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# Whatever Happened to “What Might Have Been”?

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## *Regrets, Happiness, and Maturity*

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*Although lost opportunities and mistaken expectations are unpleasant to think and talk about, these experiences may have a role to play in personality development. Drawing on research using narratives of lost possible selves, the authors review the relations of regrettable experiences to 2 important and independent aspects of maturity, happiness and complexity. Thinking about a lost possible self is related to concurrent regrets, distress, and lowered well-being; however, elaborating on a lost possible self is related, concurrently, to complexity and predicts complexity, prospectively, over time. In this article, the authors describe the role that regrettable experiences have in promoting both happiness and complexity. Finally, expanding on previous work, the authors examine potential affordances of happy maturity and suggest psychological capacities that may promote happy maturity.*

**Keywords:** personality development, maturity, goals, regrets

A child becomes an adult when he realizes that he has a right not only to be right but also to be wrong. —Thomas Szasz

... by the time you reach my age, you've made plenty of mistakes if you've lived your life properly. —Ronald Reagan

**D**uring an April 13th, 2004, press conference, President George W. Bush was asked to name the biggest mistake he had made since September 11th, 2001. Bush was, famously, flummoxed, finally admitting that although he was sure he had made a mistake, he could not think of a single one. Mistakes, failures, and erroneous expectations: These are experiences associated with regret, disappointment, and even humiliation, certainly not the most appealing topic for thought or conversation. Such experiences might best be considered “water under the bridge”—experiences one might, like President Bush, safely tuck away in some remote corner of memory. And why not? Dwelling on life’s “if only”s (e.g., “if only I hadn’t,” “if only I could,” “if only I wasn’t”) seems a sure recipe for misery. If contentment were the sole goal of adulthood, examining life’s regrettable experiences might seem to have little value.

Of course, considering life’s losses can engender regret, which shares a robust negative relationship with psychological well-being (Gilovich, Medvec, & Kahneman, 1998; Lecci, Okun, & Karoly, 1994). However, one might argue that disappointment, mistakes, and even regret are

simply inevitable in adult life (Stewart & Vandewater, 1999). Rather than stopping with the conclusion that regret is negatively related to well-being, we suggest that the capacity to acknowledge what is regrettable in life emerges from maturity and contributes to maturation itself.

In this article, we address the role of what might have been in adult development. We first present goal change as a developmental opportunity in adulthood. We use the construct of possible selves as a way to examine the contribution of goal change to adult development. We then discuss our approach to maturity as encompassing both happiness and complexity, and we present evidence for the relations of possible selves to these two sides of maturity. Our main focus is on the adult’s capacity to confront lost goals, or *lost possible selves*, as an indicator of maturity and a portent of personality development. Reflecting on one’s mistaken expectations poses costs to happiness, but that work, the articulation of what might have been, may have benefits in terms of the complexity of a person’s sensibility and, perhaps, the very meaning of happiness itself. That there is value in loss is more than a platitude. Although it may be a peculiarly American instinct to search for the positive in any negative event (McAdams, 2006), we argue that the active, self-reflective struggle to see the silver lining is a key ingredient of maturity.

### **Goal Change as a Developmental Opportunity**

Goals provide an ideal context for examining the role of what might have been in adult development. Goal engagement relates strongly to enhanced well-being, but it also opens an individual to challenges, difficulty, and even the *promise* of failure. No matter how well chosen or doggedly pursued they are, goals do not always work out. Working toward goals includes not only potential fulfillment but also failure, disappointment, and, of course, regret over incentives one did not pursue instead and time and energy

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wasted on fruitless endeavors (see King & Burton, 2003, for a review). Not knowing when to disengage from a goal can lead to distress and an inability to engage in new goals (e.g., Klinger, 1977; Koole & Kuhl, in press).

Clearly, sometimes, cutting one's losses is good idea. Innumerable Hollywood movie lines notwithstanding, sometimes failure is, indeed, an option. A hallmark of successful self-regulation may be the ability to *flexibly* pursue goals, disengaging from life goals that no longer include the possibility of fulfillment (e.g., King, 1996). Yet, when faced with goal failure, rather than disengage, people are likely to redouble their efforts (Brunstein & Gollwitzer, 1996; Emmons, Colby, & Kaiser, 1998). These results speak to the power of goals in our lives, but they also point to the challenge of letting go of a lost cause.

Disengaging from cherished goals is difficult, involving the recognition that one's abilities and life circumstances simply will never lead to one's hoped for future. Relinquishing a goal means surrendering rewards that one had previously invested with value, accepting one's mistaken expectations about the future, and, perhaps, reevaluating one's place in the world. Yet freedom from regret requires that one truly divest oneself of ties to those lost cherished ends (Wrosch, Bauer, & Scheier, 2005).

The crisis of goal change can be viewed as one of adulthood's "teachable moments": an opportunity to develop as a person. If adulthood is defined as some (moveable) ending spot (i.e., the "you are here" X that marks one's current place on the map of one's life) in development, we might say that when goals become untenable, we are moved to consult that imaginary map. At such times, we might ask the questions "How did I get here?" and "Where am I heading?" In our research, we have posed just such questions to our participants, inviting them to describe the goals they imagined for

themselves prior to a life-changing experience and the goals that currently motivate their lives.

## Lost and Found Possible Selves

To examine the role of goal change in adulthood, we have relied on the construct of possible selves. Possible selves are defined as personalized representations of important life goals (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). Possible selves encompass not only the goals we are seeking but all of the imaginable futures we might occupy. Possible selves serve as cognitive resources that motivate the self throughout adult development (Cross & Markus, 1991).

In our research, we have drawn on samples of adults who have experienced significant life changes, including parents of children with Down syndrome (DS), women who have experienced divorce after marriages of more than 20 years, and gay men and lesbians. In these studies, community adults have been recruited via newspaper ads and organizational meetings to participate in a study of goals and well-being. Participants have completed mail-in surveys containing measures of well-being and personality development (described further below) as well as a series of written narratives. In addition, to address prospective relations, participants were recontacted two years later to complete the questionnaire measures a second time. Although these individuals differ in many ways, they share a common feature: They have all experienced a significant change in the possible self landscape of their lives.

In this research, participants have generated written narratives of two possible selves—namely, their current best possible self and an unattainable best possible self that they may have once cherished, or a lost possible self. For example, an individual who finds himself rearing a child with DS may be forced by circumstance to relinquish aspects of a treasured possible self ("grandfather," "business partner with my son"). Narrative descriptions of these lost possible selves tap into individuals' subjective assessment of what has been a primary source of motivation in their lives. Lost possible selves represent the person's memory of a self they would have pursued "if only . . ."<sup>1</sup>

Using these narratives, we have examined two aspects of possible selves—salience and elaboration. A salient possible self is one that is frequently activated in the working

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<sup>1</sup> The instructions we use to generate best possible self narratives are the following (e.g., King & Raspin, 2004):

We would like you to consider the life you imagine for yourself currently, and in the future. What sorts of things do you hope for and dream about? Imagine that your life has gone as well as it possibly could have. You have worked hard and achieved your goals. Think of this as your "best possible life" or your "happily ever after."

The instructions for the lost possible selves are variations on the following:

We would like you to consider your future as you imagined it *before* [the life changing event]. Try to remember how you imagined your future to be. What sorts of things did you hope for and dream about for your life? Think of this as your "best possible life" or your happily ever after, if you *had not experienced* [the event].

self-concept and is chronically available to the person—a relatively constant source of motivation (or regret). Salience is measured through self-report, by simply asking individuals to rate how much they currently think about that possible self, how easy it is for them to imagine, and so forth. Possible self salience provides a means of gauging goal engagement (or disengagement). Elaboration, in contrast, refers to the richness of the narrative the person has generated. Elaboration is judged by independent raters, coding these protocols on dimensions such as vividness, emotionality, and detail (e.g., King & Smith, 2004). This measure allows us to examine the work of exploring loss and the active construction of possible selves.

Lost possible selves, essentially autobiographical memories of once cherished goals, fit into the larger context of autobiographical memory, which has been recognized as important to identity, personal meaning, and the self (e.g., James, 1890/1950; McAdams, 2001, 2006; Pasupathi, 2001). Indeed, Conway (1996) suggested that the adequacy of autobiographical knowledge depends on its ability to support and promote continuity and development of the self. We tend to revise our histories in a self-aggrandizing (Ross, 1989; Wilson & Ross, 2003) but also self-consistent fashion (Christenson, Wood, & Barrett, 2003). Memory is key to the experience of the self as continuous and stable (Barclay, 1996; Bluck & Habermas, 2001; Conway, 1996; Fivush, 1998).

In asking individuals about lost possible selves—those inconsistent aspects of the past that are no longer a source of fulfillment—we are, in a sense, challenging the central role of memory as a source of stability and consistency. In our research, we have posed this potentially uncomfortable question: “How great would your life have been if only . . . [e.g., you hadn’t gotten divorced, your child didn’t have DS, you were straight and not gay]?” By focusing on a once hoped for future that is no longer available, we challenge our participants to recall these mistaken expectations and elaborate on what might have been—to describe those goals that seemed like a really good idea, at the time. These data allow for an examination of possible self engagement and elaboration as they relate to maturity concurrently and over time. To illuminate the ways that these goal processes may be understood as developmental in nature, it may be helpful to examine the place of these ideas in more general notions of personality development.

## **Mechanisms of Adult Personality Development: A Goal Perspective**

The processes underlying the contribution of goal change to personality development may be understood within the larger framework of personality development presented by Block (1982). In an eloquent essay, Block described how the Piagetian processes of assimilation and accommodation characterize personality development. In assimilation, existing cognitive structures are used to make sense out of the current environment. Assimilation allows a person to enjoy a sense of meaning because experiences fit into preexisting

meaning structures. Thus, assimilation and its affective consequences may reinforce one’s approach to life and ultimately contribute to subjective well-being.

Of course, life does not always conform to our expectations. When experience is incongruent with existing cognitive structures, it is necessary to modify current ways of thinking. Accommodation refers to this process—when existing cognitive structures are modified or new structures are developed. When assimilation fails, the person may change the self to accommodate the new experience. Accommodation has been viewed as the mechanism underlying changes in ego development over time. Research has shown that ego development is related to experiencing a variety of life events (e.g., Helson, 1992; Helson & Roberts, 1994; von der Lippe, 1998). In narratives of life transition, accommodation is evidenced in the admission that one has been truly challenged by life experiences, that one has been forced by circumstance to actively shift one’s sources of meaning (King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000). Accommodating life’s previously incomprehensible events may be painful and difficult, yet it may be a necessary component of development. The process of fully accommodating an experience would seem to culminate with a reinstatement of assimilation such that through one’s new perspective, life is once again comprehensible.

In the language of goals, we might say that assimilation is the process by which goals provide a continuous, coherent through-line in a person’s life, promoting a sense of well-being. In contrast, accommodation is reflected in thoughtful examination of lost goals and the reconstruction of and reinvestment in new goals, commensurate with what one has lost. Challenging life events may spur individuals to reprioritize and reenvision their possible futures.

Accommodative self-reflection, spurred by goal disruption, may lead to increasing levels of understanding. The construction of a new future toward which to strive—that is, engagement with a new best possible self—would then indicate that an individual has fully accommodated the loss. Thus, we might expect that the salience and elaboration of lost and found possible selves might relate in important ways to development. Before describing the relations of these possible self variables to adult development, our approach to maturity warrants discussion.

## **Happiness and Complexity: Two Sides of Maturity**

Characterizing change in adulthood as development requires that we specify what we mean by mature. In our view, maturity is a multifaceted construct. Here we focus on two aspects of the person that may be perceived as components of maturity, happiness (or, more formally [in our research], subjective well-being) and complexity (or ego development). Happiness and complexity certainly do not exhaust all of the characteristics that one might associate with maturity (or the good life, more generally; Ryff & Singer, 1998). However, these two sides of maturity are especially important to the consideration of the role of what might have been to development, for they allow us to



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examine two domains in which possible self investment, disengagement, and exploration may promote differing outcomes.

Theoretical models of development often include an implicit sense that development culminates in positive feelings. Certainly, Erikson (1968) did not include *happiness* as a criterion for personality development, but it is not difficult to imagine that a person who has attained *trust*, *autonomy*, *initiative*, *industry*, *identity*, *intimacy*, *generativity*, and *integrity* is going to be happier than the unfortunate soul who ended up on the other side of those psychosocial conflicts. Moreover, subjective well-being increases with age (e.g., Mroczek, 2001; Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998; Mroczek & Spiro, 2005; Vaillant, 1994; Vaillant & Mukamal, 2001). Carstensen's (e.g., Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003) socioemotional selectivity theory recognizes the enhanced capacities for emotion regulation that allow individuals to optimize the positive aspects of their lives as they age. Similarly, in her conceptualization of adult development, Labouvie-Vief and Medler (2002) described the highest level of development (*integrated* in their terms) as being characterized by high levels of positive affect and low levels of negative affect. These approaches provide a conceptual sense that increases in well-being in adulthood are, in fact, developmental changes.

There is, then, good reason to consider happiness as one component of maturity. But happiness is not everything (Ryff, 1989). Certainly, there are aspects of maturity that might not be captured by happiness (e.g., compassion, integrity, insight). Some of the most valued activities of adulthood do not relate in simple ways to how happy a person is. In his treatise on the meanings of life, Baumeister (1991) mused over the apparent paradox of parenthood. Though parenthood is clearly an important activity, its

relation to satisfaction would seem to make it less than appealing. While acknowledging the importance of happiness to maturity, in considering the importance of examining what might have been to adult development, we must consider other potentially valuable developmental outcomes, such as insight, wisdom, character, virtue, or a broad, complex sensibility.

The distinction drawn here resonates with Aristotle's classic distinction (in the *Nicomachean Ethics*; trans. 1962) between eudaimonia and hedonism, particularly as it has been applied to research on well-being (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 1998). For Aristotle, hedonism (the pursuit of pleasure) was distinct from the experience of happiness that emerges from the expression of virtue. Within psychology, eudaimonia has typically been defined as fulfillment that comes from engagement in meaningful activity and the actualization of one's potential (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2001). Eudaimonia is characterized as living in accord with one's true self or enacting one's deeply held values (Waterman, 1993). Hedonics, in contrast, is viewed as focusing on positive feelings *per se*.

Although, theoretically, eudaimonia ought to be separable from hedonic happiness, empirically this has rarely been demonstrated. Rather, most research has shown the relationship of eudaimonic variables (e.g., intrinsic motivation, engagement in organismic pursuits, endorsing intrinsic vs. extrinsic values) to measures of hedonic well-being (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2001; Ryan, Koestner, & Deci, 1991). In short, this research has shown that individuals engaged in eudaimonic pursuits enjoy higher levels of hedonic well-being.

An examination of the role of what might have been (a topic likely to engender regret) requires us to examine variables that are not assumed, *a priori*, to relate to happiness. If we wish to argue that happiness might be sacrificed in the pursuit of other developmental outcomes, at the very least these outcomes must, themselves, be independent of happiness.

Therefore, to assess this "other side" of maturity, we have relied on Loevinger's (1976) construct of ego development. Ego development refers to the level of complexity with which one experiences oneself and the world (Loevinger, 1976).<sup>2</sup> The essence of the ego is "the striving to master, to integrate, and make sense of experience" (Loevinger, 1976, p. 59). As ego level increases, the individual's organismic frame of reference becomes more complex.

Ego development conforms to the classic definition of development as a movement from relative simplicity to ever increasing levels of differentiation and integration (Lerner, 1998). At the earliest stages of ego development, individuals are dominated by impulses and engage in simplistic thinking. With development come the abilities to

<sup>2</sup> Although Loevinger described ego development levels as particular types, in our work, nonlinear relationships have never emerged. Therefore, we refer to ego development as a continuous variable, with lower scores indicating relatively less complex views of self and world and higher levels indicating increasing complexity.

control and channel impulses. People at the higher stages of ego development recognize that life's lessons are contextualized and that life's big questions may have a variety of valid answers. Ego development involves an increasing capacity to recognize conflict and experience ambivalence. Identity and mutuality become concerns at the highest stages, leading to a more expansive view of the self and world. Ego development has been described as the development of character (Westen, 1998). Ego development has been shown to increase with age, but that increase is increasingly unlikely as individuals leave young adulthood (Cohn, 1998; Loevinger et al., 1985). Ego development relates to openness to experience; increased compassion, intellectuality, and tolerance (Helson & Roberts, 1994; Helson & Wink, 1987); articulateness; intuition and sublimation (Vaillant & McCollough, 1987); empathy; and the capacity for interpersonal connectedness (Carlozzi, Gaa, & Liberman, 1983; Pals & John, 1998).

Just as subjective well-being does not capture all of the characteristics associated with maturity, ego development, in the absence of subjective well-being, also falls short of some ideals of maturity. The complex ego, overwhelmed by conflict and ambivalence or left disillusioned by life's difficult lessons, misses central aspects of maturity such as self-acceptance and contentment.

It is vitally important for our purposes that ego development is independent of subjective well-being (Helson & Wink, 1987; King et al., 2000; Noam, 1998; Vaillant & McCullough, 1987). Thinking about what might have been is likely to foster feelings of regret and even distress. To examine the value of such activity to maturity requires that we include a measure of an aspect of maturity on which a person can score highly even if he or she is not necessarily happy. Although the independence of ego development from measures of adjustment is sometimes viewed as a weakness of the measure (e.g., Noam, 1998), this lack of relationship is precisely why the construct is ideal for our purposes.

One way in which happiness may be privileged over complexity in the mental life of the developing person is that happiness is available to awareness (Larsen & Fredrickson, 1999). We know when we are happy or unhappy. In contrast, we simply cannot ask a person how complex his or her experience of the self and world is. Thus, while well-being is typically measured using self-report questionnaires, ego development is measured using the Sentence Completion Test (Hy & Loevinger, 1996). On this measure, participants are asked to complete stems, such as "When they talked about sex, I . . ." and "What gets me into trouble is . . ." The items are independently scored by raters trained using the guidelines provided by Hy and Loevinger. Although time-consuming, this measure has been shown to track changes in personality and complexity over time (e.g., Gilmore & Durkin, 2001; Helson & Roberts, 1994).

Ego complexity is conceptually, empirically, and methodologically distinct from well-being. A person can be quite happy without necessarily adopting a complex stance toward the self and the world. Similarly, one can embrace

the complexities of life without necessarily feeling particularly good about that life. We view ego development and subjective well-being as important and independent aspects of maturity, with the convergence of these two constructs likely capturing a fuller sense of what it means to be mature. How, then, do these two aspects of maturity relate to the adult's capacity to acknowledge what might have been?

## Lost and Found Possible Selves, Happiness, and Personality Development

Generally speaking, pursuing and progressing on important goals is associated with enhanced subjective well-being (e.g., Emmons et al., 1998). Thus, not surprisingly, results with regard to the salience of possible selves have shown a strong relationship between the salience of *current* possible selves and subjective well-being. For example, salience of the current best possible selves was concurrently related to subjective well-being for the parents of children with DS (King & Patterson, 2000), divorced women (King & Raspin, 2004), and gay men and lesbians (King & Smith, 2004). These results converge with a broad array of studies to suggest that investing in one's current goals is a strong correlate of happiness. Interestingly, in the gay and lesbian sample, the salience of the current best possible selves (i.e., the gay best possible selves, for these participants) was also correlated with being "out of the closet" such that more "out" individuals tended to have more salient identity-consistent goals. The salience of the gay best possible selves partially mediated the relation between outness and subjective well-being (King & Smith, 2004).

In contrast, failure to disengage from lost goals is associated with lowered well-being. The salience of (or level of current engagement in) the lost possible self has been associated with lowered subjective well-being, heightened distress, and increased regret for divorced women and gay men and lesbians (King & Raspin, 2004; King & Smith, 2004), even controlling for current best possible self engagement. In addition, gay individuals with very salient straight possible selves were more likely to be "in the closet." These results jibe with past research relating goal disengagement to lowered regret (Wrosch et al., 2005). Clearly, thinking about lost possible selves is no way to be happy. Individuals who maintain engagement in possible selves that are simply "not in the cards" tend to show the typical effects of regret on well-being.

Thus, one aspect of maturity, happiness, requires that individuals truly divest themselves of previously sought after goals; however, another aspect of maturity, ego development, may require an examination of these very goals. Recall that in addition to self-reported salience of each possible self, we have coded the narratives provided for level of elaboration (e.g., detail, vividness). Controlling for self-rated salience, lost possible self elaboration has been shown to correlate with ego development. For instance, gay men and lesbians who described an elaborate straight possible self scored higher in concurrently measured ego de-

velopment (King & Smith, 2004). In a related vein, parents of children with DS who were able to elaborate on their lost possible selves were more likely to report growing as a result of the experience of having a child with DS (King & Patterson, 2000).

Interestingly, among divorced women, lost possible self elaboration related to current ego development in interaction with time since the divorce (King & Raspin, 2004). Time is, as usual, “of the essence.” For women who had only recently divorced, a highly elaborate lost possible self might simply demonstrate good memory for recently lost goals. Importantly, then, lost possible self elaboration was related to higher levels of concurrent ego development only in interaction with time. Among these women, ego development related specifically to narrating a long-lost aspect of the self with rich, vivid detail. Elaborating on goals that may once have held the promise of positive affect is a correlate of ego development and personal growth, concurrently. The more mature ego is apparently not threatened by the contradictory aspects of the self that are made salient when one is writing about a lost possible self.

### **Prospective Analyses**

In addition to looking at these samples cross-sectionally, we have examined how adults’ constructions of current and lost goals predict subjective well-being and ego development over two years. With regard to happiness, few prospective relations have been identified. Rather, one’s current mental life appears to be more strongly related to one’s overall feelings of happiness (although, notably, lingering engagement in the straight possible self prospectively predicted distress in the gay and lesbian sample; King & Smith, 2004). Generally speaking, the salience of one’s current best possible self and lost possible self are the key correlates of well-being.

However, the work of accommodation, as revealed in the elaboration of a lost possible self, has been shown to predict increased ego development, prospectively. Among divorced women, lost possible self elaboration predicted enhanced ego development in interaction with time (and controlling for Time 1 ego development as well as age and whether the woman initiated the divorce), prospectively, over two years (King & Raspin, 2004). Among gay men and lesbians, an elaborate straight possible self predicted increased ego development two years later, even after controlling for Time 1 ego development as well as a variety of potential confounds (including age, education, and socioeconomic status; King & Smith, 2004). These results suggest that being able to elaborate on lost goals not only reveals a capacity of the developed ego but may also reveal processes that *lead to* enhanced ego development over time.

In sum, if maturity includes both happiness and complexity, then the mature person is one who acknowledges loss (an elaborate lost possible self) but is not consumed by it (the lost possible self is rated low on salience) and who maintains a commitment to important current goals (a salient best possible self). If we consider the goal processes

of elaborating on a lost possible self, disengaging fully from that self, and committing to a new best possible future toward which to strive as the fruition of the difficult work of accommodation, then the happy and complex person is one who has fully accommodated the loss of previously cherished goals. Happiness is associated with commitment to current goals, disengagement from lost goals, and focus on the good that is yet to come. Ego development is related to the capacity to acknowledge loss and expound on one’s previously cherished goals. In a sense, these results suggest a paradox—one must generate an elaborate portrait of loss while not thinking about that loss. Once again, time may be important. Perhaps thinking about what might have been is indeed a recipe for regret, but that temporary sacrifice of happiness may ultimately pay off in a richer, more complex self. For happy, complex individuals, what might have been is a vivid image full of lost promise, but this image is, perhaps, crowded out of mental life by the exciting prospect of what still might be.

### **The Happy, Complex Adult**

The individual who has made him or herself vulnerable to acknowledged regret can be seen to adopt a courageous stance toward life: Despite acknowledging the risks of expecting anything from life, the happy and complex person maintains a heroic commitment to continue to do just that. In the context of an elaborate lost possible self, current goal engagement takes on a different character. Such pursuits are a source of well-being, but they emerge within the ruins of previously cherished goals. The happy and complex person acknowledges fully a past characterized by loss but is also deeply engaged in the present. The following longer excerpt from the lost possible self of a happy and complex mother of a child with DS provides an illustration of the process of accommodation fully acknowledged in the context of a happy life:

I was on the road to self discovery. . . . I was searching for a little more purpose. Being a mother, being a wife, being a nurse was not enough: I wanted to fulfill my destiny. I wanted to continue on the search for self actualization. Well [my son] came along. Everything was tested, values, beliefs, friendships, wedding vows, etc. Much growth, difficult growth, lots of confusion, but I am on the other side now. . . . I am right back on track and could not be happier. I’m stronger—I’m more experienced and, God knows, I’m much more compassionate and humble.

Exploring the narrative accounts provided by individuals who score relatively high on measures of well-being as well as ego development gives a sense for the distinctive features of these individuals and their approach to lost and found goals. A first notable example is the use of humor in what are, more generally, traumatic narratives. In her description of finding out that her child had DS, a happy, complex mother noted, “I laugh at this now because I was 33 years old but I called my parents. I think I wanted them to fix things. They were good at it in the past” (quoted in King et al., 2000, p. 532). The lost possible selves of these individuals also are likely to contain gentle humor: “Actually, realizing I

was going to be a parent again at age 40 was about as traumatic as learning our child had DS.”

Ego development brings a keen perception that, in conjunction with happiness, may allow the person openness to the comfort of the physical world. Among the happy and complex parents of children with DS, a sense of awe is expressed, typically, in the physical appearance of their children: “I stripped off all of his clothes and just looked at him. He was beautiful”; “To me, he looked beautiful”; “He was perfect”; “He was not the monster I expected, he was beautiful.”

The theme of compassion toward others who have suffered is a common one in the possible self narratives of the happy and complex, but perhaps more distinctive of this group is the compassionate stance that they take with regard to the previous version of the self who is described in their lost possible self narratives. Ego development in the absence of the glow of happiness may foster an unusually brutal perspective on a former self: “I was 37 and knew the statistics but foolishly believed that nothing bad could ever happen to me” (from a mother of a child with DS). While those high on ego development and low on subjective well-being perceive that self as “foolish” or “misguided” or even “stupid,” ego development paired with subjective well-being brings a more compassionate view of the self to the fore—a self who can, perhaps, be excused for her naiveté. As one happy, complex mother of children with DS opened her lost possible self narrative, “Should I say I was an idiot? My life would have been boring? I had no idea what the life was that I was dreaming about.”

As one embraces the losses in one’s life, those losses can be transformed into sources of deep gratitude (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). Gratitude may be the hallmark of the ultimate transcendence (and capacity for resolution and happiness) of the developed ego. A happy, complex mother of a child with DS commented, about her son, “He is as much or more of blessing to our family as any child could be” (quoted in King et al., 2000, p. 523). Such a statement, in the context of high ego development, is not likely to represent defensiveness or Pollyannaism but, rather, the legitimate discovery of the genuinely positive aspects of one’s multifaceted life. McAdams (2006) has chronicled the American love of redemptive life stories, stories of triumph over adversity and of good things emerging out of bad. He has noted that such stories, while related to generativity and a productive and caring approach to life (McAdams, 2006), may also indicate arrogance and self-righteousness. Importantly, in the studies reviewed here, the positives that emerge from loss arise out of an acknowledgment of that loss (see Janoff-Bulman & Berg, 1998, for a similar perspective).

## Psychological Requirements for Adult Development

Personality development has long been the purview of personality and developmental psychologists, but personal

growth has often been relegated to the realm of self-help books or pop psychology. Increasingly, however, the active role of the person in his or her development has been acknowledged (e.g., Brandstadter, Wentura, & Rothermund, 1999; Ebner, Freund, & Baltes, 2006; Freund & Riediger, 2006). To the extent that development is an intentional process, the distinction between personality development and personal growth blurs (King, 2002; Staudinger & Kunzmann, 2005). From this perspective, development may be at least partially understood as a personal choice, relying on the commitment of the person (Levenson & Crumpler, 1996).

Acknowledging the role of the individual in his or her own development, we can consider capacities that might relate to development through goal change. Generally, these capacities involve willingness or readiness to acknowledge the unexpected, the unimaginable, the undeserved, and the unwilling, coupled with an admission of vulnerability—that one has been truly touched and changed by life experience. All of these capacities relate in important ways to the experience of and capacity to admit regret and legitimate loss.

### The Necessity of Trouble

Speaking specifically from the perspective of story, Bruner (1999) stated that stories can only function as a source of identity and meaning when there is some disturbance or imbalance—this creates the engine of story (Labov & Waletzky, 1997). The violation of expectations sets in motion those behaviors we can perform to restore order or to find a new order—to experience a true “turning point.” Research on difficult life experiences, stress, and coping supports this idea (Aldwin & Gilmer, 2004; Helson, 1992; Helson & Roberts, 1994; Helson & Wink, 1987).

Among those who scored high on subjective well-being but relatively low on ego development (those who might be considered complacent or happy but simple in their orientation to the self and the world), a common theme in lost possible selves is a tendency to mitigate regret by focusing on goals that are still available (“All of these goals are still attainable, even though we have a child with DS”; “I can still accomplish all of these goals as a gay person”). In a sense, these individuals seem to deny that trouble has occurred. In addition, individuals who are happy but low on ego development explicitly mention living in the “now” and not wanting to dwell on the past, again separating the past from current life.

In contrast, among participants high on both well-being and ego development is an acknowledgement of the profound work that has often been fostered by a challenging life experience. For example, in describing his straight possible self, one happy, complex gay man commented about the difficulties of being a gay person in a homophobic society:

It forced me to do some very difficult work in analyses and accepting myself as a person who faces prejudice. As a straight person, my life would be much more contented, peaceful, and happy. I don’t know that I would ever have felt the need to do all the work I have done.

## Surprise

Reducing uncertainty, maximizing controllability and predictability—these have been recognized as central human motives (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Kelley, 1971; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). Yet development may require that we fail to achieve a perfectly routine existence. Loevinger (1976) stated that only when the environment fails to meet the person's expectations can development occur. Implicit in this definition is the experience of surprise. Human beings cannot know or predict everything. Miscalculations are a certainty in life. Surprise or the capacity to admit being surprised by life would appear to be essential to personality development in adulthood. Among those who are low on both subjective well-being and ego development (those who fall short of both aspects of maturity), a common theme in lost possible selves includes denial of ever having expected anything from life (e.g., "I didn't expect much" from a divorced woman; "I'm a realist" from a mother of a child with DS). In these narratives of lost goals, we see a reluctance to acknowledge surprise.

## Humility

Perhaps underlying the capacity for surprise is a sense of humility. Surprise requires that one admit to not knowing everything and not thinking of every possible contingency—in short, to being human. Actively accommodating life experiences requires an admission of one's own vulnerability, of the inadequacy of one's preexisting meaning structures in the face of the challenges of reality, and of one's apparent smallness in the grand scheme of life.

Recently, scholars have argued that humility is an important psychological strength (Exline et al., 2004; Exline & Geyer, 2004; Schueler, 1997). Importantly, humble individuals are thought to have relatively positive self-views (Exline & Geyer, 2004). In their discussion of epistemic egocentrism, Royzman, Cassidy, and Baron (2003) suggested that true humility is more about possessing an exalted view of the capacities of others rather than a negative view of oneself. Research on humility suggests that it might well converge with ego development. For example, a person who experiences humility is likely to have an accurate assessment of his or her own accomplishments and abilities (see Tangney, 2002), which might result from the increased, nondefensive self-insight that is associated with high cognitive complexity. Both humility and ego development are believed to be related to openness to new types of information (cf. Helson & Roberts, 2004; Tangney, 2002). Individuals who experience humility or high ego development are considered less self-occupied and more likely to value the "big picture" (Loevinger, 1976; Tangney, 2002). Moreover, both of these constructs are thought to be associated with increased compassion and forgiveness (e.g., Exline et al., 2004; Helson & Wink, 1987). Maturity may require the ability to be humbled by life experience.

Among individuals low on both happiness and ego development, entitlement is clearly at issue in expressed

envy about what one cannot have ("that *really would* be a happily ever after" from a gay man) and deep frustration over unmet expectations (e.g., "It was not some fairy tale or storybook. It was a realistic expectation of love and respect!" from a divorced woman). Such individuals demonstrate lingering commitment to what might have been that can be viewed as limiting both happiness and complexity. Humility may allow the individual to surrender the notion that one deserved something better from others, from oneself, and perhaps, quite simply, from life itself.

## Courage

Perhaps ironically, given our emphasis on surprise and humility, another requirement for active development would seem to be courage. Both aspects of maturity require this important but little-studied strength (but see Maddi, 2006). Admitting that one had perhaps foolishly embraced an untenable future self is threatening. Undertaking the difficult process of self-examination would appear to require fortitude. In addition, starting anew—having the capacity to expect something from life, even after one's prior expectations have failed—may be no less threatening. Among those low on both well-being and ego development, the lesson learned from life experience is the sheer danger in expecting anything from life. These individuals are more likely to admit regretting having expectations at all (e.g., "I was *too* sure of my future" from a divorced woman).

Among participants who are high on ego development but low on well-being, we see insight coupled with a sense of hopelessness or a lack of will to continue to expect from life: "There are so many things I could have accomplished," wrote one gay man of his straight possible self. Another gay man likened his straight best possible self to his brother's life, "but he doesn't see the truths that my father and I both could see. His life is frustrating. I see that. My father saw that." Happiness after a major life transition requires the courage to once again embrace life's remaining possibilities. A happy and mature mother of a child with DS shared the following best possible self:

I see myself on an exciting journey. I like who I am. I have many areas that need work but for the most part I'm present and attentive to my needs and dreams and goals. . . . I am finding that giving is truly more satisfying than receiving. I have had a challenge in accepting my son's DS. It's taken time but unconditional love and acceptance are truly there. . . . I want to work within the community to be an agent of change. We all have a time of being a caregiver—to our children or parents, or someone. I want to offer . . . tools for people to find their own balance and peace. . . . I am quite selfish by nature: My son has opened that perspective—a new window for loving and caring now exists for me. I'm proud that I have taken responsibility for my own growth. (quoted in King & Hicks, 2006, p. 133)

An elaborate lost possible self may be viewed, then, as evidence of humility, courage, and ultimately faith in the value of seeking meaning in life's losses. Although we have presented surprise, humility, and courage as prerequisites for development, clearly these characteristics may share dynamic relationships with happiness and complex-



ity. Ego development may lead one to be more likely to approach life with a keen sensitivity or openness to conflict between expectations and reality. Happiness may serve as a resource in courageously confronting a challenging life experience with a sense of hope and optimism. Happiness may also serve as a resource that promotes and facilitates the difficult process of self-examination (e.g., Aspinwall & Brunhart, 2000).

## Possible Self-Exploration as a Developmental Process

Although we have generally examined lost possible selves as responses to changing life circumstances, the exploration of possible selves may play a more general role in development. One problem in such a focus is that it may leave the impression that the adult is, essentially, waiting around to be disrupted by life events. This concern may be mitigated by the fact that, to paraphrase a once-popular bumper sticker, “stuff happens.” As noted previously, goal investment itself would seem to enhance the chances that “something” will indeed happen. However, it makes sense to consider not only the general attitude toward life that is implied in our work but the potential role of possible self exploration as a developmental process per se.

Following Erikson, Marcia (1994, 2002) described identity as emerging from a process of exploration. Although exploration is generally thought of as tied to the young adult or adolescents’ search for identity, here we propose that possible self exploration may have a more enduring capacity for fostering development in adulthood. A recently proposed model of the universe suggests that cosmology may serve as a useful heuristic in understanding the role of possible self exploration in adulthood development. Hawking and Hertog’s (2006; see also Gefter, 2006) top-down, multiple universes approach to cosmology essentially states that because of the quantum context of the birth of the universe, we cannot state with any confidence how the universe began, rendering bottom-up approaches to cosmology limited. In their *no boundary theory*, Hawking and Hertog propose that we begin with the current “final state” of our universe and project backward all possible histories—all possible universes—that might give rise to our current state. One implication of this approach is that the history of the universe that we discover is at least partially determined by the questions we pose in the present. Provocatively, Hawking and Hertog have suggested that the present can affect the past—that is, we can create our history. If we could stand outside the universe, we would have what Hawking calls an *angel’s eye view*, in which backward causality may exist—we could see the present affecting the past. As Hawking noted, “Observations of final states determine different histories of the universe” (quoted in Gefter, 2006, p. 30).

Although a controversial (even audacious) approach to cosmology, this theory serves well to illuminate the role of possible self examination in the process of adult development. If backward causation can be entertained when considering the origins of the universe, surely it might

function in the mental universe as well. Indeed, Bruner’s (1999) discussion of narratives of aging presages Hawking and Hertog’s (2006) top-down approach to cosmology. Bruner (1999) asserted that story “makes it possible to get on with ordinary ‘forward living’ by fixing it ‘backward’” (p. 8). Backward causation is also acknowledged in the autobiographical memory literature in the realization that the present and future become ever more definitive of the past (e.g., Bluck, 2003).

This no boundaries metaphor would suggest that examination of not only the paths we chose (and lost) but those we did not even consider might relate to personality development. This notion resonates with the original conceptualization of possible selves as all possible imagined selves—self as bag lady, self as astronaut, self as mother, and so forth. Our results for gay and lesbian adults are informative in this regard. We asked these participants to generate a “straight best possible self.” These individuals may or may not have previously embraced a straight possible self (Cass, 1979). For some of these individuals, then, the straight lost possible self was a fiction. Importantly, the same relations emerged in this sample as did for our other samples. Perhaps these results speak to a general capacity for possible self exploration to recreate one’s history—to explore selves one had not even considered in the service of enhanced development.

Whether maturity can be reached via self-consciously exploring one’s possible selves is a question that remains for future research. A central question might be why anyone would intentionally embark on such an exploration if it is likely to engender regret. Is there a reason to value a complex sensibility even if it does not result in increases in happiness? Loevinger (1976) described ego development as a *master trait* that transforms the meaning of experiences. As a final implication of our approach, we consider the possibility that the complex perspective of an individual high on ego development may transform the very meaning of happiness itself.

## Toward a Psychology of Mature Happiness: Eudaimonia Revisited

The intermingling of the nuanced perspective provided by ego development and positive feelings of well-being may change the very quality of happiness itself (King, 2001). We suggest that the happiness of the person who is also high in ego development may differ qualitatively (if not quantitatively) from that of the person low on ego development. Such happiness may be based in a realistic perception of one’s life and, as such, may be more resilient in the face of life’s difficulties. Happiness, from this complex perspective, may be more bittersweet, involving the recognition of legitimate loss and the fragility of human intention. We propose that this version of happiness deserves a place in the psychological consideration of the *good life*, and eudaimonia, in particular.

As noted previously, research has shown again and again that hedonic well-being is sensitive to the dynamics of eudaimonia: People are, in fact, (hedonically) happier

when they are engaged in meaningful, self-expression (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2001). We cannot make the same claim about the happiness of an individual high on ego development. Rather, happiness is centrally irrelevant to the complex sensibility. However, in considering the place of complexity in the goods of life, it is worthwhile to note the implications of this facet of maturity for happiness.

The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Larsen, Emmons, & Griffin, 1984) is a commonly used measure of subjective well-being that has, in fact, been used in all of the studies described here. One item on that scale is particularly worth considering at this point: "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing." This item seems to get to the heart of the question of the role of regrets in adulthood. Can one give this item a 7 on the typical 1–7 Likert scale? One way to do so would be to "forget" about what might have been, to respond as President Bush did in the news conference, without regard for one's potential lost goals. However, for the person who is high in ego development, that 7 means endorsing the value of a life that has included experiences that might be considered traumatic, difficult, and even unfathomable to the outsider. In the transformational light of accommodation, regrets are realistically negative, but they become less regrettable as they are incorporated into the ever-changing life story. Of course, 7 still equals 7—and happiness may be a difficult value to forsake, regardless of how one has managed to attain it. But we argue that in the context of an elaborated lost possible self, one of these 7s is a true accomplishment, involving the mindful acceptance of one's life, "warts and all." Happiness in this context may well be a richer and, perhaps, more durable experience, an achievement rather than a byproduct of objective life circumstance or personal dispositions. From our perspective, the mature person is not "sadder but wiser" but, rather, wise and still inspired, fulfilled, and—ultimately—happy.

## Conclusions

We opened this article with the example of President Bush rendered mute in the face of a question about his past mistakes. The tendency to close ourselves off from life's potentially regrettable experiences may be a natural response that springs from the urgent need to avoid the profound distress of regrets. But the need to avoid regret need not take center stage in human life, particularly during those times when life provides an opportunity for development. In negotiating the changing possible selves we might occupy or hope for, acknowledging the value of the multitude of selves left behind along the way may serve as a means to develop a complex understanding of the self and the world. Recognition of the losses that have led to one's current place in the life story may open one up to a number of valuable and rich experiences, including a paradoxical sense of gratitude for loss itself.

In closing, we draw on the words of novelist Barbara Kingsolver (1998): "Listen. To live is to be marked. To live is to change, to acquire the words of a story, and that is the only celebration we mortals know" (p. 458). Our consideration of maturity as a convergence of happiness and

complexity suggests that the humble, courageous admission that we are all marked is the first step toward true maturity. Lingering engagement in lost possible selves is negatively related to happiness, but that does not preclude the possibility that exploring such experiences has important implications for other valuable outcomes. The participants in our studies have taught us that the very experiences that mark us may become a source of unexpected strength and play a role in the creation of a more differentiated and integrated self. Bruner (1999) suggested that development is a sign of dedication to life itself: "A life is a work of art, probably the greatest one we produce" (p. 7). The happy, complex person's palette is one that contains a rich array of color, and the mature artist, though genuinely marked by life, maintains an enthusiasm to put paint to the canvas of life in remarkable ways.

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