the evolution of consciousness, the personal unfolding of ways of organizing experience that are not simply replaced as we grow but subsumed into more complex systems of mind. In spite of the fact that the developmental trajectories of Freud and Piaget, which constitute the twin towers in the field, reach their conclusions in adolescence, most of this book is devoted to transformations of consciousness after adolescence. The cultural phenomenon is the "hidden curriculum," the idea that to the list of artifacts and arrangements a culture creates and the social sciences study we should add the claims or demands the culture makes on the minds of its constituents.

In studying the relationship between these phenomena—the fit or lack of fit between what the culture demands of our minds and our mental capacity to meet these demands—the book hopes to be a support to readers as students in this ongoing "school." But it also hopes to be a caution to readers as fellow makers of the school. All adults are not only

expected of, but themselves expectors of, if only in their private and personal relations with other adults. But readers of this book almost certainly are, or will be, not only personally but professionally involved in shaping and conveying the culture's curriculum. For those of us who have another in our employ, who manage, lead, supervise, or evaluate others; who teach, advise, counsel, do therapy with, or consult to others; who publicly seek to exhort, inform, inspire, or move others to some action—we are all in the business, knowingly or unknowingly, of making mental demands. I hope to increase our sensitivity to the experience of those who are on the receiving end of this work.

I begin by considering the fit between our culture's mental demands on adolescents and their capacity to meet these demands (Part One). In essence, I argue that we unknowingly expect the contemporary teenager to develop the order of consciousness required to participate in a Traditional world. In the center of the book (Parts Two and Three) I explore the mental demands the hidden curriculum makes on adults in their private and public lives. These chapters look at parenting, partnering, work, living with diversity, adult learning, and psychotherapy. What does the literature of expertise tell us we need to do to succeed in these activities, and what implicit demands are these expectations really making on our minds? I argue that there is a remarkable commonality to the complexity of mind being called for across these noncommunicating disciplines, and that together these demands create the consciousness threshold of Modernity. In the last part of the book (Part Four), I explore the mental demands implicit in the so-called Postmodern prescriptions for adult living, a leading edge in the various literatures. I argue that these expectations constitute a qualitatively even more complex order of consciousness and thus require an even greater caution on the part of those who would make these demands of others. Although I have tried to be clear and accessible, more than one prepublication reader has suggested that the book itself gradually becomes more complex as the curriculum it explores becomes more complex.

It is my hope that all those who are interested in the individual, the culture, or the historical evolution of cultural mentality will find room for reflection. The book derives its energy from its three discoveries, or more accurately, from a single discovery made in three different ways. The discovery of the mismatch for at least some portion of our lives between the complexity of the culture's "curriculum" and our capacity