Preface

Some years ago, I taught a course on men and their psychological issues and challenges. The class was predominantly made of men. One week the topic was fathers and we had a very spirited discussion. The following week the topic was mothers and no one had much to say. There was some shuffling of feet, heads were down, and no one volunteered to talk until one of the women in the class offered a few thoughts about mothers. After class, a few of the male students apologized to me for the class's lethargy, and after they left the classroom another male student told me that he didn't speak up because there were women in the class and he didn't think they would like what he had to say about his own mother.

When Erik Erikson's writings were becoming popular in the 1950s and 1960s, students would often be informed by their professors that a major difference between Erikson and Freud was that Freud didn't have much to say about mothers and their role in the developmental process, but that Erikson did. Professors pointed out that Erikson devoted a great deal of attention to the relationship between the infant and the mother and emphasized how important this relationship was to the child's ongoing development. What these professors did not tell their students in the 1950s and '60s is that what Erikson had to say about mothers was not always complimentary. In fact, because they focused almost exclusively on the relationship between the infant and the mother, they gave the impression that Erikson's view of mothers was idealized (and often commended him for this).

This book is an attempt to set the record straight. It shows that Erikson's view of mothers was far more complex than it has been popularly represented to be. In setting the record straight, this book treads on rather dangerous ground because, as the ominous silence in my class that day suggests, there is a cultural taboo against talking about mothers except in highly idealized ways (especially on Mother's Day). I believe, however, that Erikson's writings about the relationship between the small child and the

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mother are as relevant today as they were when they were written, and that a major reason for their relevance is that they show how children develop into resourceful individuals precisely because their relationships with their mothers are not without their difficulties.

As I note in chapter 1, this is not a book about blaming mothers. In fact, as we will see, the difficulties that begin to emerge in the relationship between small children and their mothers is due to a large extent to the fact that the children are becoming more independent as a direct consequence of their physical, mental, and emotional development. I talk a lot about the emergence of the melancholy self in this book as I believe that the word *melancholy* expresses how the child feels about these emerging difficulties. I think that this word also captures the mood of the class the day we were supposed to be discussing mothers. I realize that the word *melancholy* has a certain heaviness about it that may for some readers be immediately off-putting. But I find the word useful because it has several connotations—sadness, gloominess, pensiveness, irritability, anger—and for this very reason invites the reader to reflect on which of them may be more relevant to his or her experience than others. Also, the word *melancholy* has a history within the psychoanalytic tradition itself, and, as the introduction shows, provides an important link between Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson.

However, this book is not primarily about melancholy. As the formal structure of Erikson's life-cycle schema indicates, he viewed the ongoing development of the individual as a continuing struggle between life-enhancing and life-diminishing qualities, and contended that there should be a certain ratio favoring the former over the latter. If we assume that *melancholy* is essentially a life-diminishing quality, then we need to identify the quality that stands over against it, and a word that seems especially appropriate is *resourcefulness.*

Erikson used the word *resourceful* in the Preface to *Young Man Luther*. Here he notes that he had originally intended that his study of Luther would be a chapter in a book on emotional crises in late adolescence and early adulthood, but "Luther proved too bulky a man to be merely a chapter."[1] The other chapters would have focused on young persons who were his patients at Austen Riggs Center, where he had been a member of the staff since 1952. He goes on to note in the preface that "any comparison made between young man Luther and our patients is, for their sake as well as his, not restricted to psychiatric diagnosis and the analysis of pathological dynamics, but is oriented toward those moments when young patients, like young beings anywhere, prove resourceful and insightful beyond all professional and

1. Erikson, *Young Man Luther,* 7.

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personal expectation."[2] Thus, his book on Luther "will concentrate on the powers of recovery in the young ego."[3] It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that Erikson would have no objections to the emphasis that I am placing here on the *resourceful self*.

The dictionary defines *resourcefulness* as the ability to deal effectively and creatively with problems, difficulties, etc.[4] In light of Erikson's insistence that his life-cycle schema is a *psychosocial* one, it is noteworthy that *resource* applies both to a source of strength or ability within oneself (an *inner* resource) and to anything or any one person to which one can turn for aid in time of need or emergency (an *external* resource). My purpose here is not to suggest that this polarity between *melancholy* and *resourcefulness* might replace any of the polarities that comprise Erikson's life-cycle model, nor would I be so bold as to claim that the polarity between melancholy and resourcefulness underlies these other polarities. It is sufficient to claim that the polarity between melancholy and resourcefulness is an enduring life-theme with origins in early childhood and that it plays a central role in the realization of one's potentialities and aspirations.

Finally, since the dictionary defines *resourcefulness* as not only the ability to deal *effectively* but also *creatively* with problems, difficulties, and the like, this book reflects the fact that Erikson aspired to become an artist before he became a psychoanalyst. Several months after his death on May 12, 1994, I wrote Joan M. Erikson, his wife, asking her what she felt to be the most significant aspects of his work. She replied on February 20, 1995: "About Erik's way of looking at things, it is important to stress—always—that he was an artist." The phrase "way of looking at things" is from the concluding chapter of *Childhood and Society,* where Erikson concedes "that whatever message has not been conveyed by my description and discourse has but a slim chance of being furthered by a formal conclusion. I have nothing to offer except a way of looking at things."[5] His way of looking at things was the artist's way: with imagination, a feeling for form and a sense that there is usually more—but sometimes less—than meets the eye.

Now, for a few words about the structure of the book: In chapters 1 and 2 I discuss the melancholy self. Chapter 1 draws on Freud's understanding of melancholia, and then moves to Erikson's thoughts on melancholia as he presents them in *Young Man Luther*. It concludes with a brief account of Erikson's personal life, noting that the circumstances of his early childhood

2. Ibid., 8.
3. Ibid.
4. Agnes, *New World College Dictionary,* 121.
5. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (original version), 359.

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would make him especially vulnerable to the formation of a melancholy self. Chapter 2 focuses on Freud's psychobiographical study of Leonardo da Vinci and suggests that two of the themes that Freud highlights in this study—dual mothers and artistic inhibition—are applicable to Erikson as well. This chapter supports the view presented in chapter 1 that Erikson was especially vulnerable to the formation of a melancholy self, but it also suggests that the very makings of a resourceful self were the consequence of da Vinci's struggles with the effects of the melancholy self. Chapter 3 focuses on Erikson's essay in *Insight and Responsibility* titled "Human Strength and the Cycle of Generations"[6] and suggests that the virtues or human strengths whose development he assigns to the infancy and to early and late childhood stages of the life cycle are the foundation for the resourceful self and its development.

Chapters 4–7 focus on resources that Erikson discusses in his writings. I call them "primordial" because they exist at or from the beginning of life. These chapters will take us on a journey, as it were, through selected writings of Erikson's from 1931 to 1977. Chapter 4 on humor and chapter 5 on play focus especially on children and the positive use that they make of these two resources. Chapter 6 on dreams deals with adolescents and young adults and the role that dreams play in helping them to find their way in life. Chapter 7 centers on hope, the first of the virtues or human strengths in Erikson's life-cycle model, and suggests that the paternal voice may play a critical role in sustaining the hopefulness that develops in the mother-infant relationship.

The epilogue draws upon Erikson's late essay about Jesus and suggests that Jesus addressed the melancholy of the men who became his disciples by assuming the role of the reassuring mother. The epilogue also suggests that Jesus exemplified the self-reconciliation that we all desire, one form of which is the reconciliation of our melancholy and resourceful selves. Most important, the epilogue centers on Jesus's admonition to adults that they become like children. The central argument of this book is that the resourceful self has its origins in childhood: hence the subtitle—"And a Little Child Shall Lead Them."

Finally, I would like to note that this book is a sequel to my *At Home in the World*.[7] In the earlier book I discussed the fact that although the emotional separation of boys from their mothers in early childhood enables them to connect with their father and their father's world, this separation also produces a melancholic reaction of sadness and sense of loss.

6. Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility*, 109–57.
7. Capps, *At Home in the World*.

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Realizing that they cannot return to their original maternal environment, men, whether knowingly or not, embark on a lifelong search for a sense of being at home in the world. Thus, the earlier book focused on the ways men engage in this search, and centered especially on the work of artists. *The Resourceful Self* is also concerned with the melancholy self that develops in early childhood, but rather than elaborating the ways men seek to alleviate its negative effects, it argues that another self develops at the same time: a self that I call the resourceful self. Thus, this book addresses the same issue as the earlier one, but it has a different focus. Whereas *At Home in the World* centered on the world beyond the maternal environment, this book focuses on the inherent strengths that children possess and develop. Also, while it is concerned with the emotional separation that occurs in early childhood between the mother and her son, it also considers ways in which this separation is overcome or reversed, and ways in which the father and other paternal figures are a helpful resource. I view these two ways of coping with the emotional separation of mother and child as complementary. Thus, in offering two ways of looking at the issue, the books hopefully support the popular adage that two eyes are better than one.

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