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“  
*For life-style  
migrants, the  
choice made of  
where to live is  
consciously,  
intentionally also  
one about  
how to live.*”

## FROM PI TO PIE

Moral Narratives of Noneconomic  
Migration and Starting Over in  
the Postindustrial Midwest

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*Research introduced here examines the impact of social and structural transitions during the past three decades on middle-class working families in the United States. Through the telling narrative of an especially iconic case of urban-to-rural migration and career change, this article explores the meaning of relocation away from metropolitan areas and corporate careers to growing ex-urban, small-town communities. The author interprets this life-style migration as a manner of personally negotiating tension between experience of material demands in pursuit of a livelihood within the flexible New Economy and prevailing cultural conventions for the good life that shape the moral narratives that define individual character. Drawing on two years of ethnographic research involving interview and observation of recent migrants to Northern Michigan, this article contributes to our understanding of noneconomic migration and its part in the changing moral meanings of work in postindustrial America.*

**Keywords:** *urban-to-rural migration; work and family studies; narrative analysis; liminality; moral theory; self-hood*

“**T**he old American dream was to buy a house . . . or is it a dream of having a job, a career, and all [the] things you receive because of that?” Sitting across his kitchen table, I could see that this was something Alan was still working on. “If the definition of the American dream is having a career, a job, a ‘future’ . . . once I got my MBA, I started moving up the ranks . . . and then [that] became the dream. This was all coming from outside of me . . . ‘This is the direction you should go’ and ‘I want to move forward in the American dream.’” As with other life-style migrants, Alan could point to a time when he crested a personal watershed: “You start sensing that there’s something wrong. You start realizing all the work you’ve done . . . and what’s it getting you? At some point it gets stupid and you feel it: the ax can come after me and then I won’t have anything.” And then with certainty, “Nowadays, you’ve got to put together your own life.”

Ethnographic studies on work and family in the United States by scholars including Katherine Newman (1988, 1993), Barbara Ehrenreich (1989), Kathryn Dudley (1994), and Arlie Hochschild

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(1997) have helped us understand the means by which a rift, or “structural lag” (Moen 2001) provides the dynamic tension that can lead to a gradual reworking of the meanings and roles of work and family in shaping personal identity.<sup>1</sup> This rift or lag has opened between middle-class expectations preserved in the prevailing notion of an American dream that promises upward mobility in exchange for hard work, on the one hand, and the present economic reality and uncertainties of restructuring and deindustrialization, on the other. This article examines the narrative accounts of middle-class migrants who relocate to a non-metropolitan area in their attempt to “start over” in a new place. It considers how their accounts are part of a larger moral story and ongoing discourse of what constitutes a meaningful, fulfilling and purposeful life at a time in the United States when basic social categories and cultural meanings shift in the wake of global economic restructuring. Building on a wide range of studies of noneconomic migration at the macro and micro levels, this article addresses the relative lack of more ethnographic perspectives. Particularly absent are individual-level examinations through narrative analysis.

Focusing on the narratives of recent in-migrants to the northwestern Lower Peninsula of Michigan, we see the act of relocation may be taken as a strategy for negotiating tension between personal experience of material demands in pursuit of a livelihood within a restructured economy that stresses “flexibility,” on the one hand, and prevailing cultural conventions for the good family life as a basis for defining individual character, on the other. The act of relocation becomes an attempt to reconcile obligations and expectations between material and moral domains. While drawing on recent work/family studies throughout, the article begins with a review of relevant literature on noneconomic migration and moral theory. By applying a personal narrative approach to the collected stories of relocation and starting over from an ethnographic study of “life-style migration,” a useful intersection between these literatures is suggested. While guided by extended participant observation of several cases and situated against the broad backdrop of interview data from the larger sample of study participants, the article highlights the particularly iconic case of Diane and Mark as an extended example of the application of narrative analysis. For middle-class individuals and families who choose relocation away from stressful careers, metropolitan sprawl and associated life-styles as a way of redefining themselves through deliberate reordering of work, family,

and personal priorities, a narrative approach informed by moral theory allows access to individual-level frameworks that underlie sense of self and thus the personal context within which migration decisions are made.

### **PLACING LIFE-STYLE MIGRATION: NONECONOMIC MIGRATION AND MORAL NARRATIVE**

#### **TURNAROUND MIGRATION**

Looking at 1960s demographic data for the Midwest, James Williams (1981) noticed evidence for precursors of a widespread, post-1970 shift in the prevailing pattern of U.S. internal migration from rural to metropolitan counties. Two nonmetropolitan areas unexpectedly emerged as pockets of in-migration induced growth, including the area where I did fieldwork from 2000 to 2002. Examining three decades of research on urban-to-rural migration, demographers Kenneth Johnson and Calvin Beale (1998) conclude that unanticipated growth in some of Michigan's rural areas was an early sign of a rural-urban "turnaround" subsequently documented in many parts of the United States (e.g., McCarthy and Morrison 1978). In an effort to understand factors creating areas of significant but focused growth in the Midwest despite a pronounced lack of economic opportunity relative to other areas of the country, important early studies of urban-to-rural migration were conducted there (e.g., Borchert, Anding, and Gildemeister 1964; Fuguitt and Beale 1978). By the end of the 1970s, however, most migration research in the United States had turned to rural areas of the West and Southwest census regions that began showing much higher rates of in-migration growth (see Biggar 1979). This project returns to an area of the Midwest that, despite limited national attraction, continues to draw in-migrants from within the region leading to local growth rates during the past two decades on the order of 64 percent (Johnson 1999).

Recognizing important demographic and economic changes in the post-World War II period (e.g., the growth of early paid retirement, longer life expectancies, increased mobility due to transportation and communication improvements, and an increasingly service-based economic order), geographer Edward Ullman (1954) suggested that

*amenities* (e.g., natural forms such as climate and geography as well as the charm of small towns and availability of recreational opportunities) instead of what he described as “narrowly defined economic advantages” would generate population growth in certain parts of the country despite relative economic isolation. Supporting this projection, recent research by David McGranahan (1999; McGranahan and Sullivan 2005) finds that rather than urban proximity, population density, or economic type, county population and employment change in the United States since the early 1970s is more closely related to identifiable natural amenities such as varied topography and proximity to surface water such as ponds, lakes, and shorelines.<sup>2</sup>

Research on the emergent urban-to-rural migration phenomenon in the late 1960s to 1970s challenged predominant migration models reliant on economic explanations where relocation behavior was understood as driven by a desire to maximize individual earning potential (cf. Jobes, Stinner, and Wardwell 1992). In work that helped define early understandings of urban to rural migration, Calvin Beale (1975) called this emergent trend a rural demographic “revival.” The term *noneconomic* emerged as a way to describe a migration trend in which a significant number of Americans in their productive working years chose relocation to rural areas well outside centers of business and recognized forms of economic opportunity. *Noneconomic migration* as a term was meant to distinguish the behavior of many urban-to-rural migrants from the expected pattern of voluntary population movement where economic opportunity should be the primary motivating force for presumed rational actors (cf. Williams and Sofranko 1979; Berry 1976).

## MORAL NARRATIVE

Using aggregate, census-type data and conducted from a wide array of disciplinary approaches from demography, rural sociology, and geography to economics and planning, studies of internal migration in the United States over the past thirty years have focused on providing macro-level explanations of the causes and consequences of migration patterns (see, e.g., Jobes, Stinner, and Wardwell 1992; Frey and Johnson 1998; Pandit and Withers 1999). Working from secondary data sources, this systems-level research provides an important context within which to embed more detailed local- and individual-level analyses. A limited number of scholars from a number of these disciplines,

together with others from fields such as psychology and anthropology, have taken a micro-level approach to explore processes of migration decision making and examine an array of economic and noneconomic issues that weigh on those decisions (see, e.g., Beyers and Nelson 2000; De Jong and Fawcett 1981; Jobes 2000). At this level, discussions have typically focused on consideration of individual motivation and in different ways attempt to place an individual's or a family's choice behavior within a field of constraining and enabling factors from personal to contextual. These include the availability and quality of information about destinations, the extent and nature of social networks, personal characteristics such as the ability to accept risk, and the social, economic, and demographic characteristics of the household.

While joining other qualitative micro-level inquires, the ethnographic approach taken in this article does not provide another model of decision making. Rather, my intent is to offer insight into how decisions in noneconomic migration are framed and understood by migrants as well as how this frame serves in shaping narrative structures that inform identity and selfhood through a life story. Although narrative analysis is becoming a basic part of the methodological toolkit in ethnographic work (see, e.g., Jackson 1996; Ochs and Capps 1996), the approach has yet to be systematically applied to understanding migration behavior in the United States.<sup>3</sup> A geographer, John Watkins (1999; cf. Halfacree and Boyle 1993), has made a preliminary attempt and suggested how a personal narrative approach might inject a much needed dynamic into examinations of the life course and its influence in mobility behavior. Embedding detailed ethnographic work at the level of the individual within broad macro-level trends of economic restructuring and patterns of migration, I apply narrative analysis to stories of relocation told by life-style migrants.

This article attempts to address the relative absence of narrative approaches within the literature on migration while also suggesting, in particular, how moral theory might inform our understanding of relocation narratives in noneconomic migration. Inspired by themes emergent from stories gathered early in the project, I began infusing my analysis with moral theory and related understandings of self and personhood. I characterize the stories life-style migrants told of relocation and renewal as *moral narratives of self*. Their stories hinged on personal understandings and interpretations of important choices framed in moral terms. These morally oriented narrative accounts provided

them with a framework for evaluating relocation decisions retrospectively as well as present experience and events within an ongoing process of self-interpretation and identity formation.

While my approach to the moral relates to the work of Bellah et al. (1996), Wuthnow (1996), and Wolfe (1998)—all of whom contribute to work/family studies—my understanding is closest to that of humanist philosopher Charles Taylor (1989). Taylor's interpretation of the moral realm encompasses not only questions about individual obligations and relationships with others but also visions of *the good*. Here "the good" entails questions of what gives meaning, fulfillment, and a sense of dignity and self-respect to a life. In this understanding, identity and the moral are deeply intertwined in the unfolding narrative account of a person's life as a kind of "quest" to find a sense to that life (MacIntyre 1984; cf. Sennett 1998; Taylor 1997). This is accomplished by finding a personally meaningful *orientation* to the good as a means of measuring the worth of one's life. In this way, moral theory and narrative approaches are closely allied. According to Taylor (1989), self-identity is defined "by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which [people] can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what [they] endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which [they are] capable of taking a stand" (p. 22). To lack a coherent, unifying moral narrative of self is to be without a frame, horizon, or basic orientation through which things take on stable significance and with which a person can weigh possibilities as good or bad, meaningful or superfluous.

The choice of "life-style" for my expression *life-style migrant* is partly inspired by Taylor's moral understanding and sense of the plurality of possible interpretations of the good that confront the modern person. It is meant to emphasize the growing importance of consumption behavior relative to production activities in American lives. Work by Dean MacCannell (1999) suggests that as a term, "life-style" should be understood as "combinations of work and leisure . . . replacing 'occupation' as the basis of social relationship formation, social status and social action" (p. 6). As MacCannell reasons, the case of life-style migrants may be a sign that the "affirmation of basic social values is departing the world of work and seeking *refuge* in the realm of leisure" (p. 6, emphasis added), that is, seeking refuge in areas where the individual is thought to have greater discretion (cf. Putnam 2000; Weiss



1999; Zukin 1991). On a kind of personal quest, life-style migrants seek places of refuge that they can call home and that they believe will resonate with idealized visions of self—what I will refer to in this article as the “potential self.” Life-style migration concerns individuals and families who choose relocation as a way of redefining themselves in the reordering of work, family, and personal priorities as they seek a kind of personal moral reorientation to questions of the good.

### RESEARCH SETTING, METHOD, AND DATA

This research was conducted over two years of fieldwork in several communities within four largely rural counties surrounding Michigan's Grand Traverse Bay within 20 miles of Traverse City (population approximately 16,000). This area is approximately 250 miles northwest of the city of Detroit and 150 miles from the nearest metropolitan statistical area at Grand Rapids directly to the south. While for nearly a century the region has attracted people looking for recreative rest during time spent on vacations and in visits to numerous summer cottages from ramshackle cabins to grand manors, like many rural places around the country once only seasonally attractive, it now finds itself a destination for those seeking more permanent, year-round refuge (see, e.g., Bonner 1997; Jobes 2000; Murdoch and Day 1998; Pindell 1995).

Foundational data for this article were gathered through in-depth, open-ended interviews with in-migrants to these communities who relocated over the past twenty years. Ethnographic interviews emphasizing personal background, reasons for leaving a job and relocating, the process of relocation decision making, and the means of negotiating individual identity after the move were conducted with a total of 128 individuals. These lengthy, typically free-form conversations, allowed individuals to present detailed narrative constructions, often in extended monologues with minimal interruption. A number of these interviews led to more thorough study of particular cases. This involved extended follow-up conversations together with participant observation in everyday work and family life where I spent time in the workplaces and homes of this core group of participants. While a larger sample allowed me to consider a range of personal backgrounds and relocation experiences, I maintained frequent contact with 4 individuals and 8 families who relocated within the previous five years. Partici-

pants were found largely through snowball sampling. Initial interviews were scheduled with individuals responding either to fliers posted at local businesses such as grocery stores, theaters, bookstores, and restaurants or to local newspaper, television, and radio reports on the project. These persons then helped to identify potential participants, many of whom joined the study to form the overall sample assembled largely through word of mouth and the loose social networks that emerged among newcomers.

Reflecting demographics of in-migrants to the area, study participants were white and middle class. Participants were largely professionals including managers, accountants, lawyers, social workers, and those in health care–related fields. Almost half found or made work after relocation in a field they considered a *significant* departure from their record of employment or field of study. Nearly 60 percent saw at least an initial drop in income from prereslocation levels ranging from as little as 5 to as much as 40 percent. Forty percent started their own businesses, ranging from home-based consultancies to retail shops with several employees. Of the remaining participants, most found either salaried or hourly wage work in the local government, school system, community college, hospital, or a wide variety of local businesses. Nearly 20 percent worked two part-time jobs in order to meet income goals.

Of the 128 participants, roughly even amounts (30 percent) were in their thirties, forties, and fifties, respectively, with slightly more than half female. Nearly 30 percent were married with grown children no longer living at home full-time—there was a roughly even split among the remainder between those married with young children, married with school-age children, married with no children, and single. Approximately 60 percent of participants relocated from southeastern Michigan—the rest were split evenly between other parts of Michigan, the Midwest, and the United States at large. Eighty percent of migrant areas of origin were outside urban cores but still classifiable as metropolitan. Seventy percent had vacationed in the study area either as children or adults. Approximately 60 percent of participants moved to the study area within the past five years.<sup>4</sup>

While some cases suggested more explicit strain and possible emotional trauma than others, participants in this study experienced what I describe as a kind of *break* or breach in their confidence that they would be rewarded for hard work and self-sacrifice by remaining devoted to a

particular job or company. As expressed in their accounts, this experience can set in motion a process akin to conversion with highly liminal aspects. The understanding of conversion applied in this article is consistent with the perspective of Lewis Rambo (1993), who sees conversion not as an inner event or singular moment in a person's life but rather as a complex process involving dimensions ranging from the social to the psychological and spiritual.<sup>5</sup> It is the experience of this process that helps define life-style migrants as a category within non-economic migration. As heard from Alan at the opening, life-style migrants typically feel a loss of faith together with creeping personal disappointment and disillusionment with an American dream. At the same time, they continue to believe in what I call the *opportunity of elsewhere* to start over and remake themselves in pursuit of a life-style dream or *commitment* to a particular way of life pursued in another place (cf. Morrison and Wheeler 1978; see also Jasper 2000; Turner 1966). The relocation narratives of these individuals and families show how they reoriented in a process of *weighing*, choosing a particular geographic place they felt would allow or even *force* a shift in priorities and better balance between work and family obligations. In the coming section, I look in depth at an iconic narrative of relocation presented together with analysis informed by my close experience with twelve core cases and situated against the broad backdrop of a larger sample of study participants.

## **FINDINGS: MORAL MEANINGS OF LIFE-STYLE MIGRATION**

### **FROM "PI" TO "PIE": ENGINEERING NEW BEGINNINGS**

On a warm and breezy day in May of 2000, I began regular conversations with a voluntary corporate refugee who became what some residents and visitors to the area know simply as "The Pie Guy." Mark acquired the moniker after leaving his job as an engineer turned mid-level manager for a major defense contractor three years earlier. He left this job in order to move to the study area and start a small family business making gourmet pies in a town that has claimed the title "Cherry Capital" for being at the center of the nation's largest source of tart cherries. We are in the Pie Guy's prosperous shop across from county

offices and city fire department on a busy street through Traverse City's quaint downtown of stately brick buildings and charming Victorian-era homes. A mere two blocks away, the cool water of Lake Michigan laps at an inviting, sandy shore in a ribbon of city parkland. In a well-coordinated local plan of "smart growth," public open space reclaims what were once unsightly processing areas for vast timber operations into the first quarter of the twentieth century and, more recently, the fruit packing industry that replaced them. On this beach, one may gaze down the long, cerulean blue arm of Grand Traverse Bay, which reaches northward, skirted by rolling hills of old orchards and more recent vineyards for twenty-odd miles until it rejoins the inland sea.

Smiling comfortably as he takes off an apron, decorated unintentionally with the splatter of such fruits of his early morning labor as cherries, apples, and blueberries, Mark emerges from behind the long, glass counter. Beyond him, several large racks stand filled with picture-perfect cooling pies, each bubbled over slightly in its sturdy tin. The shelves are labeled with inviting names like "Old Mission Cherry," "Lakeshore Berry," "Farmer's Market Peach," and "Autumn Harvest Pecan"—names that evoke memories of favorite local places and community events. With hands dusted in flour, he presents me my cup. We are surrounded by a thick, moist air rich with smells of brewing coffee, baking fruit, and browning crust. After a lingering winter of cold and snow, the relative warmth of this spring afternoon seems to promise redemption through long summer days. Basking in the warm glow of sunshine through nearby windows, thoughtful expressions on our faces as we grip our steaming drinks, Mark begins outlining his narrative of relocation. His voice carries the unmistakable confidence of a man proven right in a critical, life-changing choice. He speaks with the tell-tale conviction of the converted. Like other life-style migrants, Mark's conversion entails a process wherein he reached a breaking point and lost his faith in the promises of a corporate career. This is when he began his plan of striking out "on his own" with all the exhilaration and risk that kind of move entails. At the same time, his tone suggests a humility I later understand comes from knowing how success has depended not only on detailed planning and a good business sense but also on pure leaps of faith of another kind.

Mark's account begins with a young man who grows up in Michigan's state capital of Lansing during the social, cultural, and economic tumult of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1980, he graduates from Michigan

State University in neighboring East Lansing, looking to find a job in an economy staggered by the 1970s oil crisis, the wide-reaching impact of accelerating deindustrialization, and a more heavily globalized market. Lansing lies in a wide band of once booming industrial areas that span the south and central areas of the state from the shores of Lake Michigan at Muskegon in the west to Detroit in the east. Much of the area continues to be dominated by the “Big Three” auto manufacturers: Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors. This swath of places in Michigan is itself part of a broad archipelago of heavy industry scattered, for the better part of a century or more, across a tier of midwestern and northeastern states. Collectively, these places form the “Rust Belt”—a term that effectively conjures an image of a region defined by disfiguring decomposition and decay.

Although communities scattered throughout these industrial landscapes have attempted different forms of local renaissance by focusing on attracting and retaining young workers and families through initiatives aimed at improving quality of life (including recent efforts by the Michigan Legislative and Business Leaders Public Policy Forum as well as Michigan Governor Granholm’s new “Cool Cities” initiative), in the early 1980s, the harsh reality that former economic glory ushered in by the Industrial Revolution was now largely a bygone era was just sinking in for most residents. Like many of his peers, beginning his studies twenty-five years ago, Mark anticipated work in the automobile industry. But the mid-seventies recession was also beginning. He earns a degree in engineering. Thinking back to that point, Mark says,

There was not much going on in the Midwest in terms of growth. The auto industry was down. Not a lot of opportunity. [But] California was booming . . . and I had a certain amount of just ‘Hey, I lived twenty years here.’ One of my friends went to work at Oldsmobile [*a century-old brand being killed by parent company, GM, at the time of our conversations*]. Being an auto town through the generations, they just get into Olds and . . . that’s it! You’re done! Man . . . I couldn’t think of that. I’m going to get into this job and that’s the rest of my life? Career was generation to generation and these guys would just go in on that line—the ones that went to college really didn’t so much—but they’d go to work for the state of Michigan or they’d work for a fairly set company and that’s it!

Although drawn by the same golden promise of the West that founded the State of California and helped swell both its urban and rural

populations at the expense of other parts of the country throughout the seventies and into the eighties, Mark continued to believe that he would be back home in Lansing after riding out a midwestern slump and enjoying a few years as a young, single guy in sunny Southern California. Ties to a woman back home remained, however, and eventually they marry. Rather than attempting to begin their life together in the uncertainty of a declining state economy that continued to hemorrhage Michigan's rural and urban population to other parts of the country, they opt for California, where by now Mark has become settled into a self-defining pattern of work. Over time, routines establish what seems to be a lasting *career*—a word whose etymology offers suggestive terms like “passage” and “course” (see Sennett 1998; cf. Gini 2000). Soon they began a family. Mark steers them along a course set by career choices as he takes on a position at a major defense contractor with seemingly strong, lasting ties to their new home of San Diego. With the cold war ongoing through the Reagan years of the 1980s, this was an industry that saw tremendous growth. By the early 1990s, however, serious restructuring was under way.

Although he made a good salary with full benefits and stock options, having achieved success by most standards in American life, in the face of sweeping changes in his workplace, Mark starts questioning whether this is the life he wants to live. He questions a working life where he invests himself so fully in projects that start getting routinely “axed” by his employer as government contracts are cancelled and funding dries up. In his account, I hear how he realized that this was now a world where the division he works for is moved around in an elaborate game of corporate chess only to be sold off according to an economic calculus unaffected by the concerns of working families. Reflecting the experience of many project participants, Mark's story tracks the transition from workplace as extended family to the radical dismemberment of this arrangement and the feeling that people like him had become little more than commodities or ignored costs in market discourse (see Lane 1991; Martin 1994; Radin 1987). He talks about what it meant to be a part of a tightly knit team in early projects as coworkers struggled together to solve great engineering and design problems on the scale of super-colliders and super-conducting magnets, only to have these projects and the teams working on them torn apart by powerful economic forces well outside their control:

There was a great deal of pride. We were doing a great job. We had a really tight group . . . It was a real team effort. And to watch that team fragment when [a project] was canceled . . . It affects you to see that. [It] all started [when our division] was acquired [first by one company] and then by [another]. But back when [our company] started here, we had a company campground up in the mountains. We had a park right adjacent to our plant. So if you're on a program, it was beer and pizza out in the recreational park. They had little merry-go-rounds and mini-trains. So you had a relationship with coworkers beyond your project. It was like a real family situation for thirty years since the war and up until the late '80s. [Then] to see that go away . . . The plant was sold, the park was closed, and the campground sold . . . just watching this crumble. It was hard. Now it's the forces of business. It went from being really comfortable, 'I can make a career here and build good projects and meet good people' to being like . . . you feel adrift. Things that you depended on being there . . . weren't. So do you allow yourself to be at the whim of whatever forces [are] at play . . . or do you go do something about it?

The economic restructuring of the early 1990s marches onward, taking with it most of what remained of the implicit contract between corporation and employee that had been enjoyed by his father's generation (cf. Moen 2001; Sennett 1998; Yankelovich 1982). Reacting to feelings of increasing anxiety as seismic shifts in corporate America set the ground in motion beneath his feet, Mark becomes savvier, shrewder, and more pragmatic in his thoughts about work. As his division is sold off, he begins thinking of his present job as training for something else down the road. Although he continues to be well compensated for his labor, what remained in the way of loyalty to the corporation quickly dissolves as it becomes clear that there is no guarantee of reward for being faithful to a company looking out for its own interests and fully prepared to sacrifice workers in order to fulfill demands of its swelling rank of shareholders. It now becomes a question of *timing* for Mark. It is about staying "in the game" only so long as it makes sense in that he is getting something useful out of it for the next step. "I just kind of got really turned off [with] how these decisions can just mess up everything. So, I'm getting good training. This is like grad school to me now. I'm not loyal to the company. I'll do what they ask, but I'll work through the process and learn business."

Mark sees himself gaining important personal and professional skills at the company's expense that he can later employ in his shift to

another, hopefully more meaningful and rewarding life in a place of refuge where he could feel greater control. He is sure the company feels it owes its workers little more than this week's paycheck. With this conviction, he acts with what amounts to an enlightened self-interest while rethinking where he is and where his family is going. He's taking stock and looking for a "way out" that makes sense and is likely to be best for his young family. With his fortieth birthday on the near horizon, Mark is changing course as he seeks to find a sense to his life by finding a more personally meaningful orientation to the good as a means of measuring the worth of this life: "So there are several things happening. I don't want to do this for the rest of my life. That's another factor—you kind of assess. I think everybody does at a certain age. Is this a livelihood? You know? I want to get into something more simple that I can get my hands around. I want to get something where I can control my own destiny instead of just sort of floating with this company."

While still with the company, Mark reached a kind of *breaking point*. He experienced a breach in the implicit contract, of trust and faith, between employer and employee born of repeated examples of corporate indifference to the expectations and personal needs of workers. With the kids in bed, Diane and Mark begin an evening ritual of scribbling in legal pads. Their pads begin to fill with musings about the place of work in shaping a life, detailed lists of pros and cons of leaving the known world of their present life weighed against speculation in the form of the unknown situated in their vision of starting over in a new place. This physical place, as yet unchosen, is one that they hope will better resonate with a *life-style commitment* to a "simpler," more integrated and balanced life where family comes first. They are now focused on making work and family decisions that harmonize with this set of guiding ideals and moral understandings, what amounts to an orientation to the good. I start calling this a life-style commitment after a conversation with one of my core cases, a young couple named Carl and Liz. Their narrative of relocation turned on a single watershed event. They tell a story of driving back, after an especially rejuvenating visit to the longtime summer cabin of his grandparents located in the study area, to what they described as personally unfulfilling lives in a mid-western city in which they felt dispossessed and alienated. As Liz cried, they made a promise to each other to start over in this place of retreat solemnized by their choice to make a formal commitment by "shaking



on it.” From that day, Carl and Liz began to strategize about how they would break from their present lives and begin again in this new place.

Like many life-style migrants, for Diane and Mark, a life-style commitment to start over relied, in part, on the advice of popular self-help books to aid them in their process of working through their decision making process: “With the *Places Rated Almanac* and *What Color Is Your Parachute?* books . . . [we] did some exercises. The engineering part of me is trying to take the emotion out of it, but then you have to factor it back in. You can’t completely ignore that, but we did go through, ‘Okay, this isn’t it, so what should we do?’ ” They do this calculating and *weighing* over the period of two years, all the while factoring in new information and concerns as these are realized or somehow come into play in the course of their everyday life. During this period, Diane quit her job as an office administrator to have their second child. Although initially intimidated by the sweeping change entailed in making such a move, Diane’s recurrent desire to live somewhere “simpler” was consistent with and supportive of their emerging dream. As they reflected back on the time when their family grew to four, they both described a longing to “nest.” After lengthy weighing of pros and cons, they fixed their attention on Traverse City, which appealed to them not only for its proximity to Mark’s childhood home down in Lansing, a three-hour drive to the south, but also because it is a place they see as smaller scale, slower paced, and more family oriented than San Diego. Well outside any metropolitan area, the town of approximately 16,000 qualifies as *micropolitan* (see Heubusch 1998). Taken together, they describe these qualities as a reflection of the area’s “livability.” From the perspective of would-be small business owners, they also recognize that it attracts people with disposable income. Using a variety of “place guides” such as *Places Rated Almanac*, Diane and Mark determine that a well established seasonal influx of vacationers together with a steady pattern of in-migration of yearlong residents over the past thirty years bodes well for those wanting to start a service-oriented business. Although they enjoy Southern California and live in a good neighborhood with close friends, they pack up and move.

Having decided on Traverse City as a place that has the potential to fulfill their life-style goals and commitment to “downshift,” that is, to voluntarily end an objectively successful career in order to lead a subjectively simpler more fulfilling life (Saltzman 1991), the question for

Diane and Mark then becomes, "Okay, what can we do there to make ends meet?" Based on pleasant days enjoyed while experiencing a kind of recreative time out of time during their vacation to a quiet mountain town in California, near where the company campground once welcomed workers looking to find community among others on their own time, they begin to explore seriously the option of starting a small business. A small pie shop long thrived in that quaint town by virtue of its tasty, hand-crafted pies and a steady stream of tourists seeking an experience of quiet and quality. In the temporary refuge afforded by vacationing away from the distraction of daily routines, Diane and Mark envision other possible selves (see Aron 1999; Löfgren 1999). Borrowing from the work of sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1997), I call this possible self the *potential self* for it is made to reside in some idealized, future point in time in order to set it apart from the everyday self living in the hustle and bustle of the present (cf. Gillis 1996). In Hochschild's study of the so-called time bind experienced by families at a midwestern company, she calls "Americo," the potential self was a set of imagined, future possibilities that serves as a substitute rather than preparation for action in the lives of overworked families coping with the work/family squeeze.<sup>6</sup> Removed from the uncertainties and conflicts of everyday life in the present, the potential self is one way of coping with the demands of busy, self-consuming schedules and the emotional downsizing that many chose to deal with the New Economy demands on working families.

Following the model of the successful pie shop discovered while on retreat from their everyday life, Diane and Mark have decided not only where they will seek these alternative or potential selves but also what they will do to make ends meet. Mark attacks the problem of building their vision of the good in a manner consistent with the engineer he was trained to be, thus putting into service skills gleaned from one work life in order to construct another. Looking back, Mark explains how they worried that the enormous task of creating a business from scratch, like their pies, presented a real threat to their goal of achieving a balanced work and family life. They drew confidence, however, from the fact that their venture embodied a guiding moral orientation in the form of their life-style commitment framed by their narrative of moving forward on a personal quest for greater meaning and purpose. Having some kind of restraint is important for life-style migrants who are especially wary of undergoing what Alan called a "regression," a slip "backwards" that

threatened the quest. A recent middle-aged corporate refugee who turned to managing and maintaining a cluster of dated apartment buildings after his move, Alan spoke of his struggle adjusting to self-employment. At first, he exclaims, it “scared the shit out of me!”

During that period of time, did I start thinking about going back to the world I was in, you know, a regression back to where I was at? Yeah . . . I was thinking that this is not my comfort zone. I came here deliberately, but it doesn't mean you're comfortable when you get here. There appears to be a lot of security to being a W-2 income, having a job, but I also remember very distinctly [what I] didn't like was a lot of insecurity. You were battling for your job every day. But when you come up [to the study area] and you're self-employed and you're worried, 'Am I going to have enough money?' It took me a couple, three years to understand [my discomfort].

In an attempt deal with this fear and discomfort, many project participants described days when they nearly returned to former lives until eventually they succeeded in redefining their “comfort zones.” Remembering their life-style commitments, they were able to hold back. In the following passage, Mark speaks to a need for restraint to keep from “going back.” “I don't want to jump back to what I was. At that time, it was, 'God, I just want to work in a pie shop and enjoy the simple life.' I read this book, I think it was called *The Simple Life*, or something like that, and that was his philosophy. What you need to do is reconnect with community [and] your family and get rid of this big company stress stuff.”

Defining oneself by way of a job was the manner encouraged in the generation of Mark's father. It was the way of things back at the venerable Oldsmobile plant in Lansing where, as in Whyte's (1956) *The Organization Man*, people not only worked for, but belonged to, the Company. Now there is no guarantee and no expectation of the durability of such a definition of self because the world of work upon which it had been based appears ever more unstable and unpredictable, more fluid and boundless (Sennett 1998). Indeed, a kind of fluidity is a basic quality valued and expected of today's worker. In a departure from the ideal worker of the more standardized and regular industrial world of the past century, workers now must be multitasking, adaptable, and forever learning (Gini 2000; Murray 2000; Tomasko 1993). Cultural historian John Gillis (1996) suggests that we have entered a postmodern era in

which everyone is encouraged, regardless of his or her age, to think of himself or herself as being “in a perpetual state of becoming. We are asked to retrain, reeducate and recycle” (p. 232; cf. Bridges 1994; Martin 1994, 1999).

### MORAL STORIES

The relocation narratives of life-style migrants are moral stories. When life-style migrants speak about starting over, they reveal how they are seeking what humanist-philosopher Charles Taylor (1989) refers to as “the good.” I call on Taylor’s broad understanding of the moral that includes not only those issues normally associated with the term such as questions of right behavior—the principles or standards which guide action and tell us what we *should do*—but also what it is *good to be*, that is, what has intrinsic value and as questions lead us as individuals to a sense of dignity, self-respect, and purpose. In a manner consistent with virtue ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre’s (1984) criticism of how the moral as a concept in academic and public discourse was reduced to questions of negative sanctions and control, the understanding of the moral employed in this research goes beyond a focus on what is right to do, our obligations, to include the nature of the good or what underlies notions of a life that is fulfilling. Like both Taylor and MacIntyre, I hold that consideration of the moral must include essential questions concerning what makes a life worth living, confers meaning on individual lives, and provides the basis of a sense of self and framework for personal narrative.

A moral horizon that orients and motivates by promising future reward for hard work and self-sacrifice, the American dream both depends on and contributes to a notion of the good that prevails in middle-class American society. Embedded in fundamental cultural understandings of how the world should work and acting as a meta-narrative, the American dream has long offered a framework for building lasting, self-defining narratives. It has encouraged people to work hard by giving them hope that their labor will be not simply compensated but rather *rewarded*. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow (1996) cautions against overly simplistic interpretations of the American dream, which tend to make it out as little more than “a materialistic value system, holding forth the prospect of a high paying job, a comfortable home in the suburbs, and opportunities for one’s children” (p. 4). As a

core moral framework in American life, it has served to shape the emerging economy of the past century by providing a set of assumptions about work and money and giving a reason to toil long and hard. Despite ongoing assault from deindustrialization discussed in works by scholars such as Newman (1988, 1993) and Dudley (1994), the essential moral meanings of the American dream remain intact as it lives on in popular conceptions as a kind of "key symbol" (Ortner 1989) that, though diminished, continues to legitimate hard work while providing an at least partly convincing link between work, money, and other aims and aspirations.

Although many Americans say their work can be meaningful and at least at times fulfilling, they also feel pressured, dissatisfied, and uncertain about how this work can be made to fit with the rest of their lives (Wuthnow 1996; cf. Lane 1991). Despite statistics indicating objectively greater leisure time and rising average family incomes, most Americans do not *feel* as though they have more time on their hands or more discretionary income (e.g., see McGrattan and Rogerson 1998; Robinson and Godbey 1999; Schor 1991). Just the opposite, people are feeling more rushed and squeezed. If Americans do have greater material abundance than a generation or more ago, it seems they are relatively unable to consistently put together the time necessary to think about how they might render economic success into meaningful, qualitative improvements in their lives (Bellah et al. 1996; Hochschild 1997; Schor 1991).

Challenging assumptions of an American dream of striving for and achieving success measured in material terms, life-style migrants find the relationship between economic life and a quest for deeper human values increasingly difficult to reconcile. Their economic commitments too often seem to impede the pursuit of other vital human needs. These are needs that they say they feel originating from an inner, more "authentic" self (Taylor 1992). Expressed in the accounts of life-style migrants, these needs include developing and cherishing more intimate relationships with their families, a desire to feel belonging as part of a community while living in a physical environment that fosters an abiding sense of place, and a fundamental longing to better know themselves in order to see and experience personal growth. Their disconnect results in an internal tension between the material side of their lives and something of the human spirit residing more fully in the moral domain. For some, this tension may be little more than a nagging doubt

about life choices. For the majority of project participants, however, it became a conflict demanding attention, which leads them to reevaluate their basic commitment to work, family, and self and the kind of life-style that this supports. A former director of personnel at a major soft drink company in southeastern Michigan, Alan was clear about the nature of this conflict. His decision to start over was about being able to define himself according to his own moral narrative.

You know how you sense when something is wrong and it's not really a medical condition. It's that [your] thought patterns aren't right. What price is this so-called success of the big house and the money? I guess one way to look at it is that you are selling your soul. Now looking back, I was trading away my value system for the job and support of the company . . . manifesting behavior I was not proud of. My value system was being destroyed, and I didn't know it. Now I can see that. You are brought up with certain morals, ethics, and values, and then you find yourself in a system that is *not allowing you to live your life properly*. All I was doing was tearing myself down. It was a violation of who I was. Now I can go back to being . . . who I am. I can make decisions that affect people based on their needs rather than just the numbers . . . the bottom line.

Speaking of former lives, other life-style migrants tell how they gradually divided themselves in an attempt to balance competing pressures by compartmentalizing their lives, thus creating distinct work and family selves. In this way, they were able to speak of former lives by saying that they were at the same time successful professionally yet failing personally. They could hold entirely different definitions for success applied independently to separated spheres of self, material and moral, often in conflict with one another. In the end, however, struggling to maintain this split can lead to a kind of conversion. In the wake of this experience, life-style migrants attempt a different course where the emphasis is less about adapting to external conditions or forging ahead than it is trying to change those conditions. Life-style migrants concentrate on relocation as a way of *forcing* change in an attempt to realize potential selves. It becomes an expression of their commitment to certain life-style choices in an attempt to reprioritize their lives and find some kind of balance by integrating material and moral domains. I first heard of this notion of "forcing" from a former research and development manager who, disillusioned, left a prosperous Silicon Valley

software company in the late 1990s in order to move to the study area. When she spoke of the act of relocation, Susan referred to how “something drove me to put myself in a position where I’d be forced . . . [to figure out] what matters. . . . That’s a risk, but God it has to be done.” As I had heard many times before, Susan told how she felt that she had spent most of her adult life “trying to become things. Whether it’s successful in your career or having a title or a salary or a label, it was always, ‘I am this’ or ‘I am that’ or ‘I did this’ or ‘This is who I am’ sort of thing.” Like all life-style migrants, Susan was certain that she would find “what matters” beyond titles, degrees, and labels on a personal quest.

### **NEGOTIATING A SENSE OF BALANCE AND INTEGRATION**

The ongoing negotiations of individuals and families between conflicting personal, familial, and workplace obligations and their meanings present a challenge for life-style decisions. Like so many others, Mark often expressed how important it was for him to be able to share his work life with his family. The artificial separation that grew between work and family life before moving to the study area, as a once sheltering, paternalistic company cast off past ways where company campgrounds, merry-go-rounds, and pizza parties fostered a family atmosphere, was forced on him from the outside as part of living in the changing world of work in a New Economy. This separation was now an expected part of employee life. As with life-style migrants as a whole, Diane and Mark felt that the good life should be an integrated life—both spatially and temporally. Like other life-style migrants, they felt the time had come to more fully define themselves according to their own moral narrative. It felt right that Mark should be able to share lessons of work with his children and have them partake in a greater share of his life. They constructed a business plan that would allow for their life-style commitment of balance and integration in work and family life. In addition, Diane and Mark felt that a small-town community, geographically focused with places of work, home, schools, recreation, and social activities all close by in sharp contrast to the endlessly sprawling suburbs and choking traffic of Southern California, would actively encourage greater integration through the simple scale and sheer proximity of the elements that make up daily life. Diane

explained that they wanted “something where we could integrate the whole family with everything just a few minutes from home and no freeways to worry about.”

While not every life-style migrant starts his or her own small business, as noted earlier, a remarkable 40 percent chose this path. For those project participants not in business for themselves at the time of my research, it remained something of an ideal even as they continued to work for someone else. Working for oneself has strong appeal for those seeking a greater sense of control over the circumstances of work and family life (cf. Birkeland 2002; Wolf 1999). Another of the twelve core cases of the project, Jim and Karen experienced a brutal layoff from a major software firm in southeast Michigan that suddenly stripped them of the sense of security of which they had felt assured. After the dependency created by corporate life, what Jim referred to as the “golden handcuffs,” many life-style migrants look for greater self-reliance and the ability to determine their own self-worth through the perceived control afforded by being in business for oneself. Borrowing terms from Gillis (1996), we can see the efforts of life-style migrants like Mark to attain an integrated life as an attempt to bring the everyday family they live *with* and the family they live *by* (an imagined family akin to Hochschild’s [1997] potential self) closer together and possibly to merge them (for a discussion of risks associated with this attempt to integrate, see Nippert-Eng 1996).

In a big company, you can question your own self-worth. Every day you go in . . . you may do some phenomenal white paper on a new program that will bring in business but there are days of just pushing papers across a desk. The question is, “What value did I provide this company with today?” You can see that here [in the pie shop]. It’s on a lower-tech, simpler level, but [it’s about the] self-worth or self-confidence of providing value to my family and building a base or a foundation that will endure. Each day I can feel that I am making a step in that direction. We bring the kids in so I’m benefiting their lives by having them work here. My son is eleven. He can help customers and run the cash register. He makes dough with me on Sundays. My daughter is sixteen, and she can do any job here [and] understands the value of good work and responsibility. Those are things that affect the whole family. It’s a real family group. Up until my mother passed away, she was my bookkeeper. My mom had failing health over the last few years. She wasn’t financially independent



[enough] to retire, so we provided [a job for her here]. I got to see my mom, in addition to my kids, involved in the business. It was all integrated into the life-style. The business became part of the life-style versus somewhere to go for eight hours a day to make a living.

### **NARRATIVE TRANSITIONS: CONVERSION, LIMINALITY, AND FAITH**

As virtue ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) explains, “stories are lived before they are told” (p. 212). Narrative embodies the inescapable temporality of life experience. Life stories grow out of everyday practice and our literal as well as figurative movement through time and space. They are thus naturally stories of travel (see Certeau 1984, 115). Similar in terms to Richard Sennett (1998), who speaks of the integrity of personal “character” contained in what he characterizes as sustainable narratives of self, MacIntyre finds that to the extent that there is harmony in a person’s life and continuity in sense of self, this “resides in the unity of narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end” (p. 205). For life-style migrants, that narrative unity is achieved in part through describing transitions, inner as well as outer travel from one life to another, as a kind of liminal or conversion experience in a larger personal quest within which there is a continuing sense of personhood (cf. Taylor 1997).

As accounts of physical and emotional passages to new lives, the relocation narratives of life-style migrants relate their experience of a kind of *liminality*, a basic part of their process of negotiation between material and moral domains. A term to describe a state of betwixt and between, *liminality* comes from the Latin *limen* for “boundary” or “threshold.” As used by cultural anthropologists, it has generally referred to rites of initiation or “passage” that involve certain basic elements that include a transformative period where status and identity are stripped from the individual. Influenced broadly by the foundational work of Durkheim and directly by van Gennep, Victor Turner focused his anthropological research on social processes and systems in periods of change. Specifically, he spoke of “social dramas” to emphasize the performance of ritual as well as the opportunity for change by breaking from established norms and of liminality as a kind of “interstructural stage” (Turner 1967; cf. Turner 1957). Much like the stages that Rambo (1993, see note 5) outlines for religious conversion, Turner (1974) finds

that social dramas have several observable phases ranging from breach, crisis, and redressive action to reintegration.

In Turner's (1974) understanding, the first of these is signaled by an "overt *breach* or deliberate non-fulfillment of some crucial norm" (p. 38, emphasis added). Precipitated by this breach, the *crisis* stage that follows forms the critical, liminal period in which a threshold is crossed between more or less stable phases. Life-style migrants who downshift from the self-consuming stress of corporate careers frequently recall a distinct, often epiphanic moment (or sequence of such moments experienced over a longer period) that results from a breach where the meaning and purpose they had previously found in their work evaporates or the faith or trust they held in an employer was somehow "violated." This violation extended at times to core personal values as well. In light of these challenges, personal narratives are shaped by personal crises as they attempt to make sense of new understandings while weighing options and exploring alternatives. In the following stage, they attempt to redefine themselves through forms of *redressive action* such as that taken in the act of relocation itself. Their relocation requires them to move from one life and social world to another where, in the final phase, they must find ways for personally meaningful *reintegration* in that new place. For life-style migration, this reintegration typically involves a kind of spatial orientation and cultivation of a sense of place.

Although it was clear to Mark that he needed to take action, reflecting on the personal crisis that followed the breach in implicit contract between employer and employee, he vividly recalls fear and uncertainty with taking a plunge into the unknown. Starting over holds a potentially unsettling and confusing liminal period of transition from a recognizable path now traversed to something and someplace else entirely. Specifically, he describes a sense of disorientation with clearly spatial dimensions that concern his basic identity. Mark recognizes that having taken redressive action by setting out on his own, he is no longer placed on an organizational chart that locates him within a broad hierarchy of social relations and roles. In this passage, he illustrates the essential link between identity and a kind of spatial orientation. "For a while [after leaving a corporate job] you didn't have any sense of yourself—of *where* you are. For some people, that's too great a void. That's why some people don't take that extra step. They can't handle that. 'I'm not on an "O" chart. I'm not getting my annual review and my set of objectives for the year. I don't have any of that. I take this step and I

could be a complete failure. It's up to me to decide.' This is that individual speaking. Maybe they don't want to decide. It's too stressful." Pausing for a moment to recall feelings that emerged around his decision to enter that liminal "void," Mark gestures in the air between us in an effort to give me a sense of his orientation. Sitting before me, he holds one hand out to his left clenched in a fist while he gazes into his right hand, held close to his face, palm up. He continues, saying, "I think it takes a while from knowing where you fit *there* [shaking his left hand] to knowing where you fit *here* [offering out his right hand]." Waving both hands before him in the space between these two points, he finishes: "there's a period of not knowing."

Mark experienced this period of not knowing, this space of uncertainty, self-doubt, and unknowing as a kind of liminal phase within a Turner-esque "social drama" that gave shape to a distinct moral narrative of self. He explains that ultimately it did not really matter that on some level he was no longer sure who he was during his transition as long as he knew that he was no longer what he was leaving behind and that he and Diane had set their sight on a vision of potential selves consistent with their life-style commitment. As suggested by Taylor (1989, 28-30), knowing who you are entails being able to find yourself oriented in moral space where questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and not, and what has meaning and importance to you. It is also distinguishing those elements that make a life worth living. Keeping a sense of spatial orientation, Mark explains how he got beyond the liminal: "You're marching every day ahead. Like if you're walking along the edge of a tall building. All you see is where you want to go. You kind of don't notice that 'Hey, it's kind of far down over there.' I was at the point where I've jumped into a pool and you've got to swim to the other side. No matter what's around you, you've got to swim. For the first year or so, it didn't matter who I was. 'Am I a fool? Am I a success? Somewhere in the middle? What am I?' You don't know."

Here we see fundamental uncertainty about status and self in the process of crossing through the liminal. Am I a fool or a success? Perhaps caught between the two? We get a clear picture of the importance of being oriented in space. For life-style migrants, not only is this orientation within a moral space of questions about good and bad, what is worth doing and not; it is also bound up with their physical bearings in the world, with how they locate themselves in a moral, social, and

material landscape. As a moral orientation, it is both individual and relational. Temporarily lacking a stable framework or horizon through which things take on stable significance and with which he could weigh possibilities and actualities as either good or bad, meaningful or superfluous, left Mark at least momentarily unsure of how to move. Susan spoke of how the liminal state was an ongoing negotiation between potentially competing self-interpretations (not unlike the split between professional and personal measures of success experienced by many life-style migrants). It appears as a process of “letting go” so that one might then arrive at a stable orientation and personal identity:

You think you have this idea [the commitment to start over according to a particular life-style] that this is what I want to do and this is what I’m prepared and willing to do . . . but it’s a daily thing where you’re constantly saying, “Who am I if I’m not sales director of this or whatever?” “Who am I?” was a constant. It was like you’d *sway back and forth*, so even if you’d think, “Oh yeah, I want to give up my career,” you don’t realize how entwined it is with your whole identity, emotions and everything. But the reality is that every single day when you wake up, it’s not as easy as it sounds. To fit it into this identity or personality [defined by a life-style commitment] that you think you are or want is a constant thing. It gets easier only when you let stuff go.

While not every life-style migrant planned and strategized with the intensity and degree of deliberateness that characterizes Diane and Mark’s story, the common thread through their stories is a confessed need for personal “faith.” Susan, for example, referred to a need for faith in order to be able to “let go.” It was by letting go that many life-style migrants were able to pass through their liminal state. Faith in this context concerns life-style migrants’ decision to start over and their ability to stick with the decision and “make it work,” a phrase common to their accounts. As expressed in narrative forms, it appears as faith in their commitment and ability to stay the course despite a period of disorientation or liminality akin to, as Mark put it, walking along the edge of a building or balancing on a narrow bridge:

It’s one of those things where if you’re standing on a board going across a river and you looked down you might say, “Oh shit.” But if you don’t then you just walk across. I really didn’t look down. It’s a lot of unknowns when you start a business from scratch. And maybe that first

winter we were open . . . we didn't know what the business cycle was like in terms of staffing, in terms of overhead, in terms of revenue. What was going to work? But I had the confidence to know that we could make it until summer. Part of that faith was seeing the Joshua Pie Company [*in the small town where Diane and Mark vacationed in California*] succeed for twelve years before I even started my business. I knew that I could *make it work*. There was a model. We never really completely doubted what we're doing. And I think that is . . . having faith . . . having faith in yourself.

Despite a sincerity of intent to fulfill their life-style commitment, Mark found himself slowly building back up to a former level of intensity that threatened the balance they sought to achieve by starting over. Most life-style migrants with whom I spoke told me of the risk of consciously or unconsciously ratcheting up their dedication of time and energy to work until they reach a point where they could lose sight of their original commitment to reprioritize and allow greater attention to self and family. They spoke of a need to pull back from "regressing" or "falling" into old habits that they might have pursued initially after relocation in order to recreate the familiar and provide a kind of "comfort zone," as Alan put it succinctly. Looking back, Mark realized that in his case, any tendency for falling back had a lot to do with finding a "sense of security." But what exactly should this security look and feel like? With this uncertainty, the risk was again to end up deep in self-consuming work. He explains that he "built a bridge" because he wanted to "make sure that everything was in place." Yet the drive to continue building persisted even once everything seemed in place to those around him, especially Diane. Old habits die hard. In the passage below, Diane discusses the process and the restraint that is ultimately essential in order to maintain their original life-style commitment.

Then what? I'll tell you what happened. What happened after [saying] "This is going to work?" Then he did it again! Then you went, "Maybe we need to do more to shore it up." You build a bridge and it's holding stuff, but maybe you ought to shore it up a little bit and make sure that it's going to hold what you think it's going to hold. Because I'm not in his head and knowing what he's thinking, that's what it felt like to me. For me, it felt like he was shoring up in an effort to feel that security. In actuality, maybe it needed to be shored up, but you're backing off on how many extra posts you're going to put under the bridge.

The idea of building a bridge has great significance. Bridge building suggests bringing together and ultimately merging sides as well as a sense of negotiation between them. Here Mark is bridging two worlds, two lives, where one is left behind and another is promised, potential not yet fully realized. He is building a bridge between the family of everyday life, caught in the push and pull of conflicting obligations, desires, and definitions and the family of imagination, the potential family. In the manner suggested by Gillis (1996), it is a merging of the family they live with and the family they live by. It is then an attempt to reconcile material and moral domains, to reconcile obligations and livelihood with the good in a personal quest for what makes a life worth living.

## DISCUSSION

Mark grew up, graduated college, and was ready to begin his working life in a Midwest reeling from the effects of accelerating deindustrialization. Rather than fall into the seemingly dead-end path of work in the auto industry that had for generations dominated social and economic life in his home town of Lansing, he listens to echoes of advice from a not so distant American past to “go West, young man.” With faith in the *opportunity of elsewhere*, when the tide of economic change that he earlier tried to leave behind in Michigan catches up to him in California and threatens the identity that he had felt assured was lastingly moored to a chosen career in the defense industry, Mark came full circle with a decision to return to the Midwest. Here, small-town life promises to provide his family a kind of *refuge* in their attempt to redefine work and family life even as the Midwest itself struggles to be defined by more than its industrial past. We see how the opportunity of elsewhere is pursued not only when Mark first sought the promise of “making himself,” achieving a higher standard of living in his move out West, but also when Diane and Mark return to the Midwest to seek the quality of life detailed in their *life-style commitment* while believing that they can remake their lives through force of will. Both decisions are expressions of faith in the idea of starting over and a notion of progress fundamental to the American dream as a kind of meta-narrative, a framework or moral horizon that informs the production of individual narrative.

For life-style migrants, the choice made of *where* to live is consciously, intentionally also one about *how* to live. In some cases, life-style migrants deliberately “downshift” by opting to go their own way after voluntarily leaving the corporate climb. In others, they are “downsized” or otherwise displaced by economic restructuring. Whether by choice or by default, there is a common theme to their stories as they become refugees of that world of work who seek places of refuge to call home. In both cases, they tell stories of a breach of trust, of violation that then engenders a process akin to that of conversion with a period of liminality and moral reorientation through which they come to see their place in the world differently. The stories they tell take the form of moral narratives of self.

The flexibility embraced by his corporate employer as it abided by imperatives of the New Economy made Mark a kind of free-agent worker while it also threatened him as a person by diminishing his ability to form a personally meaningful, coherent, and sustainable narrative of self where purposeful work reinforces self-worth, informs identity, and creates a sense of balance and integration between work, family, and personal life. We have seen how Mark left a high-stress job with an increasingly dissatisfying day-to-day work life and uncertain future. Mark’s story tells how the act of relocation is an essential part of the plan of life-style migrants to remake self through a shift of everyday routine. Geographic place is used to jumpstart, enable, or even *force* a rearrangement of work and family life in a personal quest to realize potential selves. In Diane and Mark’s account, concern for finding balance between and integration of work and family together with a greater sense of control became a driving force in the decision *both* to relocate to a small town and to start their own business. Commitment to a life-style believed to allow for these things and facilitated by relocation to a physical place believed to support this life-style is part of the personal negotiations between material and moral domains that shape a moral narrative of self.

We see that *weighing* allows life-style migrants the opportunity to understand whether hours spent at work are, in fact, contributing to more than the bottom line: do they also contribute to realizing a potential self? As an expression of moral orientation, weighing provides a way of traversing between one set of meanings and other valuations. Migrants who choose place of residence on the basis of quality of life considerations are making a judgment regarding the status quo where

your job typically dictates not only where you live but also the way that you live. Consistent with this, Taylor (1989) finds that *the good* is to be found “not outside of but as a *manner of living* ordinary life” (p. 23). In this way, we find a resonance with the behavior of life-style migrants and the literature on “simplicity” with its emphasis on self-examination and *intentionality* in one’s manner of living (e.g., Elgin 1981; Shi 1985).

While couples crushed in the work/family squeeze of the New Economy may hold onto visions of *potential selves* as a way of coping with harried conditions, life-style migrants seize this image as a guiding vision of a personal good. As with so many other life-style migrants, it was on vacation during recreative time out of normal time that Diane and Mark found the physical and emotional distance from the routines of everyday life that was so vital for starting their plan to begin again someplace else. Their commitment to the life-style they envision becomes an essential focal point and source of guidance as they navigate uncertain waters of a liminal period created by the act of leaving one life and source of identity for another and before establishing a more lasting sense of security in that new life. Life-style migrants rely on this guidance to keep them from “jumping back” or “regressing” into the self-consuming routines of the past. By examining the moral narratives of life-style migrants, we see how the potential self might serve as something more than the everyday coping mechanism observed in Hochschild’s (1997) study. In the case of life-style migrants, it is a way to find their bearings, to be oriented in a material and moral world even as they transition through unsettled, liminal periods, charting course to redefining personal notions of the good.

## LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This article has emphasized the individualistic dimensions of the moral. More relational aspects, as could be examined through in-depth exploration of the importance of sense of place and connection to community, whether real or imagined, in the relocation of life-style migrants, are a complex set of concerns that I have opted to treat elsewhere. This decision is partly a product of the character of the narratives themselves. As it emerged in the narratives of life-style migrants, more relational aspects of the moral appeared supportive but generally not central when compared with a basic concern for achieving a



potential self defined by personal understandings of what it is *good to be*, that is, what is meaningful and fulfilling as an expression of balanced and integrated work and family life. While I acknowledge both individual and relational dimensions to the moral, I have chosen to deal with the latter more completely elsewhere where I will bring both together as a way of linking tensions between material and moral domains with respect to issues of production and consumption.

Unlike many other micro-level approaches to migration, this project does not provide another model of decision making. Unlike macro-level studies, it was not designed to be predictive of future migration behavior or patterns. Rather, the intent of this article is to offer insight into how decisions made in the context of noneconomic migration might be framed and understood by migrants themselves. It is an attempt to show how this frame structures personal narratives that then shape identity and selfhood through providing a compelling life story. In the case of life-style migration, these stories are told as moral narratives of self. A narrative approach informed by moral theory allows us to access individual-level frameworks that underlie sense of self and thus the personal context within which migration decisions are made.

This article is an attempt to address the relative absence of narrative approaches in migration literature by bringing ethnographic methods to bear on a form of noneconomic migration while also indicating how humanistic moral theory can inform the process of narrative analysis in other, related cases of transition in individual lives. Although I have focused on relocation and the remaking of self by downsized and downshifting individuals, one might expect similar narrative forms among the economically displaced in a variety of contexts. Combining morally informed narrative analysis with an appreciation for liminal experience and insight from recent work/family research, the interpretive framework introduced here might be fruitfully applied to these cases as well.

The analysis of moral narratives of self in noneconomic migration presented here is not meant to challenge existing approaches to the study of internal migration in the United States. It is an approach best applied in conjunction with demographic data that provides a context within which to embed individual-level analysis. While this approach may not satisfy the test for predictive value of future trends, understanding themes common to narratives of life-style migrants allows us to anticipate what noneconomic migrants may seek in the places to which they relocate—something of potential value to communities.

As local places are faced with increasing uncertainty and instability, seemingly adrift in a competitive, globalizing world while being required to collect physical and social capital in order to succeed, comparatively protected anchorage might be found in public policy emphasizing so-called quality of life initiatives. This article presented research conducted in areas of significant in-migration within a region otherwise losing population. Supported by more demographic studies, ethnographic findings in this research suggest that America's non-metropolitan communities would do well to question reliance on the predominant model for encouraging capital investment, in-migration, and population retention. As noted by the geographer Alexander Vias (1999; cf. Chalmers and Greenwood 1980; Jackson and Masnick 1983; Williams 1981; Wolf 1999), this model has promoted rolling back taxes and providing cheap land and labor in an attempt to attract a single large employer in what has been called "smokestack chasing." Following the example of study towns like Traverse City, other regional community leaders might consider policy measures designed to preserve or enhance quality of life in order to attract migrants interested in pursuing particular life-style choices that emphasize quality of life and livability. In the final analysis, these measures may provide more sustainable strategies for community development by both attracting and retaining population (Irwin, Tolbert, and Lyson 1997; Kaglic and Testa 1989; Nelson 1999; Rogerson 1999; Stinner et al. 1992).

## NOTES

1. Scholars such as cultural historian John Gillis (1996; cf. Taylor 1989) point to how, in this context of change, the family takes on unprecedented cultural significance. Specifically, Gillis finds the family pivotal in "mediating the tensions and contradictions built into a political and economic system based on values of competitions, instant gratifications and amoral calculations about persons as well as things" (p. xvi). While the myths, rituals, and icons of the families of America past were provided by religion and community, Gillis points to how they are now largely "self-generated" (Gillis 1996, 19; cf. Putnam 2000).

2. The role of natural amenities in migration behavior has been investigated by other scholars including Carlson et al. (1988), Clark (1991), Comartie (2001), Greenwood and Hunt (1989), and Rudzitis (1999).

3. For a useful review of the use of narrative in anthropological research, see Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps (1996). Ochs and Capps conclude that narrative and self are inseparable as narrative arises out of experience even as it gives shape to that experience. By giving an intelligible order to the events of life, narrative creates temporal continuity

from past into future imagined lives while also acting as a critical interface between self and society.

4. Other studies on urban-to-rural migration suggest similar demographics for noneconomic migration to areas rich in natural amenities (e.g., Fuguitt, Brown, and Beale 1989; Ghose 1998; Jobes 1992, 2000; Judson, Reynolds-Scanlon, and Popoff 1999; Stinner et al. 1992).

5. As a framework for considering the process, Rambo (1993) provides a heuristic stage model of seven steps (context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, consequences). Although intended primarily for the religious context, his stages have clear parallels to experiences of many life-style migrants. Noting how the language of conversion informs popular discourse on personal transformation and growth in a variety of contexts including, for example, the experience of "coming out" among gays and lesbians, Darrol Bryant and Christopher Lamb (1999) suggest that the conversion experience can be understood as a nonreligious phenomenon. It also resonates with models for starting over in the wake of crisis provided by popular self-help literature (e.g., Luban 2001; Sheehy 1977) and frequently used by life-style migrants in their deliberations regarding relocation.

6. For further discussion of the temporal components of a work/family squeeze, see Clarkberg and Moen (2001), McGrattan and Rogerson (1998), Robinson and Godbey (1999), and Schor (1991).

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