

*Breakthrough:  
The Relevance of Christian Existentialism*

THE CONSERVATIVE PRECINCTS of American life witnessed more than one kind of dissent in the 1950s. While secular liberals fought to keep the spirit of democracy alive, others confronted the second aspect of the problem that Arthur Schlesinger had limned in the late 1940s: the challenge of finding stable values and social forms appropriate to a democratic culture in the "age of anxiety." To take up this challenge would mean engaging in a kind of cultural dissent, experimenting with new ways of living and thinking. Some young people in 1950s America, fearing anxiety but determined to overcome it, explored in great detail the existentialist outlook that Schlesinger had found attractive but took it in directions that he had not foreseen. By the early 1960s, some of the young existentialists concluded that the way out of anxiety was through disruptive, challenging political activism. This vision of authenticity through dissent led them into the civil rights movement and the new left.

Some of the most politically effective young existentialists offered a relatively acceptable and appealing dissent because they grounded their experimentalism in the legitimacy of Protestant evangelicalism. The early cold war was a time of "religious revival," as some called it, of rising church attendance rates and the ascendancy of evangelical celebrities like the young Billy Graham. Outpourings of the "old-time religion" were noted on college campuses, starting with the upheaval at Wheaton College, outside Chicago,

at the conclusion of World War II. In the 1950s, evangelical groups like the Campus Crusade for Christ won many converts among students. At the University of Texas, conservative Protestantism was the rule, fundamentalism alive and well.<sup>1</sup> Buried deep in the social conservatism of evangelical Protestantism was a latent dissidence, a radical version of this creed's sharp dissatisfaction with contemporary culture. To a minority of young people in the 1950s and 1960s, this latent radicalism came through loud and clear in the highly contemporary form of Christian existentialism.

In the 1950s, students in Austin and elsewhere immersed themselves in the currents of existentialist thought emanating from Europe and circulating throughout the Western world. What emerged from this process by the start of the 1960s was a politicized, seemingly de-Christianized dissident evangelism, a kind of "religionless Christianity," to use the pregnant phrase of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The teachings and example of Bonhoeffer, a German theologian who was executed by the Nazis in 1945 for his involvement in an antigovernment conspiracy, were introduced to young Texans searching for authenticity by Joseph Wesley Mathews, a one-time fundamentalist preacher, at an influential place called the Christian Faith-and-Life Community (CFLC). The CFLC was a residential religious study and training center affiliated with UT. Ronnie Dugger had difficulty making up his mind about Mathews and named him an "inspired merlin . . . genuine, fraud."<sup>2</sup> Others committed to more familiar forms of religiosity and social concern, such as Frank Wright, head of the University Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Austin, always doubted that Mathews and his teachings contributed much to the political ferment of the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> But contribute they did.

Many connections linked the Faith-and-Life Community, "one of those robust experiments in community intellectual living that was in such stark contrast to the comfortable campus life of the 1950s," to the political rebellion of the 1960s. Dick Simpson, a liberal activist, agreed that there was "no place else in conservative Texas" quite like "the Community," as its members commonly called it. Simpson was only one of many students who, between 1956 and 1962, resided for some period of time at the Faith-and-Life Community and later became active in civil rights protest and other liberal and radical political activity. Tom Hayden, one of the leading lights of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in its early phase, called the Faith-and-Life Community "*the* liberated spot on the silent campus" in the early 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

Members of the Community who became active dissidents invariably traveled in the larger orbit of political liberalism around the university. Had it not been for the presence in this environment of secular liberals like

Dugger and Christian liberals like Wright, young people would have been less likely to draw politically dissident inferences from Mathews's existentialism. Existentialism, like the philosophical strains of vitalism and pragmatism that it resembled in some respects, did not in itself imply political engagement of any kind. Yet at this juncture of historical circumstances, amid the synthesis of diverse elements in the political culture of the United States, existentialism fed a radical humanism that infused the dissident search for democracy and authenticity.

The crux of the matter was the conviction that one could turn away from anxiety and toward authenticity if one made oneself open to risk; this was the existentialist faith. Although the Community residents spent countless hours discussing the problem of anxiety, in the end they chose a bold stance of freedom, even of mastery, in a changing world. To the combustible chemistry of this historical moment Christian existentialism contributed the hope of breaking through to a new world where young people might find a new, authentic life. Joe Mathews preached a new evangel, drawing on the Protestant tradition of personal regeneration, as fundamentalists did, transforming it into a newly relevant message of rebirth into authenticity. He helped fashion "a message of love, of understanding, of compassion . . . of courage, of gameness."<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the spirit of "courage" and "game-ness" led to political controversy.

Dugger wondered, "Could it be that Joe knew god but just wasn't introducing him around?"<sup>6</sup> Mathews's theology was unorthodox, but its brash rebellion was calculated to appeal to young people as unmoved by traditional religion as he had become. (This approach found no small success in selling religion: one-tenth of the students who came through the Community reportedly went on to join the clergy.)<sup>7</sup> As existentialist theologians like Rudolf Bultmann had urged, Mathews sought to wrench Christianity out of its ancient trappings and recast it in modern language, symbols, myths, and hopes. Worship, and life itself, became drama. In what the French Catholic thinker Gabriel Marcel called a "broken world," salvation reemerged as therapy.<sup>8</sup> Jesus Christ was a symbol of openness to risk and extremity. Believers sought new selves, not as saints transported to the clouds, but in a "New Being" here on earth. One of Mathews's disciples in the early 1960s remarked, "I think the Community is more like the early Church than other groups are today, because the early Church didn't give a goddamn about life after death. Neither do we."<sup>9</sup> Such heterodox adherents sought to fulfill Bonhoeffer's promise of "a new language, perhaps quite non-religious, but liberating and redeeming—as was Jesus' language; it will be a new language of righteousness and truth."<sup>10</sup>

### Building Community

In the beginning, the Faith-and-Life Community seemed like a thoughtful, conservative venture in Protestant campus ministry. The institution's founder was a genial campus Presbyterian minister named W. Jack Lewis. Steeped in local culture as an undergraduate at UT in the 1930s, Lewis had been head cheerleader, or "yeller." He served as a navy chaplain during World War II and returned home to minister to students at Texas Tech College and then at UT. In 1950/1951 he undertook further theological studies in Britain and Europe and encountered the Iona experiment, an intentional Christian community in Scotland. He thought this kind of experiment might speak to contemporary students in a way that conventional campus ministry did not, and he resolved to begin a similar community in Austin.

In 1952 Lewis assembled a prestigious board of directors that provided the CFLC with both official sanction and a springboard into fund-raising. The board included Harry Ransom, as well as Texas businessmen evidently glad to support this kind of Christian endeavor. But the board was mainly composed of prominent theologians at schools across the country, the most illustrious of whom was James I. McCord, who at this time was moving from the Presbyterian Seminary in Austin to the presidency of Princeton Theological Seminary. McCord had been with Lewis in Scotland, and their conversations had urged Lewis on.

Lewis saw the Faith-and-Life Community as part of the movement for "lay renewal" that had spread across western Europe after World War II. This movement, echoing one of the original themes of the Protestant Reformation, emphasized the religious leadership of the laity. It sought to engage laypersons in continuing theological study and to encourage them to relate theology to society. At the CFLC, the "layman" who was to be engaged in religious dialogue was the university student, "that he might be more informed and articulate in his beliefs, with a view toward his becoming a responsible churchman, parent, and citizen in his life and work." The CFLC undertook this lay training, it explained in a communication to other ministers, "for the sake of the renewal of the Church." The CFLC became a model for lay education and campus ministry known around the country and even the world. McCord averred that by the early 1960s, the CFLC had "become known throughout the nation and around the world as a symbol of how Christians might respond to the demands of a new time." Clergy at many other schools, like Duke and Brown Universities and the Universities of Montana and Wisconsin, modeled their own experiments on the CFLC.<sup>11</sup>

According to its charter, the CFLC was open to members of any "Evangelical Christian Communion" or church, thus placing limits on its ecumenism. In its first year it admitted only men, who numbered thirty. They lived together in what was called the "College House," with university approval. In 1953 the Community opened a "Women's Branch," also numbering thirty women, and the "Men's Branch" expanded to forty-five; each branch totaled about fifty in the later years of the experiment. Mildred Hudgins, the CFLC's "den mother," administered the Women's Branch. The women and men lived separately but had joint classes. Judy Schleyer Blanton, a student who lived in the Community around 1960, remembered students there sneaking in and out of bedroom windows, but there is little reason to believe that more sex went on at the CFLC than elsewhere on campus. Women and men ate Friday evening dinner together at the Men's Branch and participated in unified prayer services. All students who chose to join the Community knew they would have to fulfill the normal undergraduate course requirements in addition to their studies at the CFLC. The curriculum here was likely more challenging than what students encountered in most regular classes at the university.<sup>12</sup>

The Community's members persistently described their activities as "corporate." This reflects the cold war concern that people in advanced industrial societies were faced, in this age of anxiety, with the twin dangers of individual isolation and social conformity—conditions that amounted to a recipe for totalitarianism, according to the social thought of the day. Communal experiments like the CFLC, with its written "covenant" enunciating the social commitments of its members, underscored the need to invest social forms with meaning and intentionality in order to prevent them from becoming mindless or oppressive. Claire J. Breihan and O. R. Schmidt, undergraduates who lived at the Women's Branch in the mid-1950s, recall that the corporate discipline of the CFLC was one of its most attractive aspects to them.<sup>13</sup> The Faith-and-Life Community held that it was difficult for individuals to confront a changing world effectively "without the *discipline and sustenance* of corporate structures." Navigating a new world required the development of "new and creative modes of corporate existence," and the Community's members intended to play a part in this work. Where "the struggle" to create such "creative modes" occurs, they said, "there is the breakthrough. There is the future alive in the present." The CFLC searched "toward the development of the new forms that will, God willing, bring meaning into the midst of meaninglessness for countless persons who are trapped between an old world passing away and a new world being born."<sup>14</sup>

The Community officially stated that its experiment in intentional community was both compatible and interdependent with the pursuit of fully developed individuality, or autonomous “personality,” to use the term promoted by Paul Tillich, one of the Community’s favored theologians.<sup>15</sup> “Authentic, self-consciously disciplined community does not swallow the individual; it rather creates the very possibility of personhood by pushing the individual against the necessity to decide for himself,” the CFLC’s covenant read. “Genuine participation in the structures of community and authentic individuality are two poles of the same reality.” The higher freedom of the *gemeinschaft* was not supposed to mean conformity. At least some students reported that in practice, life in the Community was animated by a bias “against accommodation for harmony’s sake.” (Others felt differently, as I discuss later.) The capacity to disagree was a mark of the really close relationships that bound a true community. “Let us never forget,” the participants agreed, “that though we are utterly bound by our covenant, we remain free at any time and in any circumstance to break the covenant; never, to be sure, by default in decision but by a self-conscious free resolve made in light of other claims.”<sup>16</sup>

Yet for all the innovation of its formal aspect, between 1952 and 1955, the curriculum at the Community took a “conventional approach,” focusing on Bible and theological studies. Lewis grew disenchanted with this curriculum. “There was no existential ‘bite’ to awaken the student to the relevance of Christian faith to life as he experienced it daily,” he reflected later. The study materials had been “presented from the orthodox and/or dogmatic viewpoint” and therefore “seemed often to demand the acceptance of some constituted authority for their validity.” That Lewis found this problematic indicates the antiauthoritarian direction in which his religious thought already was headed.<sup>17</sup>

Lewis sought new students and new teachers. The criteria for admittance to the Community were radically relaxed: No longer did students need to belong to a church, either Protestant or even Christian. Starting in the fall of 1955, any “inquirer” could apply. Previously, most students, like Claire Breihan, had come from conservative Protestant backgrounds, often fundamentalist. Furthermore, university administrators, professors, and clergy had steered toward the Community many students perceived as campus leaders. Al Lingo, a CFLC undergraduate in the mid-1950s who later returned as a teacher, was a member of the Cowboys, a prestigious UT fraternal organization, as well as a Greek fraternity member in good standing. Fred Buss, another Community member from the late 1950s, was a member of the Deacons, another elite campus men’s group. Now “the

door was open to Catholics, Jews, agnostics, atheists, Buddhists, Hindus, and others.”<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, “national, racial, religious, economic, and academic barriers were eliminated” to varying degrees. Most dramatically, the Women’s Branch became the first racially integrated housing on the UT campus in 1954 when it admitted a lone black woman. Residents from the time remember this as a conscious political decision by the group, and it cost the Community some sorely needed financial support. In subsequent years, other black students lived in the Community; one recalls it as “a real enjoyable place to live . . . people were real friendly.” A large number of foreign students lived at the CFLC between 1955 and 1962, one of its most distinguishing features on campus.<sup>19</sup>

Just as important to the Community’s subsequent direction was the appointment in 1956 of Joseph Wesley Mathews as the director of the curriculum. Until he departed for Chicago in 1962, Mathews’s teachings and personality were an omnipresent influence on the character of life and study at the CFLC. McCord recommended Mathews, who was a professor at the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, and the CFLC’s board unanimously agreed. Although Mathews alienated and hurt at least some of the students he taught, he enraptured others. He acquired disciples and enemies, who found him, respectively, inspirational and authoritarian. He brought the “existential ‘bite’” that Lewis wanted. But Mathews went beyond Lewis—eventually beyond what Lewis could stomach—taking the Community, as one of Mathews’s protégés said, “in a revolutionary direction.”<sup>20</sup>

Joe Mathews started his career as an evangelical preacher with fundamentalist leanings. The son of an Ohio Methodist minister, he went to Hollywood in the 1930s to break into the movies and got saved instead in a Los Angeles revival. He maintained a dramatic flair; his heavy silences, poetic outbursts, and fake stammer in the classroom became legend among his students. With his faith intact, he entered the army as a chaplain during World War II. His experiences in the Pacific theater of war “destroyed him” when he found that his religious verities were useless to dying men. “He could offer somebody a cigarette as they died, but he didn’t have anything to say to them. They had to die themselves,” as Lingo puts it.

In a state of intellectual and spiritual crisis, after the war Mathews began studies with H. Richard Niebuhr at Yale Divinity School, where he became immersed in existentialism. The younger Niebuhr’s austere teachings are usually seen as quite conservative, emphasizing human sinfulness and limitations and steering attention away from broader social questions. But Mathews combined this intellectual material with both the evangelis-

tic zeal of his American Protestant tradition and his own dramatic inclinations. He became a local celebrity at Perkins, known for iconoclastic sermons during which he might rip pages out of a church's Bible to illustrate his disdain of the traditional symbols of belief.<sup>21</sup> The contemporary relevance of Mathews's theatrics was indicated by Joe Slicker, Mathews's assistant at the Community, when he remarked, "The gospels are not talking about a guy named Jesus. They are talking about a drama about a guy named Jesus."<sup>22</sup>

Mathews drew students' attention to the questions that had been sweeping through European Protestant circles for decades and in particular to the German theology of Tillich, Bultmann, and Bonhoeffer. Many classified all these thinkers as theological existentialists; Tillich and Bultmann adopted the term themselves. Tillich and Bonhoeffer also were associated with the "neoorthodox" movement in theology, which historians have viewed as a conservative reaction against theological liberalism. Existentialism, however, served as the pathway between theological conservatism and radical humanism. Historically, existentialist philosophy had emerged from Protestantism, particularly in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard (whose writings the students at the CFLC also read). Small wonder, then, that in the cold war United States, existentialism took root most securely in a Protestant religious context. It ended by helping young people reach a place that many of the Faith-and-Life Community's initial establishment supporters could have neither predicted nor wanted.

### *Anxiety and Mastery*

Walter Kaufmann, the editor of an influential English-language anthology on existentialism published in 1956, despaired of producing a definition of existentialism, saying that it "is not a school of thought nor reducible to any set of tenets." He asserted, in fact, that existentialism "is not a philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy" and concluded that "revolt" and "individualism" were perhaps the most stable characteristics of this odd anticreed. "The heart of existentialism," he wrote, was "the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems" of thought, based on the belief that such systematic thinking was "remote from life." It is possible, however, to identify some consistent themes of those thinkers usually classified as existentialist. Kaufmann's remarks hint at a couple of those themes: first, a belief that thought about life should take the experience of life, rather than abstract principles, as its starting point and, second, an affirmation of the

capacity for self-conscious revolt against authority, intellectual or social, as a basic component of human identity.<sup>23</sup>

Kaufmann failed to consider in any detail the Christian existentialists.<sup>24</sup> These thinkers, studied by students at the CFLC, focused on the paired danger and promise of modern life. The danger was anxiety, and Tillich was its major expositor. Anxiety was a feeling of looking into an abyss, produced by a permanent state of estrangement from God or simply from "the ultimate," or the "ground of Being," as Tillich liked to put it, psychologizing religion for the sake of secular readers.<sup>25</sup> Anxiety was an existential condition, that is, a condition of human life itself, according to Tillich, but it had gotten worse in the age of modernity and industrialization. For all this, Tillich urged his readers to say "yes" to life, to embrace life despite the spiritual and psychological threat of anxiety, to embrace the risk of nonbeing in the way that Jesus did on the cross. The real prophet of mastery over modernity for students at the Community, however, was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a less anxious and more politicized figure. A martyr for his political activity, Bonhoeffer became the exemplar of authentic religion in the modern world.

According to midcentury theologians, people of previous eras could get through their lives either without experiencing too much acute anxiety or they could find relief from it in the unchallenged certainties of both this world and the next. The precapitalist, certainly the pre-Reformation European, past was supposedly a time of psychological and spiritual security, the meaning of life anchored in divinely ordained patterns, social and cosmic. But, the narrative went, increasing human control over the physical world disturbed the sense that the world was a perfect and completed structure of divine making. "Only after the victory of humanism and Enlightenment as the religious foundation of western society could anxiety about spiritual nonbeing become dominant," wrote Tillich. More recently, the awareness of other cultures damaged the authority of the Western worldview. Secular humanists celebrated both human power over nature and the human freedom to consciously choose values. Liberal Protestantism was, in a sense, born of these challenges to cultural and theological certainty and of the desire to accept the lessons of the Enlightenment.<sup>26</sup>

Many of the existentialists could not rest easy with this accommodation, and this joined them to the neoorthodox thinkers who rebelled against an easy theological modernism. They did not think the loss of the old certainties could be absorbed so painlessly. They recognized the degree of freedom from necessity that the human species had won in its battle against the natural world, but they feared that spiritually, this physical freedom was sending them toward the abyss. In the 1930s, Tillich wrote that "the man of

today. . . . is the autonomous man who has become insecure in his autonomy." Human control over the world, by itself, might be anything but a comforting prospect. "The spiritual disintegration of our day consists in the loss of an ultimate meaning of life by the people of Western civilization." As so secular a thinker as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. agreed, "progress"—science, capitalism, and culture—stripped the inherited meanings away from life, and anxiety enveloped humanity. Schlesinger prescribed a dose of neoorthodoxy for what ailed the masses. Tillich viewed fascism as a response to this spiritual crisis, an attempt to manufacture a new set of cultural symbols that would provide Europeans with a vision of social order grounded in something transcendent ("blood and soil").<sup>27</sup> The Faith-and-Life Community would make another, less noxious try at this symbol building.

The neoorthodox prescription of traditional Christian faith—and its assertion that God was "wholly other"—convenient though this formula might have proved as a bulwark against anxiety, was not widely convincing. It seemed to fly in the face of decades of accumulating cultural relativism among liberal Christian theologians, both European and American, who had pioneered the comparative study of world religions and who had progressively diluted the specific Christian content of what they considered legitimate belief, in search of the core religious "spirit" that was manifested differently in different cultures.<sup>28</sup> Traditionalists could wish these cultural developments away, but wish was not reality. It was left to others to answer the difficulties of modernity.

No theologian strode more briskly headlong into the future than Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Personally he expressed a rather orthodox obeisance before his Christian God, yet his admirers could take from him his modernism and leave behind his traditionalist aspect. Unlike Tillich, the epitome of scholarship, Bonhoeffer was better known for his life than his work, and his death was the best-known fact of his life. A young German who adamantly opposed the Nazi regime from its start in 1933, he fought the Nazification of the German Lutheran Church, eventually becoming involved in the small, indigenous anti-Nazi resistance. For his knowledge and approval of the failed plot to kill Adolf Hitler in 1944, he was imprisoned and in 1945 he was hanged. His most widely read work was a volume of fragments he wrote near his life's end, published posthumously as *Letters and Papers from Prison*. The Faith-and-Life Community was established only seven years after Bonhoeffer's death, and the moral lessons of World War II—lessons focusing on collaboration and resistance—were much in discussion throughout its lifetime.<sup>29</sup>

In the 1960s Bonhoeffer became, posthumously, a major player in the

In 1963, John A. T. Robinson portrayed Bonhoeffer as the most radical of the "new" theologians. Similarly, the American Harvey Cox, in his 1965 book *The Secular City*, positioned the dead German as the harbinger of secularism. Bonhoeffer's cryptic call for a "religionless Christianity" was congenial to Cox and to many young people of the 1960s. Bonhoeffer proposed to do away with many of the trappings of modern religion and to combine a primitive church with a sense of human control over the world. His "religionless Christianity" would be simultaneously archaic and modern. It would mean a "breakthrough," as Bonhoeffer put it, in beliefs, values, personal life, social life, and politics—a "breakthrough" to a new life.<sup>30</sup>

Bonhoeffer used the phrase the "world come-of-age" to describe the autonomy and mastery over the natural world that humankind had developed in the modern era. In "questions of science, art, and ethics," human understanding and control had supplanted any mythological notion of supernatural control. This was a breakthrough in the history of humankind, and Bonhoeffer celebrated it. He stated bluntly, "Man has learnt to deal with himself in all questions of importance without recourse to the 'working hypothesis' called 'God' . . . it is becoming evident that everything gets along without 'God'—and, in fact, just as well as before." He thought liberal theology was correct in that "it did not try to put the clock back."<sup>31</sup> Unlike Tillich and most other existentialists, Bonhoeffer did not view this freedom from "God" as a source of angst. Rather, he celebrated the "world come-of-age" with no sense of unease. This meant that he saw no reason to naturalize or disembodify God into "the ground of Being"; to him, human autonomy need not mean an estrangement from God. He asserted that humans' very freedom meant that they could make a radically free decision to accept God. He urged a breakthrough to God that would coexist with, not contradict, the breakthrough to autonomy.

Reflecting a modernist conviction that religion had to change with the changing times, the young participants in the Faith-and-Life Community frequently commented on the "New World" they saw emerging in the mid-twentieth century. They felt they lived in "an acutely dynamic world of flux," "an intensely technological world of automation," a world of both "space conquest and nuclear powers" and "technical psychology and inwardness." The new world of science simply "eliminates traditional other-worldly metaphysics," they insisted. Expressing a characteristic concern of their era, they worried that automation was creating "a whole new problem of leisure time," as well as the need to make this time worthwhile. Modern psychology was "transfiguring the whole meaning of personal freedom." This world "is being thrust upon us."

Like Bonhoeffer, the Community's members resolved to embrace the future confidently. Above all, they expressed the view that the people of their time could not go back to a comforting, naive past. "The question of our age," they said, "is not how to return to a static universe but how to respond to the given scene of perpetual change." The challenge, they observed, "is not how to return to naive unawareness, but how to participate authentically in this era of radical self-consciousness." They lived in "the time of experiment."<sup>32</sup>

They mused particularly over the character of human psychology in the world come-of-age. Like Tillich, they thought the development of depth psychology was part of a growing human self-consciousness that any thoughtful person had to confront. "With the new world has come a breakthrough in the human spirit," they explained. The "post-modern man is emerging," characterized by "intensive and extensive consciousness of his situation in an utterly new world. He is the man of awareness." This introspective personality acquired a new awareness of human autonomy, powers from which one could not flee. Community members thought that modern psychological self-awareness had far-reaching implications for human conduct. People know that "another can never finally determine [their] style of life for [them]," that there are "no predetermined patterns for [their] life." Such "new" personalities needed to find their own meaning and direction in life.<sup>33</sup>

This was the paradox of anxiety. Humans carried both the chance and the burden of creating meaning in life. This was their freedom, and it distinguished them from all other creatures. They had to wrestle meaning from the void of nothingness, despite the threat of meaninglessness that was always hovering over their shoulder. If they resisted this challenge, then they refused to be human. The young Christian existentialists of the CFLC shared this conviction with Camus and Sartre. Humans created possibilities for meaning but were never rid of "anxiety, the rubbing together of nothingness and possibility." Anxiety and freedom thus became the two sides of the human coin, both existential conditions. This is why Kierkegaard, after characterizing anxiety as the "sickness unto death," declared that the sickness was "man's advantage over the beast."<sup>34</sup>

### *The Ethics of Authenticity*

Reinhold Niebuhr secured an appointment for Paul Tillich at Union Theological Seminary during the 1930s, as he had done for Bonhoeffer. But whereas Bonhoeffer, guilt stricken for escaping the Nazi regime, returned to his homeland and met his death, Tillich left Germany to

remain in the United States for the rest of his life. Tillich's writings in English exerted great influence in academic circles, as with his three-volume *Systematic Theology*, and more broadly with books like *The Shaking of the Foundations* and *The Courage to Be*. Tillich moved from an early association with Christian socialism to a less clearly political theology that stressed life and love. As much as anyone, he integrated modern psychology with theology. Some have seen him, especially in his later and most influential work, as the purveyor of a therapeutic, amoral theology that avoided politics and banished any genuine religious sensibility. Indeed, he was a theorist of therapy, urging his readers to say "'yes' to life." Young people who read his work in the 1950s, however, took from it not an affirmation of dominant values and ways of life but a critique. Although by the 1950s Tillich seldom engaged in explicit political discussion, his cultural critique helped fuel an impulse toward rebellion.<sup>35</sup>

Tillich reconciled allegiance to God with human freedom by refiguring God as "the ultimate," "the unconditional," or "the ground of Being." This diffuse concept of God made Tillich attractive to theological liberals (even if it remained unclear exactly what Tillich meant). He simply asserted that if one was seized by an "ultimate concern," then one was in a religious state. Thus he reconciled God with human inclinations.

The unconditional is a dimension of all things in this world, their "inner infinity." At particular moments in our lives, the unconditional "break[s] through a given form of individual existence, bringing it into union with the ultimate ground of meaning. It is the experience of being grasped by the essential power and meaning of reality, 'the really real.'"<sup>36</sup> Generally, however, we are out of touch with this ultimate realm, according to Tillich: "The sense of the immediacy of the origin, of the creative sources of man's life, [has been] lost." He lamented, "Under the conditions of human finitude and estrangement that which is essentially united becomes existentially split."<sup>37</sup>

Wholeness, or authenticity, was the goal for existentialists, and it displaced the more traditional objectives of salvation and even goodness. To the Christian existentialists, alienation and sin were one and the same; thus authenticity acquired moral freight as the opposite of sin. Overcoming sin was a matter of ending spiritual estrangement. It was not a matter of good works. Here Tillich found common ground with the neoorthodox rejection of good works as the heart of faith and with the "realist" view of human nature as inherently flawed, a view popularized and put to various political uses by Reinhold Niebuhr.<sup>38</sup> The concept of existential sin, for others, encouraged not a complacency regarding human fallenness but, rather, a striving toward unity—and a promise of redemption.

Nonetheless, existentialist thinkers sometimes suggested a wholesale demolition of conventional codes of morality in search of authenticity, a kind of antinomianism. Carl Michalson, for example, asserted, “Life and desire and the quest for authenticity, better known to religious tradition as faith or salvation—these supersede the restrictions of mere correctness.” Authenticity was the new morality.<sup>39</sup>

In practice, the pursuit of wholeness meant a situational ethics, which the Faith-and-Life Community preached with little reservation. “Emphasis was placed on contextual or situational ethics” in the curriculum, Jack Lewis noted, because “in the end . . . faith is a decision, not a proof-text. It is commitment rather than dogma; risk, not certainty.” This seemed a doctrine appropriate to a new and changing world. In unprecedented circumstances, a personal feel for the authentic action might be all one had to go on. Dietrich Bonhoeffer redefined responsibility thus:

The responsible man acts in the freedom of his own self, without the support of men, circumstances or principles . . . nothing can answer for him, nothing can exonerate him, except his own deed and his own self. It is he himself who must observe, judge, weigh up, decide and act.

“Decide and act,” uncertainty be damned: this was the existentialist credo. This was the way out of brokenness.<sup>40</sup>

The wholeness that Tillich promised would overcome psychological, spiritual, and social alienation, all at once. To Tillich, the achievement of an integrated and forceful “personality” would flow from our reunion with God, and it would go hand in hand with the achievement of community. Tillich agreed with Erich Fromm, a more expressly political and more dissident thinker, that “the right self-love and the right love of others are interdependent, and that selfishness and the abuse of others are equally interdependent.” Tillich’s insistence on a spiritual dimension to the achievement of community and personality, on the need to gain contact with the “really real,” distanced him from the secular humanist ideal of autonomous personality which, he said, “tends to cut the individual off from his existential roots.”<sup>41</sup>

The bond that joined individual persons to God was essentially the same as what bound humans together in a true community, according to Tillich: This bond was love. He wrote specifically of *agape*, one of several varieties of love, different from *eros* or *libido* or *philia*. It was the love that judged and forgave and took doubt and anxiety into itself. *Agape* was the same kind of love that in the 1950s and 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. (who wrote his doctoral dissertation on Tillich) spoke of as the force that could judge America and overcome its divisions. It was the courageous love that judged in humil-

ity and in the knowledge of identity with the accused. It was the kind of love that would heal what was separated. The overcoming of existential alienation would be a “union-in-love with the ground of our being.”<sup>42</sup>

According to Tillich and King, we experience this powerful love from God in moments of crisis when we exhaust our capacity to cope with our situation. This was what Tillich called the “human boundary-situation.” It is the time when we experience the inadequacy of our freedom, in the proverbial “long dark night of the soul.” The paradigm of the boundary-situation is Jesus’ abandonment on the cross. God’s love arrives when we are most bereft and vulnerable. This means that we must take risks, expose ourselves to vulnerability, be willing to experience the terror of our freedom; this is the way to make contact with the unconditional. In this way Tillich provided a religious parallel to the broader existentialist premium on risk taking. We are free to put ourselves in situations in which we are “radically threatened”; here we will find authenticity.<sup>43</sup>

Love is both redeeming and transcendent. It is the point of view from which we can render prophetic judgment on the world; again, *agape* is the love that forgives and reconciles while judging. Love is the source of “the transmoral conscience,” the only sure guide to “ethics in a changing world,” wrote Tillich. It is the only force that “can transform itself according to the concrete demands of every individual and social situation without losing its eternity and dignity and unconditional validity.” These are the moral and political implications of Tillich’s doctrine of love, which seemed amoral and apolitical to his critics. Love not only is the basis for spiritual and social integration but also provides the ground for criticism of the present and the guide for behavior toward other persons in uncertain, changing times. Tillich wrote that the social consequence of love as a guide to action is justice.<sup>44</sup>

Only by drawing these social consequences from God’s love for us can we maintain a sense of connection with the unconditional. Spiritual integration cannot be achieved successfully without applying the rule of love to others. Tillich asserted what he saw as the political implication: “Without the collaboration of individuals within the movements for social justice, no spiritual reconstruction can be conceived of.” Without a corollary concern for social justice, in Tillich’s view, the ideal of personality can never be more than the secular humanist ideal of individual liberty—entailing the loss of meaning that he thought follows that ideal.<sup>45</sup>

If we experience God’s love and spread it outward, living in a community of love, we will exist no longer in a state of meaninglessness, said Tillich, but in “the New Being.” The New Being is a life “that overcomes the frustrations, the *fragmentariness*, and the *perversions* of human existence, *bringing*

together that which is separated.” It is an authentic state of existence. Provocatively, Tillich called it the “Protestant Gestalt of grace,” a healing process. “The grace of God in Christ is a therapy,” said Michalson. It “is the medicine of salvation; it heals the sickness of freedom.” This promise of the New Being, Tillich declared, was what the Protestant churches should preach to the people of the twentieth century. The gospel of therapy and authenticity, not the promise of a heavenly afterlife, would prove meaningful to them.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, the search for wholeness and authenticity seemed by far the most salient aspect of the new theology for its student audience. Young people in the 1950s often couched the questions of “being” and authenticity in terms of a search for “identity.” The staff of the Faith-and-Life Community reported that they and other campus ministers had found the question “Who am I?” was the one with which students had been “consumed” over the entire period since the end of World War II.<sup>47</sup> Students expressed feelings of alienation from their authentic selves and confusion about who they were or who they were supposed to be. The CFLC staff reported that many students were “acutely aware within themselves of a deep, uneasy, lonely emptiness . . . sick of the illusions, pretensions, fake roles and masks by which they hide from life as it is.” One young woman said this was “an age of despair.” Keith Stanford, another Community member, thought this problem was related to sexual confusion and repression. He observed a “widespread common necessity felt that one must again and again play out these masculinity or femininity pageants” and thought this compulsion pointed to “a deeper dislocation” or anxiety. “That we do not clearly know who we are as sexual beings is eloquent testimony that we do not know ourselves as *selves*,” he thought.<sup>48</sup>

Students absorbed from Christian existentialism therapeutic concerns, as the preceding comments indicate, and they sometimes discussed this desire for personal knowledge and integrity in terms of becoming authentic or human. The “problem of ourselves,” thought student Meg Godbold, was “the problem of what perspective, vision, effort, and courage we can call forth to embody competence and authentic style.” In her view, to live as a human meant learning “how to live vitally and authentically.” It was crucial to “know and embody very fully what it is to be human.”<sup>49</sup> There was little theology in these complaints and ambitions. To many young people, the ideals of authenticity and humanism were the most powerful elements in the radical religion they encountered.

### *Breaking Through*

A cataclysmic break had to be made if one wished to enter the New Being. In a sense, this was the most important message of the Faith-and-Life

Community. The existentialist message of breakthrough updated the long North American Protestant tradition of regeneration and revival into a search for authenticity. The theologian Edward Hobbs declared that one had to “die to everything he ever has been, good intentions and all.” To live for the sake of the things of this world was to exist in death, he asserted. “By abandoning our old understanding of ourselves—our false, death-dealing understanding—resolutely, honestly, responsibly,” we could find new life. Emil Brunner wrote that God’s grace meant “reconciliation,” which amounted to a “complete reversal of the direction of man’s life.” If we could make this break, we might discover “the new life,” in which “God has really come to man.” The “new life” was “the New Birth, the Divine establishment of the ‘new man.’”<sup>50</sup>

But this New Being required a dual breakthrough: to the “really real” and to other human beings. Only in community was the New Being possible. Dietrich Bonhoeffer agreed, and he offered a concrete model for the “break-through to community” and to the New Being: the discipleship of the New Testament. Writing about the early Christian church out of his own resistance to unjust authority, Bonhoeffer’s modern discipleship was a conspiratorial community of resistance.

Bonhoeffer left an account of his experience running a renegade seminary in Germany in the 1930s, *Life Together*, which became a model for the Christian Faith-and-Life Community’s “common life together.” Here he specified the method by which the members of a spiritual community could simultaneously strengthen their bonds and affirm one another’s individual personhood. This method was confession. “In confession the break-through to community takes place.” In confession, we greeted one another as sinners: “The basis on which Christians can speak to one another is that each knows the other as a sinner,” Bonhoeffer wrote. Confession was humiliating. Christ was humiliated on the cross, and those who followed him needed to embrace this, to admit the experience of humiliation as equally essential as risk as a landmark on the way to the new life. “In the deep mental and physical pain of humiliation,” he wrote, “before a brother—which means, before God—we experience the Cross of Jesus as our rescue and salvation.” As in Tillich’s human boundary-situation, in confession, we chose to make ourselves vulnerable and thereby found God. “In confession the break-through to new life occurs,” Bonhoeffer declared.<sup>51</sup>

The CFLC covenant’s discussion of guilt and community reflected a desire for transparency, leading to breakthrough, strongly reminiscent of Bonhoeffer’s account. In recognition of common guiltiness, the students affirmed, each would open herself or himself to “the gaze of another.” The participants in the Community affirmed their intention of “exposing our-

selves to our fellows” and pledged to accept one another in their guilt. “The releasing of hidden guilt and the possibility of embracing the same, is that without which we cannot and do not have life.” Participants felt that one of the most notable aspects of their experience at the Community was the “intensity of relationships” they developed. Many who came to the Community wanted “to enter into an open dialogue with other awakened people about what it means to live genuinely as human beings before one another.”<sup>52</sup>

Joe Mathews encouraged such hopes for a breakthrough to community and for individual regeneration. Both his followers and his detractors saw him trying to induce the same kind of crisis he himself had known, a crisis of belief and identity. He had known his own boundary-situation, and his young charges would know theirs if he had anything to say about it. “Breaking people down” was important to him, as one of his protégés, Casey Hayden, later remembered. The idea that breakdown might lead to breakthrough was firmly rooted in both modern psychological theory and Protestant theology, and the Community echoed this idea clearly. Even Jack Lewis, a more conventional thinker than Mathews, saw crisis leading to salvation. “A breakthrough is a gift that we acknowledge when we have been broken through. Ask those who have returned from the valley of the shadow in mental illness, alcoholism, family disruption, business failure and other personal or social crises.”

For some, breakdown did not lead to breakthrough. At least a couple of students from the Community ended up in mental hospitals, and some blamed Mathews, at least in part.<sup>53</sup> Foreshadowing the criticisms of new religious groups which, in the 1970s, were labeled cults, some former Community members criticized what they termed the “brainwashing” techniques that Mathews used on students. In 1964, several people complained that “a little ‘cult’” had grown around a certain staff member, who went unnamed but who undoubtedly was Mathews. He “spent several weeks destroying every belief, every shred of self-confidence, every competence, and every anything else that composed our persons,” one recalled. “This was a stated goal—so he could help bring us to the light.” One might encounter “*ridicule* and *sarcasm* . . . if one did not accept the Community line.” To some, this treatment seemed to violate the themes of openness, love, and honesty that the group championed. “This was the real paradox! The teachers emphasized openness, honesty, permissiveness, freedom of thought, etc.—and yet I found I had to vomit back the ‘party-line’ or I was tabbed a person who really didn’t understand myself or was simply afraid to be honest with myself and others.”<sup>54</sup>

Others were more measured in their criticism. “You could accept or reject the ideas of others, but you were pressured to say why,” said one former participant in the Community, who then added, in a candid afterthought, “This pressure for responsibility is something I often resented.” Doubtless by the early 1960s, the more conservative Christians felt embattled here in the face of the Community’s increasingly radical theology. Casey Hayden offers a more favorable assessment, however. She moved into the Community after a short time in a women’s dormitory at the university and found in Mathews a congenial ear for her dissatisfaction with mainstream campus life, as well as a kindness that others do not note. Some of Mathews’s detractors saw him as domineering, even obnoxious, but not dangerous. Dorothy Burlage, far from unreserved in her enthusiasm for him, found Mathews “extreme, doctrinaire, zealous,” though “brilliant.” In his pursuit of breakdown and breakthrough, “nothing was sacred.”<sup>55</sup>

When describing the experience of breakthrough, Bonhoeffer used an image of childbirth to invoke the ancient Christian tradition of spiritual rebirth. Why not simply begin again? One could be reborn in Christ as the “new man of the future.” If others felt despair, the attitude of the child was the adequate response. Here, he wrote, the existential “echoless crying out from solitude into the solitude of self, the protest against all kinds of duress, has unexpectedly received an answer. . . . He who has grown to the man in exile and wretchedness grows to be the child as he finds his home.” Whoever could make this leap back toward openness and simplicity could make the leap into the future. Bonhoeffer disdained “equivocation and pretence,” and he hoped to find the way “back to simplicity and straightforwardness,” evoking an Adamic hope for cultural and personal rebirth.<sup>56</sup>

Some participants in the Community reported just this kind of rebirth, evoking a modernist conversion experience. Lois Boyd, a student from the University of Oklahoma who came to the CFLC for a retreat in 1962, described how the Austin students communicated to her the themes of rebirth and freedom.

“Come on,” they shouted at us, “You can LIVE.” They shouted this at us in a lot of ways—poems, a movie, and those noisy pictures that came alive in that room and spoke to us. . . . They were calling out the same message . . . over and over. . . . “Come on—You can do it—You have Cosmic Permission to LIVE!” . . . The air was sweet—Life was good—and—I KNEW IT WAS SO!

This “cosmic permission to live” echoed Tillich’s “‘yes’ to life.” It also stood as an implicit rebuke to the conservative church culture native to the

region. The students were asserting that knowing God did not mean giving up one's freedom or life's pleasures. "There was room for freedom—room to LIVE!" Boyd exulted. She compared her experience at this retreat to a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis and a child emerging from a womb. As she explained, "Our Lives were so very new . . . and birth is such a delicate, fragile thing—and violent—and personal. But good! Only the newly Alive can know how good!" Now everything appeared in a new light. "Everything was so *full of meaning*," she said. "Oh God! Can LIFE be so wonderful?"<sup>57</sup>

### *The Appeal of Avant-Gardism*

Many members of the Community saw political implications in the breakthrough to community, to authenticity, and to new life. One contemporary observer noted that "debate among students [at the Faith-and-Life Community] is likely to center very rarely on whether a person should be baptised [*sic*], and very commonly on such problems as militarism, racism, and poverty."<sup>58</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and work inspired the social revolutionary liberation theology of Latin America. Working in a less polarized time and place when political radicalism was far less legitimate—the United States in the 1950s—Joe Mathews drew on Bonhoeffer's example to put across the view that political rebellion was part and parcel of the search for authenticity. The CFLC stated its goals thus: "To Recover that kind of genuine dialogue among contemporary men which will issue in creative social structures capable of mediating authentic personal existence and new possibilities for justice for all men who must respond in one fashion or another to this world."<sup>59</sup>

Dialogue, community, and authenticity, it seems, were bound up with the pursuit of justice. This surprised some because the young people participating in this discussion came to their dissident conclusions by an oblique route; it was the personal desire for a breakthrough to authenticity that led them down this path.

If community was a necessary part of the breakthrough to authenticity, then, as suggested earlier, the question of who might belong to the community quickly arose. To Bonhoeffer, the inclusion of the weak and suffering in the community was a particular message of the gospels. "The exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people, from a Christian community may actually mean the exclusion of Christ; in the poor brother Christ is knocking at the door."<sup>60</sup> If love was the cement of community, then the question became whom one should love. In the Sermon on the Mount,

Jesus urged love of one's neighbor. Some interpreted this conservatively, taking it to mean that we should love those near us or those like us. Bonhoeffer, internationalist and enemy of anti-Semitism, showed little patience with discriminations between neighbors and nonneighbors. "Who is my neighbour?" he asked mockingly. "Is it my kinsman, my compatriot, my brother Christian, or my enemy? . . . We have literally no time to sit down and ask ourselves whether so-and-so is our neighbour or not. We must get into action." Written in the Germany of the 1930s by an anti-Nazi preacher, the original subversive meaning of these words was clear. In the American South of the 1950s and 1960s, the words might disclose a similar meaning, suggesting the parallel, which partisans of the civil rights movement frequently drew, between the Nazis' treatment of Jews and the southern white treatment of African Americans.<sup>61</sup>

"Getting into action" meant political action. Instead of looking for a God of strength, the point was to accept a God of weakness and to accept responsibility oneself for doing what needed to be done. Merely bearing witness to evil events was not sufficient, Bonhoeffer decided, nor was empathy with the victims of injustice. The better response was political action intended to stop evil. If this meant becoming guilty oneself, then so be it. "I believe that God can and will bring good out of evil, even out of the greatest evil," Bonhoeffer wrote. "For that purpose he needs men who make the best use of everything," and he included the careful use of violence, as his approval of the plot against Hitler indicates.<sup>62</sup>

Years later, Marxist-influenced liberation theologians sought to form "base communities" that worked for social justice.<sup>63</sup> As noted earlier, these radicals drew on Bonhoeffer's example. Even though Bonhoeffer was no leftist, he offered a prophetic critique of a complacent, comfortable church. "To make a start, it should give away all its property to those in need," he wrote nonchalantly.<sup>64</sup> He envisioned a politically powerless church, an outpost of Christian spirit, what Harvey Cox, borrowing from Bonhoeffer, later called a *kerygmatic* church, announcing the "good news" of the gospels in a way that was relevant to the world, "not in the form of general propositions but in the language of specific announcements about where the work of liberation is now proceeding and concrete invitations to join in the struggle." Cox called such a church "God's *avant-garde*."<sup>65</sup>

Students in the Community looked beyond their individual selves for authenticity, and ultimately many of them embraced the role of cultural and political avant-garde. They confessed to "participation in the widespread estrangement and alienation in all social structures of our day" and issued a

call “to face the breakdown of authentic human relations in [our] marriages and homes.” They looked to social causes to explain personal difficulties and also to social solutions.<sup>66</sup> To “know yourself as a whole being,” Keith Stanford said, one needed to be a part of something bigger. Don Warren affirmed the sociality of personal identity, remarking, “We discover who we are[,] not in silent and lonely meditation, but in the midst of the world given to us.”<sup>67</sup> Participation in the wider world was the only possible antidote to personal malaise, the path to a personal breakthrough. Both men thought that not just community but “being freed for community *in mission* is to discover the meaning of personal freedom.”<sup>68</sup>

Participants in the Community grew disgusted with what they considered excessive introspection. They enthusiastically read a great deal of psychoanalytic literature, including Freud, Fromm, Rollo May, and Viktor Frankl, but they thought it was possible to be too psychologically oriented.<sup>69</sup> Dottie Adams derided the person who “is always prepared to pull the psychological tools out of his little black bag and start dissecting.” This type reveled in the analysis of his “sick, sick society,” Carol Darrell pointed out; he “delights in being told how sick he is” himself, which left him “paralyzed.” Like the “cultured men” whom Kierkegaard despised, he killed everything with too much thought and avoided making decisions. “He has pushed *life* out of him,” said Darrell, and “has assumed the posture of a mere spectator.” He was afraid of decision and commitment.<sup>70</sup>

Such a person was afraid of life itself. Like many who would follow them in the coming years, the students here posed their alternatives in the rhetoric of life against death. Darrell characterized the navel gazer almost as a vampire: “He has all sorts of expressions for describing the world as one vast graveyard and he sees his job as constantly reminding people that they are dead.” Unfortunately, she thought, “this fad is so much a part of our entire way of living in the mid-twentieth century” that college students could not escape it.<sup>71</sup>

Don Warren agreed that the time for strictly personal rumination was past. “No longer silence, no longer inwardness unaccompanied, but life, full life, historical life . . . this is the demand and the possibility in our day.”<sup>72</sup> In the Community’s rhetoric, a world of life was a world in which the “brokenness” of which Marcel wrote was reversed. Excessive introspection only prolonged the state of alienation. “We have forgotten who it is that we are,” one prayer service read. “We have fragmented the world.” The participants intoned, “We have come to remember our life/for we are dead men.” They thanked God for giving them new life, which occurred, they said, “only in the world.”<sup>73</sup>

They spoke of a holistic “life of commitment” that extended to both per-

sonal relationships and public behavior; this was the slogan proclaimed on the cover of the Community’s main publication in 1962.<sup>74</sup> Mentors like Lewis and Mathews may have had in mind a social agenda from their earliest involvement with the CFLC. But for reasons of both principle and practicality, the Community’s literature often discussed social commitment in a relativist fashion, urging students to commit themselves to something. The members of the Community prayed for strength “to be responsible” in “politics . . . the social order . . . education . . . vocation.” When studying “Applied Christianity,” said Jack Lewis, they discussed in their classes how they could lead a “responsible life in the world,” in the realms of family, culture, politics, and economics.<sup>75</sup>

The Community’s sense of worldly responsibility sometimes displayed a sharper political edge. In a prayer service in 1961, after many words about death and fragmentation, those assembled recited a section on “The Life,” characterizing their new life in highly political terms.

*We have been called to live:*  
*to be responsive and sensitive;*  
 .....  
*Let us take upon ourselves the urgencies of this world.*  
 .....  
*enable us to be responsible:*  
 .....  
*to the people of this world*  
*may we have compassion for*  
*the starving*  
*the sick*  
*the estranged*  
*the oppressed*  
*the imprisoned.*

These were sympathies that resonated with Bonhoeffer’s experience and thought. Committing themselves along these lines was the way, the prayer suggested, to overcome fragmentation. This was the path to a new life.<sup>76</sup>

Some of these Bonhoefferian sympathies were similar to those that Camus expressed. Students at the Community, like Dorothy Burlage and Casey Hayden, also read Camus.<sup>77</sup> Even though he was a declared atheist, there were many points of contact between him and the Christian existentialists, particularly the emphasis on individual decision and resistance against injustice as keys to human identity. Many politically minded Christians were attracted to his work, and Camus himself wrote that there was something of value in Christianity. In an essay quoted in the *Letter to Laymen*, entitled “The Unbeliever and Christians,” Camus stated that “the

world of today needs Christians who remain Christians.” He declared that true Christians must

voice their condemnation . . . they should get away from abstraction and confront the blood-stained face history has taken on today . . . I am waiting for a grouping of those who refuse to be dogs and are resolved to pay the price that must be paid so that man can be something more than a dog.<sup>78</sup>

A weekend seminar for laypersons at the Faith-and-Life Community included many readings from Camus, including this essay, as well as another entitled “No Bystanders.” All existentialist thinkers believed that people should “get away from abstraction.” Influenced by thinkers like Camus and Bonhoeffer, students at the Community thought that political engagement and commitment was the way to accomplish this. The way to be human was to refuse to be complicit.<sup>79</sup>

The Faith-and-Life Community’s leaders viewed the Community as a model for a new, avant-garde church that would “get away from abstraction” and “voice its condemnation.” Their mission was to announce the “good news,” the *kerygma*, in a more socially involved way than the conventional churches did: “The Church’s only reason for being is to declare this good news to man by living in the very midst of the world as the embodiment of her Gospel.” They would be a living example of the Christian message, but not in a monastic way.<sup>80</sup> The Community’s members often spoke of being on the “edge,” of “finding the edge.” The Community’s ideal, Al Lingo remembers, was

to be at the edge, between the no longer and the not yet. Most people lived in the no longer. Those things that were okay, that were ordinary institutions. But what was coming as the not yet was being forged like somebody who was laying track before the train came. . . . To point the way. The pioneer, the social pioneer.

He explains what this idea meant in practice in Texas in the late 1950s and early 1960s: “There was a cutting edge in race relations, to be on. And if you weren’t on the cutting edge, then where were you?”<sup>81</sup> God’s avant-garde could not avoid taking political risks.

This, finally, was what Community member Meg Godbold meant when she said that “we at the College House talk about responsible action, being historical people, and creating culture.” This meant acting as the social pioneer, entering into unknown territory, despite the “uncertainty of fulfillment.” It was “as a point of authenticity” that people should “engage ourselves this way,” she wrote. Casey Hayden recalls the importance of the “tragic hero or heroine” image to her and her friends at the Community,

something they derived partly from Camus’s writings. This meant that it was meaningful to take political action not only when “fulfillment” was likely but also when the risks were great and the promise of success small. Political action was taken not just for instrumental purposes but because this was the path to authenticity.<sup>82</sup>

In their desire to be “in the world,” Community members cast their gaze far and wide. They seemed hungry for knowledge of the world distant from Texas, for as much knowledge as they could get. They wanted to feel connected to what seemed like the most exciting developments in the world—“the edge.” Starting in the late 1950s, CFLC staff members took summer trips to different parts of the world, making contact with clergy embarked on experiments that had something in common with theirs, and they returned to Austin to give exhaustive reports on what they had learned. Community members were assigned different parts of the world to research—economically, politically, culturally—and reported back to their fellows. They studied the political movements that at this time were sweeping both Europe and the Third World—particularly the nationalist movements in the Third World, which these American students found exhilarating, in part because of the role played by other students in those movements. As noted earlier, after 1956, many foreign students at UT lived in the Community, and no doubt this contributed to this interest in world events. Students here were sympathetic to the nonaligned movement among Third World countries. They maintained the same interest in the worldwide ecumenical movement that Bonhoeffer and his colleagues had shown in the 1930s. They also sympathized with Third World nationalism, seeing it as inevitable and healthy, and they thought an enlightened ecumenical Christianity could play a role in abetting that movement.<sup>83</sup>

Although the Community’s staff had national and worldwide contacts and although they saw their experiment as a model for other churches, the students were most concerned with fulfilling their role as avant-garde in their more immediate environment, especially the university. Wesley Poorman, a seminary intern who worked on the CFLC staff in 1961, wrote that the campus minister should “gather a residual body of committed Christians who will be a leavening force, not only within the community of faith, but also within the community of learning.” According to Lingo, among Community members, “the commonality . . . was that people knew they were doing something on behalf of the university. That our mission was to somehow be a light in the midst of the university.”<sup>84</sup>

If the Community’s members were interested in resisting oppressive authority, in the South the challenge of racial oppression was presented to them more clearly than any other, especially after the advent of the civil

rights movement in the mid-1950s. On several occasions, Community members expressed solidarity with African Americans. As noted earlier, the Women's Branch admitted a black woman in 1954. As an undergraduate member of the Community in the mid-1950s, Lingo, after some prodding by a fellow Community member, went to the black students' small dormitory on campus to ask the students there why they were bothered that the Cowboys, an honorary society of UT undergraduate men of which Lingo was a member, were preparing once again to stage their annual charity minstrel show. After spending several hours there on a couple of evenings, he thought he had learned a few things, and he proceeded to organize a petition against the minstrelsy, to argue at Cowboys meetings that this tradition should be terminated, and to communicate the African American students' concerns to a dean at the university. He did not succeed in stopping the show. (The minstrel shows continued until the early 1960s.) But, Lingo reflects, "It was a breakthrough for me—you know? . . . No one necessarily would have raised that for me at the student dining hall or the fraternity, you know? But the Christian Faith-and-Life Community was made up of people who—who were sensitive and aware and responsive to things." Later, as a member of the Community staff, he traveled to small-town, all-white churches outside Austin to preach sermons against segregation and in support of civil rights demonstrations.<sup>85</sup>

Most visibly, many Community members participated in the civil rights protests that were held near the campus in 1960/1961 (discussed in detail in chapter 4), possibly accounting for more participants than any other single source. Other students took different actions. Several of the leaders of these protests and other insurgent liberal activities, such as Casey Hayden, Anthony Henry, Jim Neyland, Vivien Franklin, and Brad Blanton, lived at the Faith-and-Life Community for some time while at UT. The Faith-and-Life Community did not undertake this civil rights protest as a "community in mission." Rather, a group of people who spent time together at several places and who felt a sense of community as a subset of the larger student population were encouraged in this political action by the Community.<sup>86</sup>

Such political interventions were appropriate to the "time of experiment." Political risk taking was one facet of a more general experimentalism that infused the Faith-and-Life Community, an improvisational attitude whose theatricality was part of the Community's avant-gardism. This dramatic view of life, including political life, was important throughout the dissident culture of the 1960s. Community members did not shrink from the aestheticist connotations of the avant-garde role; on the contrary, they frankly spoke of their abiding concern with style, their desire to cultivate an appealing "life

image." This emphasis on style accounted for a good deal of the mystique that the Community acquired around the UT campus. The search for a "life image" was an attempt to generate a contemporary substitute for something that had always been culturally important. The Community suggested that people always had given their lives meaning and had found guidance for their actions in central images or symbols. But the old images were no longer plausible, and a self-conscious search for new images was urgent.<sup>87</sup>

As noted earlier, Mathews had little use for the familiar symbols of faith, but he was an apostle of symbolism, of drama; indeed, his own destruction of the old symbols gave him the opportunity to enact his own drama of rebellion. He encouraged Community members to experiment with new images from the worlds of poetry, film, and drama that were meaningful to them. Mathews viewed worship as an important site of symbolism, "the self-conscious symbolic activity of the faithful community." Members of the staff took turns leading prayer services and were encouraged to design their own formats. The script for the daily service was called the "choreography."<sup>88</sup> In these efforts, the Community echoed Tillich's view that we could find in all things and acts a dimension of depth and meaning that was often missing, as well as Erich Fromm's call to recover "the forgotten language" of symbolic life.<sup>89</sup> Casey Hayden says she took from her experience in the Community the desire to "make of one's life a sacrament."<sup>90</sup> Yet the Community aestheticized worship, affirming the need for symbolic richness in its rituals; thus to make life into a sacrament was, perhaps, also to make one's life into art.

No one registered the effect of the Community's dramatic mystique more sharply than did Ronnie Dugger, who was fascinated with Mathews's persona. "Joe Mathews, the inspired merlin, the mystifying poet of prayer to one's own privacy, genuine, fraud, the leader of the Community," Dugger mused. "Could it be that Joe knew god but just wasn't introducing him around? Joe wouldn't exactly say, but he wouldn't with transfixing grace." Dugger's own abandonment of his inherited faith may have fostered the ambivalence he felt about Mathews's sincerity. It is remarkable that despite his own apostasy, Dugger still found in Mathews the intoxicating, elusive promise of hidden wisdom, the mystic implication of knowledge deeper than what we see routinely on the surface of life. This was the promise of the "really real," the sense of which anthropologist Clifford Geertz, echoing Tillich, asserts is the kernel of genuine religious experience.<sup>91</sup>

Some found the intense group of staff and students gathered at the Community a little intimidating, even weird. "They knew it wasn't fundamentalism, but they weren't sure what it was," says Lingo. John Silber took a particular interest in students from the Community, but he also disagreed

vehemently with its intellectual and ethical approach. Shortly after Mathews arrived at UT, in a timely, microcosmic clash of perspectives, he and Silber held a series of debates in the University Y. Each presented his own response to the question "What is the most important thing in life?" Mathews represented the call for individual decision, based on authentic feeling and the concrete situation; Silber stood for the rational application of clear principle.

Each night the crowd grew bigger, hundreds eventually overflowing the room. Samuel Beckett's minimalist play *Waiting for Godot* had recently been staged at UT, and it became a point of contention between Silber and Mathews, each shouldering an ego of no small mass, competing for the mantle of intellectual mentor to the brightest students on campus. Some said the play reflected an existentialist outlook and spoke to the present age of anxiety, despair, and isolation, an era that perhaps, some young people suggested, was passing. Mathews expressed the view that Beckett's work remained quite meaningful, and Silber contended that on the contrary, *Godot* was "empty" of meaning. He viewed it as an expression of hopelessness, not at all useful to young people's attempts to grapple with the world around them. Despite Silber's considerable forensic skills, it was to be the existentialist outlook, far more than the rationalist one, that enlivened young people in the years ahead.<sup>92</sup>

### *The Contribution of Christian Existentialism*

This one institution illustrates, in a particularly vivid and direct way, the broader influence of existentialist ideas on the emerging dissident youth culture of the 1960s. Students who spent time at the Christian Faith-and-Life Community in the years between 1952 and 1962 subsequently moved toward diverse efforts at self-fashioning and social change, and the ideas they absorbed at the Community continued to shape these activities for many years.

Strong personal links connected the Community to the early new left. After college, Casey Hayden worked for the YWCA and became an important member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), laboring in the civil rights movement of the Deep South. She also served on the national executive committee of Students for a Democratic Society and was an influential presence at that group's 1962 Port Huron Conference, whence came the highly popular *Port Huron Statement*. In the mid-1960s Hayden helped spur the formation of the women's liberation movement with her writings, widely circulated among the American left, on the position of women in American society. Later on, she became deeply engaged

with the counterculture of the era. Dorothy Burlage at first followed a similar path after graduation. She worked for the Y, in SDS, and with various civil rights and antipoverty groups; in addition to this activism, she was able to attend Harvard Divinity School for a time. In 1970 she returned to school and became a child psychotherapist. Tom Hayden was the main author of the *Port Huron Statement*, approved a year after his marriage to Casey, which took place at the Faith-and-Life Community. The similarity between certain ideas at work in the Community and those expressed at Port Huron may be due to the distinct influence of the Austin experiment as well as to the general currency of these ideas at the time.<sup>93</sup>

Others who "graduated" from the Community went elsewhere. Claire Johnson Breihan worked for more than two decades in the Austin Independent School District as a specialist in racial integration. In the 1960s and 1970s, Al Lingo worked with Joe Mathews to build a dissident, even revolutionary, church along the radical lines that the Faith-and-Life Community had laid out. Afterward, Lingo continued his involvement in countercultural, new age, and civil rights activity. Dick Simpson became a scholar of African politics, a prominent activist in Chicago city politics, and finally an ordained minister. Joann Thompson also worked with Mathews, later becoming an activist on health care issues, based at New York City's Riverside Church. For all these people and many of their contemporaries, the quest for authenticity and the sense of social mission were thoroughly intertwined.<sup>94</sup>

Nonetheless, the Community split in 1962 over the issue of how to balance the two. Mathews's goal, in Judy Schleyer Blanton's view, was to "infiltrate" the mainline Protestant churches and to use them as a base for the pursuit of a "social justice agenda." Jack Lewis thought Mathews was scaring away the financial donations that the Community needed and still sought from well-heeled Texans. He resolved to steer the CFLC back to a more conventional religious education curriculum. But rather than be fired, Mathews quit, and a majority of the staff members left with him. They went to Chicago where they started the Ecumenical Institute, which undertook organizing projects in localities around the world. This broke the creative tension between personal and political concerns that the Community had cultivated. By the mid-1960s, the CFLC was no longer a religious study center but, rather, a human potential workshop experimenting with various therapeutic techniques that arrived from the West Coast. This was not a therapeutics of political opposition. Lewis, no longer in control, left soon after Mathews did to become a campus minister at Cornell University, where he took part in peace protests during the Vietnam War and antinuclear demonstrations into the 1980s. In Austin, the Faith-and-Life Community

moved fully into a search for personal breakthrough that was unconnected to social and political activism.<sup>95</sup>

Until 1962, the Faith-and-Life Community served as a medium for communicating existentialist themes that were becoming attractive to many young people in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The sense of anxiety and the need to confront it, the preference for the concrete over the abstract, the importance of decision and personal responsibility, the attractiveness of situational ethics, the desire for a sense of vital life, and, above all, the search for a life of authenticity in touch with the “really real”: all these ideas were circulating with increasing velocity on the nation’s campuses and not always in a religious context. But especially in the conservative provinces, Christian institutions and a Christian intellectual framework enjoyed a cultural legitimacy that left students particularly open to the power of these ideas, when those ideas were encountered in this religious context. The Protestant content and evangelical undertone of the Community helped it channel these currents of spiritual and cultural ferment into the dominant spiritual culture of cold war America.

In addition to providing cover for new ways of thinking, Christian existentialism also contributed distinct elements to the broader existentialist vocabulary. First, it grafted a strong sense of moral and social responsibility onto the search for a vital life. Christian theology certainly had no lock on morality; even among existentialists, the Christian theologians were not the only ones who articulated a strong moral dimension, as Camus’s writing demonstrates. Other secular existentialists, however, whether philosophers or novelists, had only a tenuous grasp on a moral imperative. Observers like John Silber could claim some justification if they experienced trepidation when pondering the moral and political stability of the existentialist perspective. In secular existentialism, a moral dimension seemed to be optional; in Christian existentialism, it was not. (Even for Camus, one might argue, the moral dimension was a residue of the Christian tradition from which he was estranged.)

Community was another theme more characteristic of Christian existentialism than of existentialism in general. This became an important emphasis for the new left, in both thought and action, from the *Port Huron Statement* to the agricultural communes and cooperative stores of the 1970s. Where did this idea, in such a self-conscious form, come from? The idea of a community of close relationships as the solution to a culture of alienation and as the incubator of truly strong and autonomous persons—in short, as a solution to the problems that Arthur Schlesinger thought the “age of anxiety” posed for a democracy—descended perhaps most of all from religious sources.

Although nonreligious communitarian traditions existed in American life, they were not so deeply embedded in the cultural mainstream of American life as was religious communitarianism, and they could not speak powerfully to so many Americans.<sup>96</sup> Instead, the civil rights movement did more than anything else to spread the communitarian approach to the conundrum of democracy and alienation, with its religious idea of a “beloved community” that sustained struggles for justice, that bred vigorous citizenship, and that served as a utopian ideal for all of society. The idea of the beloved community resonated with some young white people, because it answered the unarticulated needs that emerged from the historical experiences in which their lives were rooted and because it echoed other messages they had heard. Among the most important cultural sources of those other messages, which combined with the message of the civil rights movement to create a powerful political momentum behind the ideal of a community of political opposition, was Christian existentialism.

Love was the most distinctly Christian theme of all. This was a crucial theme of both the civil rights movement and, later on, the new left and the counterculture. For all their emphasis on the need for reasoned deliberation in political life, the young radicals who approved the *Port Huron Statement* announced to the world their conviction that humans possessed an “unfulfilled” potential for “love” as well as for reason.<sup>97</sup> More significant than their concern with the human desire for love was their belief that this desire was politically relevant. Love was viewed as a key ingredient in the attainment of human dignity, the fulfillment of the human spirit, and the achievement of authenticity. It was the fount of creative response to the challenging world around them and the tie that bound the beloved community. It is difficult to see where this emphasis on love might have come from, directly or indirectly, except from a religious context. Love was not always a theme in existentialism; even for a secular existentialist who was deeply moral, like Camus, love did not occupy the place of importance that it did for religious thinkers, and especially for Christian thinkers.<sup>98</sup> According to Christian theology, love came from God to human beings and thence from humans to one another. For the civil rights movement of the 1960s, closely linked to an institutional base in African American churches, these connections remained salient. Young white activists in later years were far less likely to recall the religious roots of this still powerful element in their own outlook. They were left with a vision of a society and a community suffused with love that was in effect the residue of a Christian perspective.

Finally, there was the mystic search for something deeper in life, for the “really real.” As noted earlier, some thinkers call knowledge of the “really real”

the essence of religious experience. In Tillich's terms, it was a search for "the ground of Being," for "the ultimate." Existentialism, in any form, expressed a desire for a life of meaning. But this meaning was not necessarily something transcendent; it might be something created entirely out of the materials of this world. Alongside the Faith-and-Life Community's worldliness, however, there lay the suspicion that in the world they might find something more exhilarating and vital than what they had seen before, something more than most people knew. To locate them on the theological terrain that they studied, they combined Bonhoeffer's command to go to the public place with Tillich's challenge to confront the boundary-situation. They wanted to be both on the edge and in the world. They sought to find, somehow, the extraordinary in the ordinary, the margin in the center. This mystic quest, stemming originally from a religious context and continuing to reflect a spiritual desire, shimmered around the borders of the postmaterialist, postscarcity sensibility of radical politics in the 1960s.

The discussion in the Faith-and-Life Community encoded and validated the link between personal and political concerns, a link that became increasingly important to the emerging youth radicalism of the era. One student noted that the Community gave him the "freedom to talk about my questions"—questions of self, of God, of life, and of the larger world—and it encouraged students to look for connections among these concerns. Geertz writes that the "watchword" of the religious perspective is "rather than detachment . . . commitment; rather than analysis, encounter." If this is true, then the search for authenticity that the young existentialists of this era pioneered was religious indeed. According to the *Port Huron Statement*, the spirit of "encounter" characterized the participatory democracy that the new left envisioned.<sup>99</sup> In the coming years, the quest for authenticity took young people through a path of commitment and encounter that only the most ambitious among them might have expected.

## CHAPTER THREE

*The Issues of Life:  
The University YMCA–YWCA  
and Christian Liberalism*

ONLY AMID THE PITCH and personal upheaval of social change did existentialism and the search for authentic life appear as signposts pointing to political engagement. The civil rights movement ultimately provided that context of upheaval. Yet by the time the interracial youth wing of the civil rights movement took institutional shape, with the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960 on the heels of that year's sweeping tide of black student sit-ins at retail establishments across the South, the search for authenticity had already become part of a political consciousness of a sector of white youth who favored activism, even protest. In the late 1950s, groupings of white youth in the South and around the country crystallized into nodes of liberal political dissidence, able and willing to break out into insurgency, almost seeming to wait for opportunities to do so. The civil rights movement gave them their greatest opportunity and pushed many of them toward the left.

These young people, influenced by existentialism, came to believe that activism was the path to authenticity. A more direct influence on them, however, was the social gospel tradition of Christian liberalism, descended from the early twentieth century, which provided them with a straightforward defense of political liberalism, with adult models of responsible dissidence, and with an institutional base for protest activity.<sup>1</sup> Christian liberalism communicated to young people the message that they could live a life