SEVEN

The Committed Life

The person beginning the second mountain climb wages a silent rebellion against the "I'm Free to Be Myself" culture that is still the defining feature of our age. That individualistic culture, you'll remember, was itself a rebellion against the stifling conformity of the 1950s. The second-mountain ethos is a rebellion against that rebellion.

Individualism says, Shoot for personal happiness, but the person on the second mountain says, No, I shoot for meaning and moral joy. That individualism says, Celebrate independence, but the second-mountain hero says, I will celebrate interdependence. I will celebrate the chance to become dependent on those I care for and for them to become dependent on me. Individualism celebrates autonomy; the second mountain celebrates relation. Individualism speaks with an active voice—lecturing, taking charge—and never the passive voice. But the second-mountain rebellion seeks to listen and respond, communicating in the voice of intimate exchange.

Individualism thrives in the prosaic world, the world of career choices and worldly accomplishment. The second-mountain ethos says, No, this is an enchanted world, a moral and emotional drama. Individualism accepts and assumes self-interest. The second-mountain ethos says that a worldview that focuses on self-interest doesn't account for the full amplitude of the human person. We are capable of great acts of love that self-interest cannot fathom, and murderous acts of cruelty that self-interest cannot explain. Individualism says, The main activities of life are buying and selling. But

you say, No, the main activity of life is giving. Human beings at their best are givers of gifts.

Individualism says, You have to love yourself first before you can love others. But the second-mountain ethos says, You have to be loved first so you can understand love, and you have to see yourself actively loving others so that you know you are worthy of love. On the first mountain, a person makes individual choices and keeps their options open. The second mountain is a vale of promise making. It is about making commitments, tying oneself down, and giving oneself away. It is about surrendering the self and making the kind of commitment that, in the Bible, Ruth made to Naomi: “Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die and there I will be buried.”

As I mentioned in the introduction, most of us make four big commitments over the course of our lives: to a vocation, to a spouse and family, to a philosophy or faith, and to a community. We think of these commitments as different things. Choosing a marriage seems different from choosing a philosophy or a community. Only one of them, the actual marriage, involves a formal ceremony and an explicit exchange of vows. But the process of commitment making is similar across all four realms. All of them require a vow of dedication, an investment of time and effort, a willingness to close off other options, and the daring to leap headlong down a ski run that is steeper and bumpier than it appears.

How does commitment making happen? It begins with some movement of the heart and soul. You fall in love with something—a person or a cause or an idea, and if that love is deep enough, you decide to dedicate a significant chunk of your life to it.

For most of us this love creeps up slowly. It takes time to figure out if the person or cause is worthy of all the faithfulness, care, and passion that a commitment entails. We build gates around our hearts and let people or causes inside one gate at a time. If you retain a lifelong love for your college or your summer camp or your hometown, you probably had to live in it for a time before its roots sunk ineluctably down into you and the love became deep and permanent.

The few times I've fallen in love with a person, it's been after a long period of nonromantic friendship. Maybe for that reason, I'm fascinated with those cases when the hook gets lodged in the mouth all at once. In 1274 in Florence, a young Dante saw the young girl named Beatrice and, in a flash, was overawed. He gives a striking, almost anatomical, description of a person surrendering to love:

> That spirit which lives in the most secret chamber of the heart began to tremble fiercely so that I felt its agony in the least pulsation, and, then, trembling, it said to me: "Behold a god more powerful than I, who, coming, will rule over me." At that moment, my natural spirit, that which lives in the high chamber to which all the spirits of the senses carry their perceptions, began to marvel deeply, and speaking especially to the spirit of sight, spoke these words: "Now your blessedness appears." At that moment the natural spirit, which dwells in the place where all our nourishment is brought, began to weep, and weeping said these words: "Oh misery, how often will I be troubled from this time on!"

Dante saw and was conquered, and knew instantaneously what trouble this new ruling passion would cause him. But he loved on nonetheless. And this can happen with the love of a person, but also with the love of a political cause or an idea or a God. The love will change everything in unexpected and inconvenient ways.

Once the heart has fallen in love and has acknowledged that love, then the soul feels a powerful urge to make a promise to it. Once love strikes, there is an urge to say, "I will always love you." That's because the very essence of love is dedication. As Dietrich and Alice von Hildebrand once wrote, "A man who would say: 'I love you now, but how long it will last I cannot tell,' does not truly love; he does not even suspect the very nature of love. Faithfulness is so essentially one with love, that everyone, at least as long as he loves, must consider his devotion an undying devotion. This holds good for every love, for parental love and filial love, for friendship and for spousal love. The deeper a love, the more it is pervaded by fidelity."

A commitment is a promise made from love. A commitment is making a promise to something without expecting a return—out of sheer lovingness. There may be a psychic return on a good marriage, or from a commitment to a political cause, or from making music, but that is not why one makes it or why one does it. If a couple is actually in love, and you pull them aside and tell them that this love probably doesn't make sense and they should forsake it, you will almost certainly not persuade them. They'd rather be in turmoil with each other than in tranquility alone.

There is something that feels almost involuntary about a deep commitment. It happens when some person or cause or field of research has become part of your very identity. You have reached the point of the double negative. "I can't not do this." Somewhere along the way you realized, I'm a musician. I'm a Jew. I'm a scientist. I'm a Marine. I'm an American. I love her. I am his beloved.

In this way, a commitment is different from a contract. A person making a contract is weighing pros and cons. A person entering into a contract doesn't really change. She just finds some arrangement that will suit her current interests. A commitment, on the other hand, changes who you are, or rather embeds who you are into a new relationship. You are not just man or woman. You are husband and wife. You are not just an adult; you are a teacher or a nurse. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks clarifies the difference: "A contract is a *transaction.* A covenant is a *relationship.* Or to put it slightly differently: a contract is about interests. A covenant is about identity. It is about you and me coming together to form an 'us.' That is why contracts *benefit,* but covenants *transform.*"

A committed person is giving her word and placing a piece of herself in another person's keeping. The word "commitment" derives from the Latin *mittere,* which means "to send." She is sending herself out and giving another person a claim. She is creating a higher entity. When you enter a marriage, your property is still yours, but it is no longer only yours. It belongs to your spouse, too, or, more properly, it belongs to the union you have both created—this new higher-level thing.

This fervent, love-drenched, identity-changing definition of a commitment is true, but not the whole truth. A commitment isn't just love and a promise, of course. It is love and promise put under law. In living out

a commitment, each party understands the fickleness of feelings, so they bind their future selves to specific obligations. Spouses love each other, but they bind themselves down with a legal, public, and often religious marriage commitment, to limit their future choices for those times when they get on each other's nerves. Curious people may read books, but they also enroll in universities to make sure they follow a supervised course of study for at least a few years into the future. Spiritual people may experience transcendence, but understand that for most people spirituality lasts and deepens only if it is lived out within that maddening community called institutionalized religion. Religions embed the love of God in holidays, stories, practices, and rituals, and make them solid and enduring. As Rabbi David Wolpe once wrote, "Spirituality is an emotion. Religion is an obligation. Spirituality soothes. Religion mobilizes. Spirituality is satisfied with itself. Religion is dissatisfied with the world."

Thus, the most complete definition of a commitment is this: falling in love with something and then building a structure of behavior around it for those moments when love falters. Orthodox Jews love their God, but they keep kosher just in case. But let's not be too stern about this. The yoke committed people place on themselves is not a painful yoke. Most of the time it is a delicious yoke. When I had my first child, a friend emailed me, "Welcome to the world of unavoidable reality." You can be late with a work assignment and you can postpone a social occasion, but if your kid needs feeding or has to be met at the bus stop, you're in an unavoidable reality. Parents groan under the burdens they took on with the commitment of parenthood, but how often have you met a parent who wished they hadn't done it? A thick life is defined by commitments and obligations. The life well lived is a journey from open options to sweet compulsions.

WHAT COMMITMENTS GIVE US

Though commitments are made in a spirit of giving, they produce many benefits. Let me spell out a few:

Our commitments give us our identity. They are how we introduce ourselves to strangers. They are the subjects that make our eyes shine in conversation. They are what give our lives constancy and coherence. As Hannah Arendt put it, "Without being bound to the fulfillment of promises,

we would never be able to achieve the amount of identity and continuity which together produce a 'person' about whom a story can be told; each of us would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of his own lonely heart, caught in its ever-changing moods, contradictions, and equivocalities." Identity is not formed alone. Identity is always formed by joining a dyad with something else.

Our commitments give us a sense of purpose. In 2007, the Gallup organization asked people around the world whether they felt they were leading meaningful lives. It turns out that Liberia was the country where the most people felt a sense of meaning and purpose, while the Netherlands was the place where the lowest percentage of people did. This is not because life was necessarily sweeter in Liberia. On the contrary. But Liberians possessed what Paul Froese calls "existential urgency." In the turmoil of their lives, they were compelled to make fierce commitments to one another merely to survive. They were willing to risk their lives for one another. And these fierce commitments gave their lives a sense of meaning. That's the paradox of privilege. When we are well-off we chase the temporary pleasures that actually draw us apart. We use our wealth to buy big houses with big yards that separate us and make us lonely. But in crisis we are compelled to hold closely to one another in ways that actually meet our deepest needs.

Our commitments allow us to move to a higher level of freedom. In our culture we think of freedom as the absence of restraint. That's freedom *from.* But there is another and higher kind of freedom. That is freedom *to.* This is the freedom as fullness of capacity, and it often involves restriction and restraint. You have to chain yourself to the piano and practice for year after year if you want to have the freedom to really play. You have to chain yourself to a certain set of virtuous habits so you don't become slave to your destructive desires—the desire for alcohol, the desire for approval, the desire to lie in bed all day.

As the theologian Tim Keller puts it, real freedom "is not so much the absence of restrictions as finding the right ones." So much of our lives are determined by the definition of freedom we carry around unconsciously in our heads. On the second mountain it is your chains that set you free.

Our commitments build our moral character. When my older son was born, the delivery was difficult and he came out bruised and blue, with a low Apgar score. He was whisked away to intensive care. It was a harrowing time. In the middle of that first night, I recall thinking, If he should live for only thirty minutes, will it have been worth a lifetime of grief for his mother and me? Before having a kid, I might have thought, Of course not. How could thirty minutes of life for a being who is not even aware of itself be worth a lifetime of grief for two adults? Where's the cost-benefit in that? But every parent will know that it makes perfect sense. After his birth, the logic is different. Instantly it became clear that the life of the child has infinite dignity. Of course it is worth the grief, even if the candle is only lit for such a short time. Once a kid is born you've been seized by a commitment, the strength of which you couldn't even have imagined beforehand. It brings you to the doorstep of disciplined service.

When a parent falls in love with a child, the love arouses amazing energy levels; we lose sleep caring for the infant. The love impels us to make vows to the thing we love; parents vow to always be there for their kid. Fulfilling those vows requires us to perform specific self-sacrificial practices; we push the baby in a stroller when maybe we'd rather go out alone for a run. Over time those practices become habits, and those habits engrave a certain disposition; by the time the kid is three, the habit of putting the child's needs first has become second nature to most parents.

Slowly, slowly, by steady dedication, you've transformed a central part of yourself into something a little more giving, more in harmony with others and more in harmony with what is good than it was before. Gradually the big loves overshadow the little ones: Why would I spend my weekends playing golf when I could spend my weekends playing ball with my children? In my experience, people repress bad desires only when they are able to turn their attention to a better desire. When you're deep in a commitment, the distinction between altruism and selfishness begins to fade away. When you serve your child it feels like you are serving a piece of yourself. That disposition to do good is what having good character is all about.

In this way, moral formation is not individual; it is relational. Character is not something you build sitting in a room thinking about the

difference between right and wrong and about your own willpower. Character emerges from our commitments. If you want to inculcate character in someone else, teach them how to form commitments—temporary ones in childhood, provisional ones in youth, permanent ones in adulthood. Commitments are the school for moral formation.

When your life is defined by fervent commitments, you are on the second mountain.