Introduction:
What Makes Life Worth Living?

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Life is but "futility of futilities," proclaims the book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament. "All life is suffering," holds the first of Buddha's Four Noble Truths. If these statements are true (a big "if," and yet who of us can say without hesitation that life is more joyous than painful, more fascinating than tedious), then how do we get through life? What makes our lives worth living?

Philosophers from William James, who held that if you "believe that life *is* worth living . . . your belief will help create the fact" ([1897] 1956, 62), to Albert Camus (1955), who argued that life is worth living not despite but *because* it has no meaning, have tried to answer this question. But answers given by writers of fiction and song offer a more concrete starting point. Bruce Springsteen's song "Reason to Believe" (1982) depicts, among other futilities, a man poking a dead dog with a stick, trying to bring it back to life, a woman vainly awaiting the return of a husband who deserted her long ago, and a baby baptized and buried an instant later as an old man. The refrain of the song says, "Still at the end of every hard-earned day, people find some reason to believe." But this "reason to believe" is an illusion, the song seems to say: there is apparently no "reason to believe" in life's worthwhileness, no "reason to believe" that all will be well in the end. Still, the song's characters keep on believing—believing, or at least hoping, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

One reason for our perseverance in life is thus blind faith, or at least blind hope, according to Springsteen's song. A second reason is implied in a passage from a story by the Japanese writer Kuroi Senji:

> "Are you satisfied with that [work] . . . that you did?"
> "Am I satisfied? I guess I'd have to say that I'm not satisfied. But then, I don't work in order to be satisfied." . . .
> "Then why do you work?"
> "I wonder why. Come on! . . . How can I answer that? It's no use asking that kind of question." (Kuroi 1990, 198–99)

Of course we work to pay the bills; but beyond this, Kuroi's character seems to hold, we work and live because this is what people do. There's no use questioning it, just do it. In John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich,* Rabbit Angstrom talks with his son in a similar way:

> "Look, Nelson. Maybe I haven't done everything right in my life. I know I haven't. But I haven't committed the greatest sin. I haven't laid down and died."
> "Who says that's the greatest sin?"
> "Everybody says it. . . . It's against Nature, to give up, you've got to keep moving." (Updike 1982, 356)

From these words, a lack of imagination coupled with the drive to keep moving seems to be the imperative at the root of day-to-day, year-to-year existence: all one can do is keep plugging away at life.

As ethnographers have shown, this perseverance may be accompanied by the consolations of fantasy. John Caughey found that in characteristic American fantasies, "the individual departs from the real social world, where he or she is average and recognition is slight and grudging, enters a 'glamorous' and media-glorified career field, and becomes . . . 'somebody,' 'a god to millions,' through the mass recognition of others" (Caughey 1984, 168). Thomas Rohlen found that the Japanese high school students he studied immersed themselves in their comic-book fantasies to make their exam-crammed reality tolerable: "The private world of Japanese [high school] students is one full of imaginings and often bizarre images. One needs only to glance through the comic books that are so popular among teenagers to realize that they have a fondness for the extraordinary, the weird, and the obscene that stands in stark contrast to their outward conduct" (Rohlen 1983, 109).

These investigators imply that fantasy is what makes our lives bearable. Maybe we're all Walter Mittys, dreaming of worlds in which, unlike the mundane realities of our actual lives, we are heroes.

But is this all that keeps us persevering: blind faith, dumb habit, the drive to keep moving, the sop of fantasy? Is it only our refusal to see life as it is that keeps us from wading deep into the ocean by the millions and throwing ourselves off buildings en masse?[1]

Perhaps not. Inertia and fantasy are negative explanations for people's perseverance to life, but there's also a positive explanation. Most people, it seems, have a sense of commitment to some facet of their world—perhaps their work, or their family, or their dream, or their religious belief—that gives them a reason to believe in the worthwhileness of their lives.

In Japan, this sense of commitment is called *ikigai,* a word that can be glossed as "that which most makes one's life seem worth living". Surveys of *ikigai* show that men tend to say they find *ikigai* in work or in family, women in family and children. Young people tend to say they find *ikigai* in future dreams, old people in past memories or in present family or hobby. A minority of people say they find *ikigai* in religious belief or in creative endeavors; some say they have no *ikigai.* There is much argument over the meaning of *ikigai* in Japan today, as we'll see; but most people seem able to specify, at least for the pollsters, what makes their lives seem worth living.

In the United States, there is no term fully comparable to *ikigai,* but the idea of *ikigai* seems readily comprehensible to Americans. Consider the line in so many love songs: "Baby, baby, I can't live without you"—in other words, you are what makes my life worth living. Or consider a Sunday comic strip I once saw. Its character moves through his day's drudgeries—traffic jams, piles of paperwork, unpleasant words from the boss—muttering "Why do I put up with this?" Then he gets home and is greeted by the hugs of his little daughter, and he understands: his child is what makes it worth putting up with. Indeed, many Americans may put up with the indigni-

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1. Baumeister notes psychological research showing that depressed people in the United States perceive themselves more accurately than nondepressed people: "Most people seem to achieve happiness by systematically distorting their perception of themselves and their circumstances" (1991: 225). Goleman (1985) and Becker (1973) also discuss how "vital lies" enable us to remain secure and happy.

ties and drudgeries of life for the sake of something—children, lover, work, dream, or God—that makes their lives seem worth it all.

Ikigai is thus a direct answer to the question, what makes life worth living. And yet, this answer is not final, but only provisional. One who lives for work will soon enough retire, or get laid off; one's lover may leave; children will grow up and be gone; one's dreams may fade; God may disappear. One will eventually die, and what will it all mean then? Meanwhile, there are always doubts: "Does she really love me?" "Is this work worth spending my life on?" "Shouldn't my children be free of me?" "Where is the God to whom I pray?" *Ikigai* is essentially insecure; in Japan and the United States alike, it is not the end but the very beginning of the pursuit of a life worth living.

What makes life worth living? For much of my life, I've been asking myself this question. As a child, I remember thinking that life wasn't much fun; I escaped through books. At age seven, I came down with diabetes and needed daily shots of insulin thereafter. Doctors told me that if I didn't take care of myself, I would die young, and I soon convinced myself that I would. I vowed to write, and thereby last beyond myself; I tried to set all that happened to me on paper, as if to transcribe a life worth living from a life that I suspected wasn't.

At fifteen, I discovered LSD and another world that I believed to be better than this one. For several years, I would come home from school and sleep, then rise as my parents and siblings slept, to trip in my basement shrine: candles, plants, a charred sculpture, picture books of explorers' journeys, and piles of tattered currency from around the world (bought from an ad in *Boy's Life*). After high school I went to college, then left to write a novel about a man who bricks himself up in a room and creates a universe. For a year I lived in a cubicle in a pensioners' hotel, swallowing LSD and envisioning other worlds, until finally, still sane, I gave this up and decided to reenter the world of other human beings.

It took me years to do that—among other things, the idea of *making love* to *another human being* seemed impossible, a chimera—but eventually I became more or less resocialized into the world.

Nonetheless, that world still seemed false at core. As books like those of Ernest Becker (1971, 1973, 1975) showed me, our deepest human meanings are built upon our "denial of death," our futile efforts to become symbolically immortal, through money or success or patriotism—or through writing one's thoughts on piles of paper that, after all, are only paper. Could it be that our lives are most deeply based on lies? How could one find a life worth living in such a world?

Indeed, when I looked around in those years, I found the meanings that people seemed to live by insufficient. As books such as Studs Terkel's *Working* (1972) revealed, many Americans work hard but don't like their jobs; the janitor, the waitress, the salesman, the lawyer may work for the sake of a paycheck to enjoy in their leisure hours. But television is the most common American leisure activity—could television be what makes life worth living? Love songs told me "all you need is love," but some half of contemporary marriages end in divorce. Most Americans say they believe in God; but while for some God may indeed provide the basis for a sense of life worth living, for many people I knew God seemed to exist only for an hour or two on Sundays.

Because life in the United States didn't promise much of an answer—because writing seemed false, and my peers' paths of doctor, lawyer, merchant chief seemed futile—I decided to search somewhere else. I went to live in Japan in 1980 because I had been offered a job teaching in an alternative English school, but also because I wondered if Japanese might be able to answer my question. I soon enough came upon the term *ikigai* and found that to many Japanese their *ikigai* was clear: their total commitment to their families and companies. Yet, the longer I was in Japan, the more I saw that for many this commitment seemed unsatisfactory: the employee laboring for a company he hated but couldn't quit; the mother pushing her children to excel in an examination system she detested; the youth dreaming dreams certain to be crushed. In Japan too, what makes life worth living seemed problematic: Why go through with life?

Graduate school, with all its professional specialization, is hardly a place for the pursuit of existential questions, but in cultural anthropology I found a haven where I could indeed pursue such questions. I began graduate training at Cornell University in 1987, seeking to

explore what makes life seem worth living in Japan and the United States. In 1989–91, I interviewed fifty-two Japanese in a northern Japanese city and fifty-two Americans in a western American city, talking with them about their work, their families, their religious beliefs, their dreams, hopes, and fears, and their *ikigai.* This book, a revision of my doctoral dissertation, contains the accounts of some of these people and my reflections about what they told me. The book is empirical in its approach and steeped in theories from social science. Underlying this, it is personal. What can the Japanese and Americans I talked with teach me about what makes life worth living?

Let me here tip my hand, to say that they could teach me nothing unequivocal. There's no light at the end of the tunnel, making all clear and well. But there is a glimmer of hope in what they taught me about the ultimate basis of *ikigai:* the meaning of life, as much as we can know it. It's only a glimmer, but it's all we can have, as I will try to show you before this book ends.

The Structure and Aims of This Book

This book is an exploration of *ikigai* in Japan and the United States. I first examine the cultural meanings of *ikigai* (part 1), then analyze *ikigai* in Japanese and American lives (part 2), and then explore the relation of *ikigai* to the meaning of life in the late modern world (part 3).

In chapter 1 I discuss how the dominant meanings of *ikigai* in Japanese print media are *ittaikan* and *jiko jitsugen,* "commitment to group" and "self-realization"; in chapter 2 I examine the parallel cultural tension in the United States between "self-realization" and "commitment" as ideals of how to live. In chapter 3 I turn from media to people and discuss how I conducted interviews and constructed accounts, and how Japanese and Americans can be compared in their pursuits of lives worth living.

In part 2, the bulk of the book, I look into the words and worlds of nine pairs of Japanese and Americans. Chapter 4, "*Ikigai* in Work and Family," examines the personal accounts of a committed Japanese bank manager and an alienated American airline pilot who both live for their work; two mothers, a married homemaker and a di-

vorced administrator, who live for their children; and a Japanese company employee who dreams of finding his true self and an American who quit his high-stress job to devote himself to his family. In the chapter's commentary, *"Ikigai* and Gender," I elaborate on the familial division of *ikigai* in Japan (work for men, family for women) and the struggle of many Americans to overcome this division.

Chapter 5, *"Ikigai* in Past and Future," considers two young women who dream of a moneyed future that one cultivates and the other avoids; two young men who dream of quitting their mundane jobs to follow their "callings"; and two older women not far from death, one seeking to remain with her family in this world, the other looking ahead to God in the next. In *"Ikigai* and Dreams," I discuss how all *ikigai* are based in culturally and historically shaped dreams of the future.

In chapter 6, *"Ikigai* in Creation and Religion," I consider a Japanese calligrapher and an American novelist who find *ikigai* in their creative endeavors; a Japanese bank employee and an American policeman who find *ikigai* in their religious faiths; and an Ainu activist who dreams of resurrecting Ainu culture and an African-American schoolteacher who feels she has no more dreams left to dream. In *"Ikigai* and Significance," I analyze *ikigai* as the attempt to create and sustain a sense of the enduring significance of one's life.

Part 3 sets forth a cross-cultural theory of *ikigai*. In chapter 7 I examine how the people portrayed in part 2 culturally formulate their *ikigai* and socially negotiate their *ikigai* with the people around them, and I look at the institutional channeling of *ikigai* in Japan and the United States. Chapter 8 explores the linkage of *ikigai* to the larger meaning of life and the collaboration of self and society in maintaining this linkage. I consider Japan and the United States as societies lacking common frameworks of ultimate meaning, and show how the people in part 2 construct personal senses of ultimate meaning—senses that might not be true but that then again just *might* be true.

I have three aims in this book. First, I want to introduce to my readers the Japanese concept of *ikigai*. The conflict over the meaning of

ikigai in Japan today is finally a conflict over how Japanese should live their lives at present and in the future. In this sense, *ikigai* can serve as a window into Japanese society, in all its continuities and transformations.

But *ikigai* has implications beyond Japan. My second aim is to show that *ikigai* is not only a Japanese cultural concept but a cross-cultural concept as well, explicating American as well as Japanese lives. Through *ikigai* selves in Japan and the United States comprehend their most essential link to their social worlds; through it they find lives worth living within their different societies. In this sense, *ikigai* becomes a means of seeing culture from the perspective of its inhabitants, of seeing how culturally shaped selves use their culture to comprehend what they live for.[2]

Ikigai in this sense can serve as a means of understanding Japanese and American cultures in a fuller way. Writings about Japan sometimes seem to oppose a unitary Japanese culture to a unitary American culture, a distinct "other" as opposed to "self," "them" as opposed to "us." But this is illusory, I believe. As this book's accounts show, members of different cultures—two mothers worrying about their teenage children's college prospects, two young men dreaming large dreams shadowed by reality's constraints, or two old women battling life-threatening illnesses and wondering what fate awaits them beyond this world—may in their pursuit of *ikigai* resemble one another more than they resemble the vast majority of their own countrymen and women. This reflects the importance of personal factors such as gender, age, and religious belief in shaping the parallel formulations of *ikigai* for my pairs of Japanese and Americans. It also reflects the

2. As much as possible, I avoid technical theorizing in this book. Nonetheless, a few definitions, based in phenomenology, may be in order. I define *self* as "locus of consciousness," and I maintain that selves of different cultures, despite different cultural moldings, may be compared as physically separate consciousnesses experiencing the world in part through that separation. I define *society* as a "totality of linguistically and institutionally connected selves and their social creations, appearing to each self as the social world lying beyond self and its immediate others." I conceive of *culture* as "the multitude of processes through which selves shape society and society shapes selves within a given linguistic and institutional matrix." My definition of self, in particular, may raise the hackles of both postmodernists and ethnopsychologists, but because it allows me to make the most sense of the people I interviewed, I adhere to it steadfastly.

underlying commonality of Japan and the United States, two societies that are not simply cultural antipodes, but also parallel representatives of "late modernity," a parallel that each of my pairs illustrates in microcosm.

The final aim of this book is, once again, to explore the question, "What makes life worth living?" In this book I hope to offer, through the concept of *ikigai* and through a theory of late modern culture based in the self's pursuit of *ikigai,* a means of comprehending how Japanese and Americans make up the meanings of their lives. I am trying to link the social-scientific discipline of cultural anthropology to the larger existential questions of philosophical anthropology, questions bearing not just upon others in distant, exotic places, but upon you and me as well. What enables us to experience our lives as worth living? How shall we shape the meanings of our lives? These philosophical questions are socially and culturally rooted, and I believe cultural anthropology, as the intersubjective science of human beings, is most suited to address them.[3] In this book, I seek to make at least the rough beginnings of such an address.

3. The kind of philosophical anthropology I advocate is discussed from a social-scientific standpoint by Ernest Becker in *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1971), and from a philosophical standpoint by Martin Buber in his essay "What is Man?" ([1938] 1965).