THE

CONSTANT CHOICE

An Everyday Journey From Evil Toward Good

PETER GEORGESCU

WITH DAVID DORSEY

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The names and identifying characteristics of some persons referenced in this book, as well as identifying events and places, have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals and their families.

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First Edition

To Barbara and Andrew, Sedona, Ali, and Mackenzie

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven . . . A time to rend, a time to sew, a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.

—Ecclesiastes 3:1

CONTENTS

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

MINE HAS BEEN AN UNLIKELY LIFE. AS A FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD, off-the-boat immigrant with no understanding of the English language, no formal education, and fresh memories of the atrocities of a Soviet-style labor camp, becoming the very embodiment of the American Dream was not the most probable outcome. In fact as my life progressed, there were critical points at which my personal narrative could have unfolded in vastly different ways, including an early end. Throughout it all, my journey was influenced by the compassion of countless people, directed by the lessons of a hard childhood, and guided by a strong sense that there was a positive force propelling me forward. The knowledge of good and evil were my constant companions. The knowledge that evil existed in the world was incontrovertible and deeply personal. Yet also born of my experience there existed a growing

faith in the promise of better, more enlightened choices that could shine light into dark corners and illuminate a better path.

I was drawn into events as a child that, for most people, are simply chapters in a book on European history. Being born in Romania, on the eve of the Second World War, was risky enough. Yet only a few years later, I found myself, as a small boy, forced to work in a Communist labor camp, as a generation of former leaders, intellectuals, and anyone else who might pose a threat to the new regime was exterminated. My grandfather was one of these people, a national leader in Romanian politics and, as a result, a member of this doomed generation. He was put in solitary confinement where, one day, a guard kicked him in the mouth until he died. My chances of making it through that same gauntlet alive were slim. But, after years of childhood captivity and abuse, that's exactly what happened. I landed in America at the age of 15, knowing hardly a word of English and having no education beyond the first grade. Yet I was a quick study, gifted with an admission to Exeter, and I graduated with honors from Princeton and then Stanford Business School. Hired directly out of school by Young & Rubicam (Y&R), I began a career in marketing and communications as a trainee. Thirty-seven years later, still at Y&R, one of the leading agencies on Madison Avenue, I was running the entire company, as chairman and CEO.

Despite a life that may seem charmed to some, at least since 1954, I have struggled throughout the years to understand why evil pervades so much of human behavior. Some popular research data recently emerged claiming that human beings are moving on a kinder, gentler trajectory—the evidence: fewer wars with thousands slaughtered and fewer murders in towns and cities. Therefore, they say, evil is losing out, and good is thriving. Yet all the evidence I have seen defies that analysis. Evil has simply mutated and changed garb. Evil is alive in business, in

politics, in governments, and in nations. Sometimes it's overt as in Darfur, Sudan, Syria, or Al Qaeda. Evil is still around us in the brazen thieves—the Madoffs—the bullies, the harassers. One in 4 women in the most advanced democracy in the world—yes, here in America—suffers physical abuse from husbands or boyfriends. One in 6 young girls and 1 in 20 boys suffer some form of sexual abuse, too often from members of their own families.

I was born wired to keep asking questions and pushing hard until I was satisfied with a personal resolution to each quest. With some questions, well, let's just say I've been pushing for a long, long time.

It doesn't have to be this way. Evil is woven into our past, as a species, but it doesn't need to be a part of our future. History has blessed us with extraordinary messengers to show us the way to a better future. Their names are familiar—yet their messages are too often ignored. You'll likely recognize most of these names: Buddha, Confucius, Moses, Christ, Muhammad, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Mandela and more. They all appeared in history to illuminate our way toward good.

But a culture of complacency and even cynicism simply shuts the door on historical leaders, and we move on with less insight, less knowledge, and fewer values, with a compass that points whichever way we want at any given moment. In fact, most of us, and particularly younger generations, have an indifference to history. As I looked at our collective future, at the world my granddaughters would inherit, this tendency filled me with genuine fear. This younger cohort feels history is boring, or worse, irrelevant. There is no wisdom to be extracted, nor insights to provide constructive context for the future. Life becomes one-dimensional: a continuous present tense, with no glancing forward or back. Let the future generations fend for themselves! How sad. Winston Churchill's commentary on history is very

revealing. "The longer you can look back, the further you can look forward." And the Pulitzer Prize–winning historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. stated, "History is the best antidote to delusions of omnipotence and omniscience. Self-knowledge is the indisputable prelude to self-control for the nation as well as for the individual . . . It should strengthen us to resist the pressure to convert momentary impulses into moral absolutes."

Yet indifference to history is not the only hurdle we face. Perhaps my greatest concern about our future as a human condition is about what happens inside ourselves—how we think, how we reach out to the world around us, the instincts we choose to serve and ultimately our resultant behavior. On the one hand, we are witnessing an epic struggle with our capacity to imagine new environments, new institutions, new concepts, new technologies, new communities, and even new nations. On the other hand, our ability to adapt to these new ideas is glacial. Behaviorally we abhor change; we take comfort in the status quo. And the changes that have been adopted gradually over time have not necessarily been for the better. A good example of this is our democratic process. The Founding Fathers envisioned a beautiful ideal. It was a fair state of governance, with thoughtful checks and balances. Yet we seem to have retrogressed. The system's architecture appears as relevant and inspired as it was on that June morning of 1788. In practice, we are faced with a dysfunctional, corrupt, contentious, and simply ineffective form of governance guided by self-interest. What happened?

Where are these "me first" impulses coming from? If these tendencies have always been with us but submerged in our subconscious or deliberately rejected for more altruistic behaviors, what has changed so drastically in our society today? Where is the institutional support for mature choice, for learning compassion,

for developing a sense of commitment to the common good over selfish concerns as the ultimate goal in life? Unfortunately, in many ways, that support—in the form of family, community, and leadership—is lacking or has disappeared entirely.

Let's start with the traditional family unit. More and more families are single-parent households. More and more families have both parents or partners working. There seems to be less time to spend as a family and less inclination to talk about ethical and moral issues. Meals in the home are almost never sit-down events where discussion about happenings of the day takes place, where opportunities to guide behavior can be used as teaching moments. The extended family is no longer in the same home or even in the neighborhood.

The community where neighbors were part of the larger family, looking out for each other's kids, is equally out of date. Church and Sunday school are no longer routines most of us respect. Sadly, institutional religions, with too few exceptions, have let their yearning flocks down. Most schools are afraid or reluctant to make up the gap in teaching morality or values. Even later in life, corporations are becoming much less caring or paternalistic. We're too often alone, without a working compass to choose a more balanced approach to life—where the common good and compassion have a chance against our more base instincts for satisfying our selfish, self-centered genes.

At almost every turn in my life, I learned that people look to leaders and observe what they do. Saying the right things is nice, but walking the walk is really what matters. So in today's world, where are the inspiring leaders? They aren't necessarily in organized religion. So many church leaders managed to turn their heads when the vilest crimes were committed against the vulnerable young. They aren't necessarily in business. In the first decade of the twenty-first century we experienced a

global recession unlike any other since the great depression of the 1930s. It was a self-inflicted economic downturn created by selfish greed among the financial business elites. And they aren't necessarily in politics. During the attempts to recover from the recession, tribal warfare among political leaders continued to depress our economic and spiritual healing.

Add to these failings the pervasive effects of technology. Yes, technology can be good. We learn more, we can share ideas and feelings with more and more people. Business and service activities can become much more productive and efficient. But there are also huge unintended consequences. If time with computers is growing, does it teach our children how to get along with each other or how to resolve conflicts with dignity and respect? Does it inspire corporations to do better by their workers or to demand higher and higher productivity while threatening to export jobs to lower-wage communities globally?

It is relatively easy then to conclude that our collective behavior reflects a loss of moral compass, a serious consequential diminution of our guiding values as decent, compassionate, caring humans. The most fundamental question of all is seldom asked. Why are we really here on this earth? What are we supposed to do? Are we making progress as humans?

Early on, I bought into the American dream of strong values and wide-open opportunity. This characterization of the American scene is far from perfect, but in comparison to what I'd seen in Romania, it was entirely accurate. Living here felt like paradise on earth—and still does. Yet the twenty-first century has been a bit of a brick wall—so much for paradise on earth. It has quickly become clear how our country and world have become mired in problems without easy solutions. We continue to face the threat of nuclear attack, and vast hunger punishes hundreds

of millions of people around the world, while continuing violence and terror wrack places like Syria, Rwanda, and Darfur, as well as Sudan, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and so many others. Tom Friedman says his generation had only one nonlinear crisis to face, nuclear war. Now there are at least four: nukes; the environment; our fragile, teetering global economy; and a growing culture of selfishness, greed, narcissism, and entitlement. At home I see deepening dysfunction in the body politic. The real constituencies for elected governments, whether local, state or national are less and less about the average voter and more about the tribes of lobbies and the money. It's no longer about the common good. It's about Red vs. Blue. It's about a smallish group of "haves" who want to protect their economic gains at all costs. It's about an intolerant us, intolerance among religions and even within religions.

The real issue is—and these words should sound rather familiar to an American—we, the people. I'm going to quote Tom Friedman again. On the op-ed page of the *New York Times*, he said the solution to global problems isn't better leadership. "The real answer is that we need better citizens who will convey to their leaders that they are ready to sacrifice, even pay, yes, higher taxes, and will not punish politicians who ask them to do the hard things."

Exactly. And a great power that can't generate this kind of willingness to sacrifice and work together from its citizenry will not be a great power for long. The system isn't the problem. We are the problem. As Walt Kelly's comic-strip character Pogo put it, "We have seen the enemy, and he is us."

It has been said that from those to whom much has been given, much is expected. Likewise, the enlightened Benedictine Sister, Joan Chittister, in Erie, Pennsylvania, has asked us to

"focus on our responsibility to give something back." So here I am, graced to still be around, this ordinary human having been blessed with the capacity, and even an obligation, to do more.

This book tells of events in my life that forced me to ask fundamental questions—sometimes asking them for decades—about who we are, what makes us human, and how we can possibly make the right choices. Why is the world filled with so much immorality? If we were created with a purpose, what is it? If God is in fact all-powerful, why did we suffer through Nazi Germany and the Khmer Rouge? Indeed, if we are the problem, as quite clearly we are, how can we also provide the solution?

If these questions sound familiar to you, read on. I'm not saying I have answers to sell. It's each individual's mission to find his or her own answers. I can only share my own struggle, one man's quest to come to grips with existential doubts. But watch out. If you do find some workable answers for yourself, you may just have incurred a huge responsibility. You may find that you cannot remain a mere spectator, if you ever were, at the game of life. You too are likely to feel the call to become an activist, of some kind, helping to make the world a better place.

INTRODUCTION

IT ISN'T EASY TO SEE WHERE I'M GOING. THROUGH THE WINDshield of my Lincoln Town Car, the western New York State sunset—flickering through the poplars and pines along the road—is both blinding and illuminating. With all that light and shadow flashing past, it's hard to make out the next turn. It's all coming back to me, though. I've been this way before, many times. On this particular trip, I was thinking about a moment in a hotel room four months before.

When the phone rang, I didn't want to pick it up. I was in San Francisco for a board meeting at Levi-Strauss and Co., but my mind was on that impending call. Before it rang a third time, I grabbed it, just wanting to be done with it and hear the verdict. It was my friend Jim McCarron, who also happened to be my urologist. Before I'd left town, he'd done yet another dozen biopsies.

"Well," he said, "Eleven out of the twelve biopsies were normal."

I braced myself for that twelfth one.

"The other one contained a Gleason Six Cancer."

"What's the next step?" I asked. "Surgery?"

"Let's get together and discuss the options when you get home."

Keeping a lid on my questions, I hung up. I was angry. Not at Jim, who's wonderful, but at the randomness of cancer. I'd known this was probably coming at some point, after a certain age, but somehow I hadn't prepared myself for the specificity of those words: Gleason Six. It sounded so impersonal, implacable. Why?

I felt I had so much left to do in my life, much of it of greater value than most of what I'd done until now. I wanted so much to give back to the people around me. I'd worked like a yeoman for decades, making mostly choices for good, giving up my weekends, often enough, doing what I thought was right, putting myself into a position in retirement to actually make a contribution. And now this.

It isn't to say I was unprepared for the news. I'm a planner. You don't run a large company for years without thinking months and years ahead. Being ready to manage a cancerous prostate has been one of the many tasks on my preparedness checklist over time. In a way, I'd been training for this event. Since before my retirement, I've been building a list of brilliant prostate surgeons. Whenever I heard about one of them, onto the list his name would go. The last and most recent name was Da Vinci. He's not a surgeon, though. He's a machine.

Early in this decade, this robotic device, designed for heart operations, was adapted for prostate surgery. With the extraordinary clarity of twelve-times magnification, the surgeon can

see the actual prostate, its tissue and vital nerves. Yet, as with so many things on this little blue planet, there are caveats. Without a competent, experienced surgeon at the controls, Da Vinci is just a classy but empty name. I wanted a surgeon with some mileage.

Sitting in Jim McCarron's urology office in New York, we discussed several options. A "Gleason Six" is a cancer ranked six on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the most dangerous. Six is a moderate cancer but sneaky enough to break loose and wander around the body until it finds a new place to settle and raise its extended family of malignant cells. Having been on the Board of New York Presbyterian Hospital, I was well versed in all of this. By the end of his monologue, Jim said, "In your case, with an enlarged prostate, I recommend surgery. And at your hospital, you've got arguably the finest robotic surgeon in the world, Ashutosh (Ash) Tewari."

I'd known about Tewari for years, yet I needed to feel I was in good hands. So, when my wife Barbara and I met him, I locked my gaze on Dr. Tewari's face.

Instantly, my anxiety dissolved. The calm and inner peace radiating from this man belonged to a gifted physician. It suggested a man of God, a Buddhist monk. His voice was smooth and soft, a notch above a whisper, and it conveyed trust and confidence.

We chatted for no more than half an hour, and all the while, I was thinking, immediately, this is the guy. We're done here. I'll trust my life to him. Outside, after our talk, Barbara nodded. Yes, he's the one.

"Let's get this cancer and move on," she said.

What's interesting to me now, looking back at this crisis, is how the weeks *before* the surgery proved to be as significant for me as the procedure itself. I'd been diagnosed with a particularly dangerous disease and then told to sit around and wait for nearly two months to get rid of it. Let me point out that this period of waiting does not exactly induce a relaxed, welcome state of leisure. I understood the delay. The prostate had to heal from the biopsy and therefore seal itself, bottling up its cancer cells. That was necessary so that none of the bad cells would easily come loose and float into the bloodstream, only to lodge in my lungs, my brain, or my liver, after the prostate was removed. And this meant I had all the time in the world for thinking. Just hearing the word cancer, you can feel your blood pressure rise, and the dread prompts you to cast a slightly dubious eye on everything you are doing, as well as everything you've done. At crucial moments in my life, like this one, I've found myself standing back and wondering about my deepest beliefs about how each individual is influenced for good or evil and, accordingly, how each individual then influences humanity. The drive to write this book began to take shape during these two months of suspense.

Despite the dread, decades of visualizing best possible outcomes, in childhood, in school, in business, had served me well, and so I tried to shrug off the fears. Maybe the statistics were wrong. Besides, Dr. Tewari had a remarkable reputation, a brilliant team, and a fabulous hospital. Risks were minimal. Still, I couldn't shake the questioning.

As a child growing up in Romania, I'd been a traditional believer and an altar boy. But as I grew older, I wanted an intellectual model, a way of thinking about God that didn't conflict with science. I wanted an understanding of life that would give my own personal struggles a sense of meaning. My early model was simple and perhaps naïve. Our planet was populated by two

kinds of people: the good and the bad, in endless struggle. But in the end, I believed, the good people would win. They would win because God was on the side of good, so good would always triumph over evil. Remarkably enough, this childlike model worked for me amazingly well throughout my youth and into early adulthood. Understand, I don't mean to dismiss it with that adjective "childlike." It was a powerful, benevolent—and, I think, partly accurate—vision of the world. Good does have an edge over evil. And we should all be trying out for that team.

This early, simplistic model of the world likely saved my life. It gave me the strength and endurance to survive the horrors of Communist Romania when I was separated from my parents for eight years and forced into physical labor in what were, at one point, life-threatening conditions of near starvation. Yet, later in life, after I came to America and was rising in the world of business, this model seemed less and less accurate. I saw good people tormented or ruined by others whose motives were clearly evil. I saw how success can be achieved, and how goodness often becomes just as much a handicap as a source of strength. I found myself in a spiritual crisis far more perilous than the physical extremes of my imprisoned life as a child. I felt my belief in a personal, interventionist deity begin to crumble. And with it, the entire structure of my worldview, a picture of the world that gave me a reason to get up every day, work hard, devote myself to my family, and harbor hopes for a better future. My faith began to crumble because its foundations had eroded. My emotional life began to come apart, and my body began to break down.

All these struggles, from the past, came back to me as I waited for my surgery. I'd come through them and emerged with a new worldview, a new kind of faith in the potential of humanity, and an evolved belief in God. Yet now I found, once again, at the prospect of not surviving my surgery, my questioning

returned. Death had put his head through the doorway, looked me in the eye, and said, "Come see me later." So, like the good diligent worker I've always been, I began to scramble, retracing my spiritual steps in my mind—testing my beliefs and plumbing the nature of my faith to see if it still held up.

As a former CEO, I've had little time in my career for leisurely tours of the countryside—so I couldn't be happier than I am right now, rediscovering my way back to Chautauqua. Beside me, Barbara is relaxing comfortably. My wife has taken full advantage of her reclining seat, and it's such a smooth ride, she's probably half asleep.

This is our ninth end-of-June drive to Chautauqua, for the opening of the Institution's season, where we will stay for the full two months of lectures, concerts, movies, plays, conversations, and quiet dinners with guests. Our silver whale is loaded with the summer's provisions.

Part of the joy of coming to Chautauqua to live for two months in our little cottage, packed into rows of other modest homes, is never missing the material possessions that seem to crowd our lives. We keep coming back to Chautauqua, still hungry for something money can't provide.

Today our drive from Manhattan has taken longer than usual. The doctor told me I had to get out of the car every two hours, stretch, and then walk for at least a quarter mile. Still, I could use a rest stop, a *real* rest. It's the first time in more than six weeks that I've been allowed to drive. I love driving. Right now, it feels like a rare indulgence. But then, the closer we get to our destination here at the western tip of New York State, the more everything feels that way. It's all a privilege, a gift. My

recent brush with the possibility of death, and the surgery that followed, have given me a completely new perspective on what others might consider the tedious demands of travel and daily life. It's all a bit more interesting than before.

We're just crossing the high bridge over Lake Chautauqua, an hour's drive from Buffalo. Knowing we're only ten minutes from the grounds of the Chautauqua Institution now, believe it or not, I get butterflies! After nearly a decade of these vacations, I still get that feeling in the pit of my stomach, a sense of warmth, delight—a sensation that means we're almost home.

You may wonder at this point why I love this place so much. It's a place where I've learned patterns of thinking essential to what I'm going to say in this book. It is exactly the place to go when a brush with death makes you think hard about what matters most in life. It's a place where people think about issues in ways that aren't always condoned in the media or even in universities. Granted, it can seem like a backward culture to many newcomers, a slice of the past trapped in amber. It's intentionally a bit cut off from our electronic, media-saturated lives—because you come here to break old patterns of thinking and living, to find new and fundamentally open-minded ways of seeing the world. Chautauqua has come to strike me almost as an embodiment, a projection, of my own lifelong spiritual quest—the state of questioning that represents the backbone of how I relate to the world. It's a place where smart and socially engaged people, with every manner of creed and philosophy and culture, gather to have good-natured, tolerant debates about issues that seem to have no easy answers. That's my element, and it's the fundamental chemical element, as it were, out of which this book was built.

As she has done at so many other crucial junctures of my life, Barbara led the way here, discovering Chautauqua nearly a

quarter century ago. Her good friend Alice Neild used to invite her every year for a week-long visit. Back in 1901, Alice's grandmother made her first journey to Chautauqua all the way from Dallas, and her family has returned every year thereafter. I was free to join Barbara and Alice on a weekend, but it was during the week, when I was always swamped with work at Young & Rubicam, when this place really came alive. The lecture series, Monday through Friday, from 10:45 till noon, for nine weeks every summer, is unique. Inspired by their week-long themes, Barbara would phone to tempt me away from the office with her raves about the lectures she heard on social justice, or the growing importance of water in the world, or the political crisis du jour from Russia to the Middle East, or even a parade of America's poet laureates reading from their work. You can't imagine how much I envied her, at those moments. It was just the sort of experience I craved. Yet every year I would put her off, with what had become my mantra: "It will be great to do, but in our next chapter, when I retire."

Well, my new chapter is upon me, and here I am pulling into the Chautauqua Institution gate at 7:00 p.m., nearly nine hours since we left New York City. My summer parking permit shows through the windshield, so the booth attendant can spot it without standing up from his chair. With a warm welcome and a smile, he lifts the barrier, and we glide slowly to our street—it's 12 mph here, in deference to the bicycles, pedestrians, and clusters of kids at all hours. Automobiles are a rarity on these narrow lanes. We're almost home now—our other home, our spiritual home—and yet something gnaws at me this summer. A feeling that began haunting me in my twenties, a questioner who whispers inside me, quietly calling out: Why? Why have I been so fortunate, and why can all that good fortune be so quickly and irrevocably taken away? What does it all mean?

My world, needless to say, didn't come to an end. Dr. Tewari did his magic, with the help of his assistant, Da Vinci, along with a team of nurses and other doctors, agents of mercy during my stay at New York Presbyterian Hospital. I recovered, on plan, as expected. My prospects are excellent. All the early indications showed that we caught the cancer, contained it, and got it out. And I had none of the dreaded side effects. Many more months of recovery lay ahead, but after only a few days in Chautauqua in that June of 2008, my sense of well-being rebounded—stronger for my having gone through the trials of cancer.

I felt energized and reborn. My sense of inner peace had returned. Yet my questioning had become a call to action: I intended to put my summer in Chautauqua to use. If ever there was a place and time to deepen one's understanding of God—to do an engineer's close inspection of the structure of my beliefs—this was it.

Everything begins on Sunday mornings here, so it's fitting that this is when I began pondering my own past, and all the ways I've tried to come to terms with it. Thousands gather at the amphitheater for the Sunday church service regardless of the weather. The whole tone of a week in Chautauqua is established by whoever is standing at the head of this ever-changing congregation. And that tone is then often picked up every weekday, by whoever delivers the daily lecture from that same lectern, at the same time of day.

Chautauqua draws its audience largely from the Midwest—the often-derided Middle America, folks with a capacity and will to make a difference in their communities, their regions, and their nation. Teachers and ministers mingle with CEOs, people from the arts, and the small business owners who really make our economies work. It's a mosaic mostly of those unheralded American people who actually make things happen without

needing recognition for it. These are informed people on whom nothing much is lost.

As Chautauqua Institution's brilliant president, Tom Becker, once told me, "I can't ever remember a speaker, after taking questions for half an hour, who hasn't said, "*Who are these people? I've never been asked such astute and challenging questions.*" Having spoken there myself, I have a rule of thumb: Never come unprepared to give a talk in this place. In a recent lecture here at Chautauqua, Justice Anthony Kennedy said that America's democracy and our freedom are completely dependent on a virtuous, enlightened, and committed citizenry. This is exactly what Chautauqua is all about.

The 10:45 a.m. lectures (and resultant discussions) during the weekdays are about seminal, contemporary issues that center on possible solutions to major social problems, in our nation and around the globe. This kind of questioning engagement, which resembles my academic training at Exeter, in college, and in graduate school, has always been a part of my professional life. It followed me into my career in business—where my work centered on creative teams of intelligent people inventing new ways to help companies succeed in their markets. And so it has become second nature for me to examine intractable problems with new eyes, from new angles. I'm ready to dive in and imagine new possibilities, often because I look for any chance to seek novel connections between diverse fields most people would think are mutually exclusive.

Chautauqua itself looks like a little village someone has transported into today's upstate New York from maybe a century or half a century ago: small frame homes, packed tightly along quaint streets. Some of the major structures—the 1890 amphitheater and the huge Second Empire hotel—date back nearly to the origins of the place. It has a long tradition of

formal education and is imbued with a deep respect for spirituality and all the major faiths, with roots extending far back into American history. Early in 1874, a businessman and a Methodist minister from Cleveland thought teachers and ministers of their day, as dedicated as they were to their vital missions, were simply not knowledgeable enough about the ways and happenings of the world. Reverend J. H. Vincent and his business pal Lewis Miller thought their children needed a better, more enriching early education. So they created a summer school where teachers and ministers could learn.

Vincent and Miller wanted a location that would isolate their summer school from the distractions of home life. So they settled on a bucolic strip of lakefront, with gently rolling hills and magnificent trees, on the 17-mile shoreline of Lake Chautauqua, in the westernmost region of New York State. From Cleveland, it was a couple days away by carriage, a trip long enough to settle and focus a traveler's mind. The rudimentary camp began as little more than a cluster of sleeping bags under tents that became A-frame shelters. They eventually gave way to the slightly Disneyesque Victorian village, still standing today in the heart of the community. By the turn of the twentieth century, a 3,800-seat amphitheater had been built.

If you visited our house, near the corner of Ramble Avenue and Palestine Street, you might laugh at our ubiquitous red-white-and-blue theme. Inside and out, the house is a shrine to the stars and stripes. This seems corny, at first, or strike you as a little tongue-in-cheek. Yet it isn't a joke. We want you to know this is a thoroughly *American* household, and by that I mean it's a place that considers individual freedom of choice the most fundamental principle of all.

Here against this backdrop I've crystallized a lifelong attempt to see how my love of science—with its rational and

fiercely empirical path to knowledge—could be reconciled with my reliance on something larger and more powerful than myself, through faith. I saw a way for me and my view of the world to marry science and faith, partly as a result of recent insights in one particular biological field of study and also because of the mental patterns of questioning and debate this place has fostered in me. My time at Chautauqua has helped me discover what is, for me, a surprising but deeply satisfying connection between the field of genetics and the admonitions of all the major religions. That connection is at the heart of what I hope to convey in this book and is based on a field of study that has, only in the recent past, begun to get public attention: epigenetics. My first encounter with this field came during a conversation I had with the brilliant New York Presbyterian heart surgeon and health advocate, Dr. Mehmet Oz.

We've known for some time that human life begins as a single cell equipped with all the genetic information an organism needs to survive and grow into an adult, encoded into what's known as the genome. In every cell of a human being's body resides this same identical genome. Yet despite the fact that all these cells have the same string of code, these trillions of cells somehow develop into a couple of hundred different cell types—building heart, kidneys, brain, and all the rest. What has only recently been discovered is that a cluster of molecules at the top of the genome, the epigenome (Latin *epi* means "on top of"), issues instructions to the entire string of code—thus determining what kind of cell will grow from the master code. Essentially, the chemistry of the epigenome tells the rest of the genome whether or not to develop a certain way and how much to amplify or dampen the volume on the instructions for its own growth and behavior.

Darwin's theory of evolution correctly contends that it takes

many generations for a genome to evolve. Nothing in these new discoveries contradicts this principle, because the epigenome doesn't alter the structure of the genome itself. It simply turns parts of it "on" or "off." Imagine a player piano with a fixed number of keys, each with its own note. The sheet of "music" that runs through the mechanism causes only certain keys to strike at certain times, but the piano can produce a potentially infinite number of songs from the same finite set of keys.

Here's what's revolutionary about all of this. Research, mostly done in the past decade, indicates that individual human behavior can alter the way that the epigenomic "brain" controls the behavior of cells—and thus the body, including the brain. Repetitive behavior can alter the way an individual's genetic code operates. This is something that resembles evolutionary change within the span of a single individual life, and it's a genetically encoded change that can be influenced by individual choice. The data that supports this is persuasive and conclusive. Daily, habitual behavior can alter the way an individual's body ages, his or her state of well-being, and even the nature of that person's ethical choices. We're all familiar with how good habits can extend and enhance our qualify of life, but epigenetics demonstrates that these effects can be inherited by the next generation, because the new behavior is stored and passed along as part of the way the epigenetic cluster of the genome instructs future cells in their growth and behavior.

An article in *Time* magazine by John Cloud ("Your DNA Isn't Your Destiny") sheds some light on what this does and doesn't mean: "It's important to remember that epigenetics isn't evolution. It doesn't change the DNA. Epigenetics changes represent a biological response to environmental stress. If you remove the environmental pressure, the epigenetic marks will eventually fade and the DNA code will, over time, begin to revert to its

original programming." So far it has been shown that epigenetic changes can be passed along to several generations. As my wife Barbara often says, "The fruit doesn't fall far from the tree."

While we don't fully understand all the details of epigenetics and how and when it has an impact on an organism's life, the positive potential implications are spectacular. Cancerous cells may be influenced to stop dividing; obesity driving cells could be dialed down. Specific drugs could be created to influence these miraculously powerful molecules dictating their will on our afflicted bodies. This is all fact, now, not science fiction. In a small, phase-2 study of 45 patients facing almost certain death from a non-small-cell lung cancer, researchers at Johns Hopkins University have already shown that survival rates can be improved quite dramatically with the use of a drug designed to affect epigenetic changes instead of traditional chemotherapy.

Scientists have concluded that epigenetic changes start in the uterus with the fetus registering, in its cells, the behavior of the mother—what she eats, what she drinks, whether she smokes, the drugs she uses, how she exercises. In the twenty-first century, when changes in our world arrive at ever-faster rates, those tiny molecules might help us better adapt to this challenging environment. What epigenetics suggests is that the very structure of our bodies can be an ally—*a register of good behavior*—in our effort to better control our lives and our world.

Once I learned about epigenetics, many strands of my own thinking began to merge, which offered me a way to see the meaning in my own life experience and my quest for a way to understand it. For centuries, science and religion have seemed to be at odds. Stephen Jay Gould tried to keep them segregated in a way that wouldn't invalidate one or the other approach to understanding the nature of human life. He called them separate and distinct "non-overlapping magisteria." Each had its

own authority and purpose, yet never would the twain meet. I disagree with this approach. Faith in God, and all the behavior that follows from it, has little to do with the propositional truths of science. Yet I think it's entirely possible that science, at some point in the future, might offer evidence that a faith in God actually reflects a profoundly proper way of relating to the nature of human life and the world. This is different from saying with certainty that "God exists." It's a way of saying that it makes perfect sense to have faith in what you cannot clearly imagine if that faith alters your life and the lives of other people for the better.

In some ways, contemporary science has begun to seem like a branch of faith itself, suggesting that scientists should be more than tolerant of those who believe in things yet unseen and unknowable. Science routinely now talks about dark matter as the most plentiful constituent of the universe, and it is, by definition, yet unseen and knowable. Quantum physics has postulated a number of paradoxes that don't jibe with common sense or human imagination, for example, that a particle can also be a wavelength. String theory talks about the possibility of anywhere from nine to twelve dimensions in the universe, but our minds can only visualize length, height, and depth. In other words, science now speculates about realities that are unimaginable, given the limitations of how our brains process experience. It would seem premature to rule out that science might end up confirming the paradoxes of religious mystics or the notion that the world that greets our five senses might not be all there is. Science is built on the assumption now that the world is far more than what we can see, hear, and touch. To say that faith, and even religion, is fundamentally opposed to science suggests that you have an unexamined and irrational grudge against one or the other.

As Karen Armstrong has pointed out in *The Case for God*, the whole battle between those who want to prove or disprove the existence of God misses the point. It's less about proof than practice. As the life of Jesus illustrates, the idea is to do good, not to wait for intellectual certainty. Good begets good. And to show how significant science can be as an encouragement to those on this path, studies have shown that those who consistently choose good can *evolve* to become different, better people. Does this mean as a species we could ultimately become more like the spiritual figures—Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, Socrates, and all the others—who have taught various paths toward a higher understanding? I don't see why not.

Epigenetics, for me, represents a fact-based, scientific *analogy* for the sort of religious creeds that have connected everyday choices to grave and lasting spiritual consequences: the doctrine of karma for the Buddhists, or the Christian notion that the smallest choices in life have eternal implications. Science now says that the most seemingly insignificant habits—the accumulation of an individual's free choices, day after day—will register in the behavior of that individual's epigenome, which can eventually encode good habits into the behavior of future generations. What you choose to do, from day to day, actually does matter, and is—in a sense—permanently recorded in your own genetic structure. Choices that might seem inconsequential can have larger consequences than might be apparent in the life of the person making those choices.

Humanity's freedom to choose good represents, for me, *the* fundamental truth of life, partly because my own good fortune has depended so heavily on the choices other good people have made on my behalf. Many kind people have lifted my burdens onto their shoulders, helped heal my wounds, and taken me by the hand to safer shores. That force of good in all of us cannot be ignored any more than we can deny our own evil inclinations.

Are we able to choose to do more good than evil? I believe that if this is possible, it can change the fate of mankind.

This book is a result of my exploration of how individuals can align themselves with good through daily choice. My thesis is inordinately simple. If we better understand who we are as human beings, we should be able to make better choices in our lives.

So, with all of this in mind, I've felt compelled to explore and understand who I am, where I stand, how I've gotten here, and what's required of *me*, after having been given so much. The message of this book is to challenge others to seek answers to the sort of questions I've been asking myself since I first encountered evil as a child. Why are we here; what are we to do with this time we've been given on the planet? Why are we drawn into evil when so much of our nature seeks goodness? Why is evil still so dominant in the way the world works, when it seems so obvious that being good brings much richer rewards?

There's an old Cherokee legend that encapsulates much of the wisdom we need in our time. The story has it that an old Indian is telling his grandson about the battle that goes on inside people. "The battle is between two wolves inside us. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, faith, and compassion. The grandson asks, "Which wolf wins?" The old Indian replies, "The one you feed."

Over the next portion of this book I'm going to dwell for quite a while on how prevalent and common evil was in my experience of childhood, and I'm going to descend into the story of the increasingly horrific experiences I had. After having said how important free choice is, how crucially we need to keep choosing the good, I offer my childhood as a lesson in how nearly impossible it is to escape evil. And nothing in my

experience or thinking for many years, even as an adult, has enabled me to understand why evil should be so pervasive; that thought sent me down a path to understand how this could be. I have suggested already how science confirms the wisdom embedded in traditional religious injunctions to be good. Yet for many years, especially when I was suffering under the evil of Romania's ruling elite, I had no way of comprehending why ordinary people so quickly descend into viciousness. Questions about the nature of evil and good have taken me a lifetime to answer, and once again it's much on my mind as I sit in the Chautauqua amphitheater listening to Jared Jacobson's organ, the largest outdoor instrument of its kind in the world, booming out an opening hymn for Sunday morning's assembly. Often Barbara and I try to find seats just outside the protection of the amphitheater's roof, in a sitting area nestled under the shade of a tall oak tree in the open air. When the organ gives way to a choir of 150 singers, I gaze up at patches of blue sky and white clouds and give my attention to the non-denominational service. With my thoughts on my first encounters with evil as a child in Romania, it seems appropriate that Dr. Joan Brown Campbell, our resident minister and the head of the religion department at Chautauqua, quotes from Psalm 56: "Be merciful unto me, O God: for man would swallow me. Mine enemies would daily swallow me up: For they be many that fight against me." And then: "Blessed is the man that walkest not in the counsel of the ungodly nor standeth in the way of the sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful." Blessed indeed, because the scornful do seem to keep multiplying.

Her words from the Psalm pierce me with painful memories, because I became obsessed with evil at a young age and therefore have struggled to understand the nature of it all my life. Listening and gazing up at the sky, my mind tumbles back to Europe and the horrors that took me by surprise as a child in Romania.

CHAPTER 1

SEEING EVIL FOR WHAT IT IS

THE DAY THEY TOOK MY FATHER AWAY IN 1941 MUST HAVE felt like any other day. I was a little 2-year-old, full of fun, living with my brother and my grandparents in the Romanian village of Lipova in Transylvania, where Romania shares its border with Hungary. My parents, still in Bucharest, had sent us there for our safety. So, when the police arrested Rica Georgescu at his home, I was far away, probably playing with toy soldiers in my grandfather's enormous library or helping my brother Costa water the rose garden. On that particular day, I likely felt safe, happy to be living in that little village. By sending us to Lipova when the war began, my parents had hoped to shield us from Hitler and the Romanian fascists. As it turned out, they kept us from seeing our father being led away to prison.

So, in a strange way, the day of my father's arrest may have

been quite happy and pleasant for me. Soon enough, I was told about it, and the long puzzlement of my life began. But my first thought, when our mother described how he'd been taken to prison, may have been that I couldn't immediately see any difference in my world. He'd been gone from my life already. All of this took place in 1941, when the war was just getting started, and we'd been living without him for weeks, maybe months.

According to my mother's recollection, she arrived from Bucharest and sat us in the kitchen to say our father had been arrested. Even at that age, I must have felt my mother's warmth and charm. When I was older, I recognized how extraordinary she was with her intelligent eyes, a penetrating gaze, and a talent for immediately seeing into another person's character. She also had a gift for conversation, and she used it to help my father many times while he was in prison. Obviously, at that age, I was blind to her heroism. I can recall my mother now from my encounters with her as a teen and an adult. Looking back, I know my impression of her, then, was of the woman she became as she rose to the challenge we all faced.

"Did he do something bad?" Costa asked.

"No. He's a very good man."

"But if he's been good, how could they take him away?"

I didn't know it at the time, but I would keep asking that question for the rest of my life.

"Because *they* are bad people," she said. "Don't worry. He'll be fine. He'll be free someday."

Even though I was too young to understand my father's arrest, I believed her. And she was right, although at that age, my hopes had a shaky foothold. As I got a little older, I had a simplistic, youthful assurance that good and evil were easily recognized and that eventually God would intervene, in this world, on behalf of the good. Therefore my father would

be saved. My faith foretold a happy outcome for my family because we were good. I didn't see that my father was persecuted *because* he was good.

These earliest experiences of the darker side of human nature were showing me one of its most subtle and significant characteristics: it's often hard to see, especially when your personal life doesn't appear to be immediately disrupted by it. Evil can be at its worst, and most dangerous, when you don't even know it's changing you and your life. In a sense, my first encounters with evil were in situations where it was reorganizing my world and I wasn't even aware of it—a situation I was to face again and again both in Europe and America. It's a fundamental challenge of human life: to choose against evil, you first have to recognize it.

Living apart from one's parents was not an unusual arrangement in our family. It was becoming something of a tradition for us. We Georgescu men came of age through exile and separation from our families, against a backdrop of war and political turmoil. Much earlier, with social upheaval on the horizon in Romania, my father's own parents knew how vulnerable the Balkan states would be in the event of war, so they'd sent my father to a boarding school, Warwick Academy, outside London. His full name was Valeriu, but it had morphed into a more intimate Valerica, shortened eventually to the nickname Rica. He grew up in England, developed a British accent, and came to identify completely with the values of personal liberty and individual rights. He was raised to believe in freedom, alongside children of the British upper class. Although he spent most of his youth in Great Britain, far from his parents, he intended to return to Romania after the turmoil of the First World War subsided.

With some of the richest oil reserves in Europe, Romania then had a lot in common with Saudi Arabia today. As a student, my father knew he could use that oil as his ticket home, so he studied petroleum engineering at the University of Birmingham. When he graduated, he fulfilled his dream by taking a job with Standard Oil in Romania, assigned to manage oil fields in Ploesti. He commuted to his work from nearby Bucharest, a sophisticated metropolis known as the Paris of Eastern Europe. He hadn't been there for long before he met a young woman named Lygia Bocu, just back from the Sorbonne in Paris. At the time she was being courted by Prince Nicolae, the younger brother of King Carol II, who ruled the nation more or less as a figurehead, in the manner of British royalty. Even though, if she'd surrendered to this romance, she could have become something like the Romanian equivalent of Princess Di, she chose a life with my father, a mere oil executive.

A cynic might say she was a clever lady; she chose the *real* power. Others who knew her better would have recognized it as true love. My brother, Costa, was born in 1934. As a young man he would turn out to be serious, brilliant, bookish, and pious to the point of wanting to be a priest at an early age. I was something else entirely. Born in 1939, a skinny imp full of antics, a little clown, I was the one with the unruly imagination, the playful one my mother showered with love. When war began, my father's Romanian job with Standard Oil of New Jersey (later Esso and Exxon) kept him in Bucharest. My parents sent Costa and me to live with my maternal grandparents in Lipova.

My family, on my mother's side, was intimately connected to what was going on at the highest levels of government. We were virtually a part of the royal retinue, even though our mother's lineage traced back to peasant stock, not the aristocracy. We had deep ties with the Peasant Party, whose leader, Iuliu Maniu, had

headed the Romanian government until King Carol II set up a dictatorship in 1937. As war started, Ion Antonescu took over, supported by the Iron Guard, a fascist movement that assassinated its opponents and seized power just in time to align Romania with the Germans. Maniu went into hiding and established connections between members of the Peasant Party and the Allied forces, especially England and America.

Willingly drawn into the resistance, my father helped set up a radio transmitter that became a key link between the British in Turkey and Romanian nationalists aligned with the Allies. That radio was crucial to an effort to organize an uprising. The transmitter looked like a pile of spare parts, but when certain wires were connected, it worked perfectly. But a Romanian girl who learned about the radio by sleeping with a British agent in Istanbul had been sleeping, as well, with a member of the Gestapo. She tipped off the Germans about the transmitter.

My father was charged with treason, and he spent the rest of the war imprisoned at Malmaison—the Bad House—still working clandestinely with the OSS to defeat the fascists. He was, in fact, a resistance leader from his cell during those years. All of this may sound thrilling, but I remember only the great void of his absence—the withdrawal of someone who could have carried me on his shoulders, taught me to fish, play soccer, and then, later, to fly a plane and drive a car. He could do all of that and more, but we had so little time together when I was growing up that he had few chances to tutor me about anything. During the war years, I got to know him mostly from his photographs.

My mother, as well, became a distant figure, spending so much time in Bucharest, working clandestinely with my father to help free her people. It was the beginning of a pattern that never went away: The grand opera of my parents' life always seemed to take place somewhere far from mine.

As someone working for an American company, my father would have been killed if Antonescu, the Romanian fascist dictator, hadn't been so circumspect about all possible outcomes to the conflict. He represented himself as loyal to the Germans, but he hedged his bets by keeping my father alive. It was a shrewd way of showing the Americans how much he had sympathized with the Allies, all along, in the event of a German defeat. Meanwhile, my father continued helping the resistance with Frank Wisner Sr., an American OSS operative who would emerge later to become one of the four founders of the Central Intelligence Agency. My mother smuggled messages into my father's cell, on slips of paper hidden in cigarette packs and matchbooks, and then she memorized whatever he told her for delivery to Wisner and the Romanian nationalists plotting a coup against the German forces. It was an effort aided by the Allied intelligence network based in Turkey, led by Wisner.

Antonescu's shrewd intellectual duplicity reflected Romania's uncertain identity and position in the world. On a vacation in Syria a number of years ago, I finally achieved a clear, simple vision of Romania's predicament. Our guide was telling us about the fate of his country, how for thousands of years the Persians, Romans, Turks, Greeks, Crusaders, and the usual assortment of barbarians had all trudged through Syria on the way to somewhere else. As a convenient stop along the Silk Route and the Mediterranean, it became a kind of way station between East and West. Our guide summed it up: "Everyone goes through Syria to get to the sea." With few exceptions, the Syrians simply adapt to whoever has the most influence over them at any given time, because they are tiny and ill equipped to defend their borders from greater powers. Foreigners were welcome to fight other foreigners on Syrian soil. Who were the Syrians to say no?

It's the curse of the country at the crossroads, and I realized

this was precisely Romania's curse. It was one of many countries in the world serving mostly as a route, a corridor, between empires. Antonescu, like others before him, was being realistic about his nation's situation. In his view, Romania didn't have the power to say no to Hitler or Stalin or—deeper into the past—the Austro-Hungarians and Turks. It was a pawn on a chessboard with powerful rulers installed on squares far from Bucharest, beyond its borders. Yet Romania was even more than a passage. It had something Hitler wanted to fuel his war machine: huge oil reserves.

So, without making excuses for the man, it is understandable that Antonescu may have had a reason to behave the way he did. At one point, he reprieved my father literally from a firing squad and, at another time, refused to surrender him, against Hitler's orders to deport him to Berlin for interrogation. He protested that my father was a Romanian citizen and Germany had no right to arrest him. That was Antonescu's privilege. He won that argument, and my father survived, yet again. All this time, with Antonescu's full cooperation, Germans streamed across Romania, pausing briefly, at their discretion, on their way into Russia. Antonescu was a master of *realpolitik*, and although he was loathed by many of the people, he may have simply been doing what he thought was in Romania's best interests.

When I was older and still a child in Romania, it seemed so easy to single out the bad ones: those people who mouthed destructive political agitprop, children who informed on their parents, and the militia who arrived in the night. Yet now, so many decades later, I look back and realize Antonescu himself represents the *real* conundrum of a human being's darker impulses: a man of so many mixed motives, good and bad, that he was easy to both defend and despise. In his brief rule over the country, he demonstrated how difficult and intractable evil can

become, and how hard to escape, because it's so often woven into the behavior of someone doing things absolutely essential for survival. On one hand, in his mind, much of the evil he did may have been inescapable because it actually allowed Romania to survive as a sovereign nation. On the other hand, most of what he permitted was clearly evil. There were more than 300,000 Jews and Gypsies, who'd been destined for the extermination camps, to testify against him.

At the time, in that chronic state of political crisis, these horrific events came to seem like ugly necessities to many Romanian people, as they had for the Germans who fell under Hitler's sway. The pressures of the day blinded people to the fact that the ends cannot justify the means—establishing and maintaining political and economic order couldn't justify the evil of what Antonescu was doing. Another leader might have been able to see the prospect of ethnic cleansing as an atrocity and face squarely the challenge of maintaining some kind of political integrity at great expense, but Antonescu was focused primarily on his own power. And all those who went along with him were undoubtedly clinging to the benefits of milking the system he created. To do that, they had to blind themselves to the evil they were doing: to be able to see it as simply an ugly necessity. The ugly necessity is never simply a necessity. It's a choice.

Antonescu may have sought protection from the Allies with his Machiavellian maneuvers, yet he proved his loyalty to the Germans with assassinations, persecutions, and cleansings. In one instance, he let the Iron Guard break into a prison where they seized and shot dozens of people suspected of plotting against them. Another time, they raided a Jewish ghetto in Bucharest and killed hundreds of men, women, and children, hanging their bodies on hooks in a slaughterhouse.

Meanwhile, my father was held under low security, thanks

to his skillful manipulation of his captors. He arranged for the chief jailer's two girlfriends to obtain jobs in the oil industry, which gave him the freedom to operate while in prison. As the unofficial dean of the place, my father was able to keep books and papers, had a sitting room in addition to his cell, and had the ability to communicate with other prisoners—partisans, British Army officers, a whole crew of people sympathetic to the resistance. At one point, he had the company of sixty Americans who had been shot down over the oil fields. Almost all Allied prisoners of war were held at Malmaison prison.

My mother, working just as hard as an agent for the resistance, would visit him in prison as his courier. Early on, when she arrived, she had to endure intense interrogations. But as time went on, she brought fresh clothing and supplies to everyone, as well as pots of food and boxes of apple pie for the Americans. She was such a frequent guest that they would let her in and forget about her. She was able to smuggle news and plans and ideas back and forth between the prison and resistance headquarters in Istanbul.

In 1943, midway through my father's imprisonment, our grandmother called us into the rose garden and said she'd just gotten wonderful news from Bucharest. That incident is still one of my most vivid memories from early childhood. Our mother had contacted a Gypsy fortune-teller in the mountains to ask about our father's fate. He had requested something owned by my father, and she'd dispatched a driver to deliver a handkerchief to the Gypsy. With it in hand, the fortune-teller phoned our mother and said our father would be freed on August 23, 1944. He would be alive and well, and we would be reunited.

None of us had any way of knowing the Gypsy would be right. Yet, as soon as I heard this news, I was overjoyed. Without hesitation, I believed it would come true. I suppose partly

because my mother and grandmother and brother believed it, but also because it felt true. Absolutely convinced that our father would survive the war and be released, on a Sunday morning, we celebrated his freedom while he was still being held, sharing hot milk and special cakes our grandmother had baked. As it turned out, we were right to celebrate. A year later, on that exact date, our father was released.

Skeptics would dismiss our confident hope as a minor case of magical thinking. Yet our unquestioning faith in the good news even now strikes me as something more than that. It was a willingness to trust in something we couldn't explain or understand. We felt its veracity—something real had been communicated to us, and we accepted it as a gift. Even now, I don't think I was wrong to feel the joy I felt, and still feel now, after all these years. I tell you about this particular event, not simply because the predictions just happened to come to pass, but because I still feel something more was at work.

After a year of planning, organizing partisans inside and outside Malmaison, the plot to overthrow Antonescu culminated in a successful coup. In June 1944, when Allies landed successfully at Normandy, it was time to act. They mobilized sympathizers inside the government, army, and in key industries. King Michael, Carol's son and successor, spearheaded the uprising.

On August 23, 1944, all the key people in the government and army, who had been plotting secretly with the resistance, emerged and arrested Antonescu. The coup succeeded without bloodshed. (After the war, though, Antonescu was convicted of collaboration with the Nazis and executed.) At this point, the resistance took over the palace, with troops dispatched to Ploesti—my father's oil fields—where they began to drive German allies out of the country. Lines of communication were cut, bridges were closed, railroad stations seized, and the oil fields

were reclaimed—all within a matter of hours. The prisoners at Malmaison were set free. It was Bastille Day in Romania.

Risking his life, King Michael addressed the nation over the airwaves, saying that he was establishing a democracy. Romanians rose up and liberated their country, fighting bravely, losing 150,000 soldiers in eight months. But, as it turned out, all those deaths were for nothing. Only a few years later, the Soviets moved in and Romania sank into subservience and fear once again, this time for forty-five years.

As we walk back to our house after the morning church service, I reflect on how far apart the world of occupied Romania was from the American principles and culture that have made Chautauqua possible. With its tradition of education, imbued with a deep respect for religion and spirituality, it has roots extending far back into its history—which grew out of the idea of making a fresh start, working from a clean slate. In Europe the past is everywhere, in the architecture, the memories, the religion, the politics—it's inescapable. America and Chautauqua both share in this spirit of starting over with a clean slate.

The pattern of America's emergence was recapitulated in my own life. The corruption of European politics was left behind for the fresh and seemingly innocent opportunities of American soil. Of course, innocence is the first thing to be lost in the evolution of political freedom. Pick any presidential race over the past half-century and you'll see how the freedom to vote gets warped by special interests and the same kind of self-deception that laid the groundwork for so much suffering in Romania. Yet Chautauqua is actually a good argument for American exceptionalism. Our political system makes a place such as this possible, and