What Is It Like to Be an Emerging Adult?

Four Profiles

Douglas Coupland’s 1991 novel, *Generation X*, can be credited with first drawing widespread attention to the fact that something new was happening in the lives of young people in their twenties. The novel follows the lives and musings of Andy, Claire, and Dag as they wander through their late twenties together. None of them has been able yet to find enjoyable work, and they refuse to settle into jobs that may pay well but involve “endless stress” and meaningless work “done grudgingly to little applause.”

As for love, none of them is close to getting married, but as Andy says, “I do at least recognize the fact that I don’t want to go through life alone.”

Their feelings about entering adulthood are summed up in the title of one chapter, “Dead at 30 Buried at 70.” As good novels often do, *Generation X* not only describes the lives of individual characters but, in doing so, also provides vivid insights into what it is like to live in a certain place at a certain time.

Most emerging adults I talk to about *Generation X* dislike the book, even if—especially if—they have not read it. Who can blame them, given that *Generation X* is responsible for the construction of a rather unflattering stereotype of young people in their twenties as “ slackers”—aimless, apathetic, and cynical. Nevertheless, although Coupland’s depiction of young people in their twenties was extreme in some ways, in the lives of Andy, Claire, and Dag can be seen many of the features that I described in chapter 1 as defining emerging adulthood. They are exploring (if rather aimlessly); their lives are unstable; they have a sense of being in between adolescence and adulthood (and they are assiduously avoiding adult responsibilities);
and they are self-focused (to an extreme). *Generation X* is also original and funny, and I recommend it to anyone interested in emerging adulthood.

My aim in this book is different than Coupland's, of course, and not just because it is nonfiction rather than fiction. I want to describe common patterns in the lives of emerging adults, not just individual characters, and to illustrate these patterns I will take quotes from various interviews and weave them together. However, there is also much to be gained from describing individuals, so that we can see what a complete life looks like in emerging adulthood. If we only combined isolated parts from the interviews, we would never see how all of the parts fit together. By describing several people in detail, we can get a full sense of what it is like to be an emerging adult, in all of its complexity.

In this chapter we will look at the lives of four emerging adults. I chose the persons for these profiles so that they would represent a broad range of backgrounds and experiences in emerging adulthood. Two are male and two are female; two are White and two are members of ethnic minorities; two are college graduates and two are not; and the four of them grew up in several different parts of the United States. They range in age from 21 to 27. Together they provide a taste of the diversity that exists among emerging adults, as well as some of the qualities that are common to many of them.

Although the persons in the profiles are diverse, they were not chosen to be representative of all persons in my study, much less all persons in their twenties. None of them are married, and none of them have children. None of them are firmly settled into a career path. Rather, the persons in the profiles were chosen because they exemplify the characteristics that define emerging adulthood as a distinct period of life: the age of explorations, the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities. The profiles presented in this chapter will serve to illustrate the essential characteristics of emerging adulthood described in chapter 1, by connecting them to the real lives of emerging adults. The profiles also preview many of the themes of the chapters to come.

**Rosa: "Choking Life for All It's Got"**

I arranged to meet Rosa, 24, at a coffee shop near the University of San Francisco, and I had no trouble spotting her when she walked in. She had told me over the phone that her mother was Chinese and her father was Mexican, and in her face I could see clearly the unusual, striking blend of features from both sides of her family. She had just come from her job at an
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Internet software start-up company, and she was dressed in casual professional clothes, white slacks and a sweater that matched the jet black of her shoulder-length hair.

We started by talking about her work. Her current job for the Internet start-up requires a variety of skills, including editing, accounting, and human resources management, because it is a small company, only 17 employees. She likes the variety, because it gives her a chance to increase her knowledge and explore possibilities for where she might want to focus her efforts. "I want to be able just to bounce around and learn as much as I can from each of the departments, so I just started doing editing. I want to kind of touch the marketing side, too. Just to see what I want to do."

Working for an Internet company was not what she had in mind when she graduated from the University of California at Berkeley two years ago. An English major in college, she planned to become a teacher in the Oakland school system she had attended as a child. "I really thought I wanted to go into education," she said. "I graduated from college and I started running an after-school program at a very low-income school because I thought if I was going to teach, I was going to teach where I was needed the most. I didn't want to teach in any district but Oakland, because I grew up in Oakland and I wanted to give back to the city."

However, she soon became disillusioned and depressed with what she witnessed in the schools. "Some of the kids didn't eat all day. A lot of their parents were on crack. A lot of them just lived with their grandmother one week, their aunt the next week; they really just floated. They were cruel to themselves and cruel to each other, just because they needed the attention." Her grim experiences at work seeped into the rest of her life. "I really got attached to my kids, and I couldn't snap out of it when I left the school. Like, I would still be in that zone when I got home, and I'd take it out on my boyfriend."

So she sent out resumes and soon left the school for her current job. But she doesn't see this job as permanent. "I still don't think I'm a businessperson. Eventually I think I'm just going to open my own bakery. That's what I really want to do." She is also considering other possibilities. "I will probably end up taking a career more in editing. I can see myself in front of a computer, writing whatever, because I love to write. But I can also see myself in hard-core marketing for a big corporation, because I do like to work with people and I do like fast-paced stressful work." For now, she is happy to do some temporary exploring during her emerging adult years. "I mean, this is cool for now. I'm just going to hop around for a while."
She is more settled in love than she is in work. She has been seeing her current boyfriend, Mark, for three years, and she expects they will marry, although she is not sure when. “I know that if he proposed to me today, I would say yes. Oh, I love him to death. We’ve been through so much. I know we can get through anything that came in our way. We communicate really well.”

Before Mark, she had another boyfriend for four years. Like many emerging adults with immigrant parents from Asia or Latin America, she never embraced the American way of dating casually in adolescence and emerging adulthood before settling down. Still, now that she is in a relationship that may lead to marriage, she finds herself wondering if she shouldn’t explore her options a bit more. As much as she loves her boyfriend, there are also what she calls her “distractions,” other men she feels attracted to. “Sometimes there’s these little things that happen on the side, or people you meet, and you just kind of wonder, ‘God, would this be cool for now?’ Because I haven’t had very much experience with other people. And sometimes I question if I really want to be in a relationship right now.”

She also feels a need to develop her own identity more clearly before she enters marriage, by having a period of being self-focused. “I think I want to get more in touch with myself. I want to be a little selfish for a while, and selfishness and marriage don’t seem to go hand in hand. I’d like to be able to experience as much as I can before I get married, just so I can be well-rounded.”

This sense of not being ready to commit to marriage, being “wishy-washy,” as she puts it, makes her feel that she has not yet fully reached adulthood. But in other ways, she does feel like an adult. “I think the way that I care about people is very adult. The way I express myself is very adult. For the most part I think I’m adult. It’s just the wishy-washy part that I don’t know about.” Overall, then, like so many emerging adults she feels in-between, on the way to adulthood but not there yet. “Maybe I am an adult. I don’t know. I’m a kid a lot of the times.”

Becoming independent from her parents has not been a big issue for her in marking her progress to adulthood. She lived with her parents all the way through college, and enjoyed it. She has always gotten along well with her parents, except for a brief period in her early adolescence when she tangled often with her mom. “I think I had it bad with her probably sixth, seventh, and eighth grade[s]. But I went through it early, and then after that I was cake.”
Her father travels around the world doing maintenance and repair on large ships and her mother is an optician. Solid middle-class jobs by most standards, yet Rosa sees their career paths as examples to avoid.

I knew I wanted to be somewhere that I would grow as a person, and I don’t see them growing as individuals. I mean, my mom is an optician, and you don’t grow doing those things. That’s why I kind of chose the high-tech path, because there’s always new software to learn. And with my dad, I didn’t want to have a job that beat up my body. I knew I wanted to be able to grow, and I didn’t want to be broken by the time I was 40, you know. I think that’s what I took from their jobs.

Although she has always had a good relationship with her parents, family life in their household has not always been easy. Rosa said her parents “almost divorced a few times” during her childhood. Her father resented her mother for working long hours and for making more money than he did; her mother complained that he drank too much. They get along somewhat better now, but it is hardly an ideal marriage.

There was additional tension in the household because of the problems of Rosa’s brother, who is 18 months older than she is. “My brother and I have always hated each other,” she said bluntly. “We don’t really talk. We don’t talk at all actually.” He had various problems in childhood, then in high school “he went into the drug thing,” she says. “I don’t know. He got bent somewhere.” She gets along much better with her sister, who is 8 years younger than he is. “My sister and I were never close until I moved out. Now I love her to death. She’s 16 and she acts like it, but I love to be there for her. She’s my baby sister.”

Rosa sees the problems her parents and her brother have had as rooted partly in the unusual ethnic mix of Chinese and Mexican in the family. Each side of her parents’ families regarded the other with suspicion and hostility, which generated conflict between her parents. Her brother was often ridiculed and beat up by other kids simply for looking Asian. Rosa has felt her own share of ethnic prejudice. When she goes to the mostly White suburbs, “I feel sometimes that we’re looked at like, ‘Why are you here?’ Definitely like, ‘There are too many of you here.’” It’s not only Whites who look at her that way. “The Blacks too. And I sense a lot of hostility from Mexican people. I just don’t have the connection. And I am Mexican! But I don’t look like it.”
Nevertheless, she has embraced her ethnicity with enthusiasm, especially her Chinese side. When she was young, her mother immerses her in Chinese culture, whereas her dad showed little interest in making her familiar with Mexican culture. “I grew up very Chinese. I grew up going to my grandma’s sweat shop after school, I hung out in Chinatown, and I always saw my mom’s family every weekend. My mom spoke Chinese to us.” Rosa has always had mostly Asian friends, and her only two boyfriends have been Asian.

Now that she is in emerging adulthood, Rosa feels bad about letting the Mexican side of her background lapse. “I feel it’s really unfair to my father. The only thing I know about my Mexican culture is that I’m Catholic, and I can cook the food. I’d like to learn more because I love my father to death.” Her hope is that her children will have more of a Mexican identity than she does.

I don’t really know that much about my Mexican side and hopefully I’ll learn, but I’m going to have my dad teach them their Mexican side. My dad already said, “When you have kids, they’re going to call me ‘Bupps,’” which is grandpa in Spanish. So hopefully he’ll be able to pass on a lot to them. I just think it’s a nice thing to know. You know, you’re not just “an American.” You have a beautiful, long history to your name.

However, the Catholic faith is one part of her Mexican heritage Rosa does not want to pass on to her children. Although she was raised “strictly Catholic,” she now says, “I don’t like Catholicism. I don’t care for it at all. I don’t think it applies to modern-day society at all. I’m not going to raise my kids Catholic.” As an emerging adult she has become a deist, a person who believes in God in a general way, unattached to any specific religion. “I don’t think my god has a religion—it’s just God. There’s just God. And that’s the only thing I don’t question. I know there’s a God. I think it’s the same God that Jews have, that Muslims have, they just all have a different name.”

Perhaps influenced by her mother’s Buddhist beliefs, she is inclined to believe in reincarnation. “I believe I was a cat before because I love to lay in the sun. Seriously! Every time I go home, I have my mom scratch my head or scratch my back.” However, she adds that her focus is on this life, not the past ones or the next one. “I don’t really give an afterlife much thought because it’s not really that important to me. When I’m gone, I’m gone—I don’t really care what happens to me when I’m gone.”
For the future, Rosa has many dreams, of opening a bakery with her mother, of marrying Mark and having two children, of a lifetime of learning.

If I was rich, I'd be a lifetime student. I love to learn. I wouldn't go back to school because I would require it for my future, I would just go back because I want it for myself. Like, I wouldn't mind going to law school, even though I don't see myself practicing law at all. Just for the fun of learning. I can really see myself going back for a Ph.D. in literature or something. I love to read, I love to write.

By the end of her life, she would like to be able to say:

I experienced as much as I possibly could, and I spent as much time with my friends and my family as possible. And that people know how I feel about them. I tell my mom I love her every time I talk to her. And my dad. Just that I was happy and I tried to make the people around me happy. Those are the most important things. I just want to know that I made the most of my time. I can't just sit and watch TV. I believe in just taking life and choking it for all it's got.

Steve: “Who Knows What’s Going to Happen?”

Steve, 23, flashes his ironic smile often, as if he wants to make sure you can see that he doesn’t take himself too seriously. His brown eyes peer out from underneath dark eyebrows, which contrast with his short light-brown hair. When I met him for our interview in my office at the University of Missouri, he was wearing a green and maroon rugby shirt and casual light slacks.

Although he currently lives in Missouri, he lived in a variety of places in the course of growing up. His family moved often to follow his father's work as a contract engineer; every time his father got a new contract, they moved. He grew to dislike moving and vowed that he would put down roots somewhere once he left his parents' household. But as it turned out, he has moved around during emerging adulthood even more than he did with his family. “I always said that once I get out of high school and move away I'm going to stay in one place, but I've probably moved 15 times since I left home.”

Missouri was one of the places his family lived for a while during his childhood, and he moved back there to go to the University of Missouri. However, he dropped out of school after a few semesters, feeling “kind of burnt out on it.” Now, he waits on tables at a local restaurant. He is content with the money he is making. “I average about $16 an hour, so I mean,
where else can I go right now and make that much money?” Nevertheless, he views his job, like he views many things in his life right now, as temporary. “I’m just kind of lazy right now. I’m just taking it easy.”

While he was in college, Steve majored in fine arts because of his love of drawing. He continues now to do sketches and portraits, to make money in addition to his waiter job and because he enjoys it. However, he is doubtful that he could successfully make a career out of his artistic talents. “If I could wing it and be an artist I’d do it, but it’s one of those things where you have to be great or you’re working in advertising,” and advertising does not appeal to him. “I’ll probably end up doing art as a hobby,” he says.

What course will he take, then, in terms of work? It’s pretty clear that he doesn’t know at this point. One moment he says, “I’ll probably end up being an engineer. My dad’s an engineer, so I’ll probably end up doing that. I’m really good at math, and I know I could pick up on it real easy.” Yet when I ask him a few minutes later what he sees himself doing 10 years from now, engineering has nothing to do with it.

I’ll probably be living in Colorado. I would want to say owning a restaurant, but probably in some kind of management position because I’ve been in the restaurant business for eight years so I know a lot about it. I cook, I’ve waited tables, I’ve bartended. I’ve pretty much done it all and that’s what the criteria is to be a manager. I’m sure I could get a job, and just to be able to ski all the time would be great.

But right now he is doing little to bring this dream to fruition, unless you count the job as a waiter. “I’m just kind of ‘treading water,’ as my mom says.”

With regard to love, Steve has been involved for about two months with Sandy, who is a waitress at the restaurant where he works. They get along well and spend most of their time together. They would like to live together but hesitate because of the objections of her parents, especially her father. “That’s like his last little grip before he lets her go,” Steve says resentfully. He’d like to move in with her for practical reasons, not because he feels nearly ready to marry her. “It would totally cut our expenses in half.”

He is in no hurry to get married, to Sandy or anyone else. In his view, there is a lot less pressure to get married by a certain age today than in the past. “Nowadays, it’s not even really an issue. If it happens it happens and if not, not. It’s not as big of an issue as it was like in the ’50s.” He’s still not sure who really needs a steady job. A set of work. But not a set of fine. But at age 20, of course it’s obvious of his need. And really expanding that I’m still by this decide of view. I’m a co-writer, a

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sure what qualities he would like to find in the person he marries. "I haven't really narrowed it down yet. I guess when I find her, I'll know."

Steve is as uncertain and unsettled in his beliefs as he is in love and work. As he was growing up, his parents made little attempt to teach him a set of religious beliefs. He says they told him, "If you want to believe it, fine. But if you don't, that's fine too. We'll support you either way." Now, at age 23, he seems to have reached a few conclusions. "I believe in a Creator. Obviously, we couldn't have just sprouted from the earth." Reincarnation also seems plausible to him. "I always thought there was obviously reincarnation." But as he talks further, it turns out that none of his beliefs are really so "obvious" after all. "I mean, none of us really know. There's no proof-positive to any of it. You have to have the facts and really I have none so I can't really make an educated guess yet."

Given his uncertainties about love, work, and beliefs, it's not surprising that he does not feel like he has entirely reached adulthood. "Mentally, I'm still trying to grab ahold of it," he says. He explains that what he means by this is that he doesn't yet accept the adulthood requirement of having to decide where his life is going. "I just don't look at it [from] an adult point of view. I just don't really buy into the whole system, you know. I'm like, 'I'm confused right now,' and everybody's like, 'You've got to make a decision,' and I'm like, 'Well, no, I don't.'"

Another thing that makes him feel he has not entirely reached adulthood is that he drinks more alcohol than he thinks an adult should. "I'm still in the party mode," he says. Still, his alcohol use has gone down from what it was a year or two earlier. "I don't really necessarily drink as much as I used to. Most of all it's because it's expensive to go out." He has grown tired of the local bar scene. "You can only go out to so many bars without them getting kind of boring." He has also grown tired of the effects of heavy drinking. "I don't like puking, and I don't like being hungover." Not to mention the insurance bills. "I got a DWI [Driving While Intoxicated], and I had a couple of rearends where I wasn't watching. I mean, my insurance is like $1,800 a year. Outrageous. That's why I kind of stopped drinking so much." But he still drinks enough to see it as a reason why he has not become an adult.

Nor do Steve's parents view him as having reached adulthood. "When I get a job, they will," he says. A job other than waiting on tables, that is. "We call it a 'real job.' 'When you get a real job.'" Nevertheless, his relationship with his parents has changed in recent years, to more of a relationship between equals. Now he is "a little more open with them, I guess. The way I talk to them and the way they talk to me, it's more on an adult level."
His parents have been successful in both their professional and personal lives. His dad has been successful as an engineer, and his mom, after devoting herself to raising Steve and his brother when they were young, now owns an antique store. Their marriage has been a relatively happy one. "I can't even remember them ever fighting once," Steve says. "They've got a pretty good sense of humor with each other, and they know how to communicate in kind of a funny way and still get the point across." They seem to have good relationships with their children as well. Steve says he was "very close" to his parents growing up, and it is clear that he remains fond of them.

Yet despite their success, and despite the unsettled quality of his life at age 23, Steve believes that his life will be better than his parents' lives have been. The reason for this is that he has been allowed to have an emerging adulthood with years of freedom to try out different possible paths, whereas his parents did not. "My dad, when he was 15, moved out and basically had to find a way to support himself and eventually his family, and I'm not having to go through that. My dad is in a position where he can help me out more than he got helped."

Eventually, Steve expects to have everything his parents have and more, all the best that adult life has to offer: satisfying and well-paying work, a happy marriage, a couple of children, living in an area he loves. For now, however, he is happy being "very nomadic. I've got so little stuff I can just move it around. I don't like to sign a lease, so usually I just try to do it month by month." He wants to be ready to hit the road in case a promising opportunity comes along. "Who knows when I'll find a job in Colorado? I've got to be ready to go! I don't want to owe anybody $1,000 on a lease when I'm not going to be living there. Who knows what's going to happen?"

Charles: "I'm Highly Portable"

You could tell by looking at Charles, 27, that there was something different about him, something out of the ordinary, even by San Francisco standards. His hair was in dreadlocks, and his black beard was trimmed short and looked striking against his brown skin. He wore a black T-shirt under a brown leather vest, and a silver earring. A black necklace with a gold pendant shone from his neck. But what was most striking about him were his eyes—large, alert, and intense, shining with energy.

He looked like he might be in the arts, and he is, a musician, songwriter, and singer, part of an a cappella band called the Jump Cats, which he described as "a rock band without instruments." He also works for an adver-

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tising agency, writing and editing advertisements, but even though he has
been working there for a year he described himself as a “temp,” meaning
that he has an understanding with the agency that he can leave at any time,
for short periods or long, as opportunities come up for the band. Right now,
he and the band are recording a compact disc, so they have all taken tem-
porary jobs to support themselves until the CD is finished and they can go
on tour promoting it.

Charles graduated from Princeton, an elite Ivy League college, having
majored in psychology, and he thought seriously about becoming either a
psychologist or a lawyer. By then, however, he realized that “music is where
my heart is,” and he decided, “I didn’t want to regret not going for some-
thing that would ultimately bring me more satisfaction” than psychology
or law. His unfettered situation as an emerging adult has given him the
opportunity to pursue his dream of devoting himself to music. “I’m single.
I don’t have a car or a house or a mortgage or a significant other that’s pull-
ing me in another direction, or kids or anything. I’m highly portable, and
I can basically do whatever I want as long as I can support myself.”

In the future, Charles sees himself pursuing other avenues of creative
expression in addition to his music. Writing novels, plays, and perhaps
screenplays. Designing games, like the card game he recently invented that
has special cards specific to the game. He expects to have a full life and sees
no reason why he should not be able to fit many different things into it. “I
would basically like to set up my life in such a way that the things that I
wish to do are the things that I’m doing and that they are not mutually
exclusive. Now obviously, you can’t do everything you want to do all the
time, but you can work in ways so that you’re able to consistently do pieces
of things that you want to do.”

Charles grew up in Shaker Heights, Ohio, a well-to-do suburb of Cleve-
lund. His parents are attorneys, his mother in labor law and his father in
personal injury. He got along well with them during childhood and ado-
lescence, and he still does. Once or twice a year they “whisk me away,” he
says, for an exotic vacation—southern Spain, Belize, St. Martin.

Still, the privileges of his upbringing have not protected him from
the wounds inherent in being an African American growing up in Ameri-
can society. He recalls, “The first day of first grade, a White kid hit me
in the nose and gave me a bloody nose all over my new shirt.” When
Charles returned to school the next day, he gave the offending boy a bloody
nose of his own, “with my parents’ blessing. I told them about it, and my
dad said, ‘You can’t let him do that to you.’” The following year, he heard
for the first time the epithet that all Black children have thrown at them eventually.

I was at a sports camp in the summer and a kid called me a nigger. I’d never heard the word before, so I went home and asked my parents, “What does this mean?” And they said, “He called you that?” And I said, “Yeah.” My dad said, “If he calls you that again, hit him.” So within two or three days, we were in tennis class, and he said it to me again, “Nigger.” So I hit him in the head with the tennis racket, and he never called me a nigger again.

In adolescence, several times, Charles had the experience shared by many young Black men, of being pulled over for “Driving While Black.” “My parents always had reasonably nice cars since I’ve been able to drive. And seeing a Black youth driving a nice car at night is grounds enough for many a police officer to pull that person over, regardless of whether or not there’s any sort of violation.”

However, these experiences have not prevented Charles from having many good relationships with Whites. His friends in high school were the smart kids, White as well as Black. Many of his friends at Princeton were White. He has dated Whites as well as Blacks and Asian Americans. The person at Princeton who persuaded him to be the leader of the a cappella group there that sparked his enthusiasm for music was an older White student who “took me under his wing,” Charles recalls. And the Jump Cats are two Black guys and four White guys.

As an emerging adult, being African American is definitely part of his identity. “I’d be silly to try and say that none of my experiences have been at least somewhat based on or influenced by the color of my skin.” He believes that opportunities in American society are restricted in some ways for African Americans. “It will be a hell of a long time before a Black person is ever president in this country,” for example. “My parents told me at an early age that ‘you’re a Black kid, and you’re going to be Black all your life. And that means you’re going to have to work twice as hard to get half as much.’” Nevertheless, he believes that his talents and the advantages of his background will allow him to succeed at whatever he tries. Opportunities may not be entirely equal in American society, but “I think it’s getting closer.”

His parents, highly educated themselves, always encouraged him to excel academically. He says the message they gave to him was:
What Is It Like to Be an Emerging Adult?

You are gifted with good genes and good brains because we gave them to you, and we know that you're bright. We know that you can make straight A's. We're not going to try and ride you and make you get straight A's because we don't think that's necessarily best for you. But we don't ever want you to think in any course you take that you can't get an A because that is bullshit.

The messages from his peers were more mixed. His best friends all did well in school themselves and supported each other in doing well. But he was aware that there were some Black kids who believed that "if you were in AP [Advanced Placement] classes, that was a strike against you" because most of the students in those classes were White. "Who you were in classes with determined who you would become friends with, so if you were in AP classes with almost all White kids and you were friends with almost all White kids, then they would say you're stuck-up." He also recalls that when he was accepted at Princeton, the reaction of one of his Black acquaintances was not "congratulations" but "I can't believe that, man. What the fuck is a nigger doing in the Ivy League?" However, Charles always easily shrugged off such views and never allowed his own pursuit of educational success to be affected by them.

He feels he has "definitely" reached adulthood, ever since he moved out to the Bay Area after college. He was alone, with no one to rely on but himself, and that made him feel adult.

I had found my own living space, using my own contacts and my own initiative, and had gotten two jobs out here and was paying rent, you know, doing that whole thing. I felt that I had gotten off the ground in terms of starting a life out here. Not that it was my ideal life of what I wanted to be doing. I was working for a financial software company in a non-exciting capacity, and I was working at a nice restaurant in Berkeley, busing tables. But I felt that I had set my foot on the road, you know, "OK, I'm an adult now, and I'm walking."

Even though Charles is confident he has reached adulthood, his life shows a substantial amount of the exploration and instability that are two of the defining characteristics of emerging adulthood. In work, he has made a clear choice of pursuing a career in music, but the nature of that pursuit is still very much up in the air. He says that in 10 years, "I think I will still be doing music in some way, shape or form," but he adds, "I couldn't say exactly how." Perhaps with his current group, if they are successful, but
perhaps as a guitarist or bass player, perhaps as a record producer, perhaps as a songwriter, perhaps some combination of these possibilities. Of course, there is also the writing of novels and plays to fit in, and the game designing. And then there is that Princeton degree to fall back on, perhaps leading to further education and a career in psychology or law. So, at this point, Charles is a young man full of possibilities, but it is difficult to predict which ones will be fulfilled in his future.

In love his future is even more wide open. He has been seeing his current girlfriend for three years. She is half Asian and half White. They share a love for music—they met at a singing competition—and a high level of education (she is currently a Ph.D. student in language and literature). Yet he says they both see marriage as something that is “not a realistic possibility any time soon.” His musical career is likely to take him on the road for extended periods. She has at least two more years of graduate school, and after that there is no telling where her career opportunities might take her.

His beliefs about religious issues also seem not yet settled, still in the process of forming. Although he grew up going to an Episcopal church with his parents, by adolescence he was “bored with Sunday school and bored with the service.” Also about that time, he said, he “realized that I was not being encouraged to think for myself.” Even though the Episcopal church is relatively liberal in its doctrine, relatively tolerant of departures from orthodoxy, for Charles any organized religion is objectionable because it tells people what to believe rather than having them find out for themselves.

Now, he believes generally in a deity. “There’s got to be something better than mankind in our universe, because we’re too screwed up to be the best thing.” However, he is more definite about what this deity is not than what it is. “I don’t believe in a bearded White God or a bearded Black God or a nonbearded Black or White or Asian or Indian or Latino god or goddess sitting someplace, watching everybody.” Buddhism appeals to him, especially the Buddhist belief in reincarnation.

I like the Buddhist idea of rebirth and that in each subsequent life you make mistakes, but you’re approaching perfection at which point you can achieve nirvana. There is something that really appeals to me about the idea that you get another chance because everybody makes tons of mistakes in their life. It’d be nice to have another shot with some benefit from the experience[s] you’ve been through.

However, he hastens to add, “I am not a Buddhist.”
He is more certain about what he believes about this world, here and now, and the values he wants to live by. "In terms of how I conduct myself with friends and with people who aren’t even friends, I try to treat them the way that I would want to be treated. To a certain extent that boils down to the Golden Rule, ‘Do unto others . . . ’" He also believes in being true to himself, following his heart and doing what he really wants to do with his life.

It concerns me that of the many gifted people that I went to school with, so few of them are actually doing what they really want to do. And so many people say to me, "You are an inspiration to me because you are doing what you want to do. You have not yet sold out and said, ‘I got a fancy degree from a liberal arts school. I'm just gonna go to business school or law school and get a degree and make lots of money.‘"

Although Charles is 27 years old, an age when many of his peers are moving out of emerging adulthood into more settled lives, he has maintained his zeal for exploration, and he easily tolerates the instability that goes along with it.

Angela: "I Want to Get My Life in Order"

Angela, 21, has a job in landscaping, and you might have guessed that from looking at her. She is deeply tanned and her long hair is sun-bleached to a blondish light brown. She is quite tall, probably six feet, and quite slender. Her face is attractive and cheerful; she smiles a lot. You can see both vulnerability and hope in that smile, especially after you have talked to her for a while.

She returned to Missouri a year ago after spending two years at Michigan State, where she was majoring in horticulture therapy, which entails teaching people to cultivate plants as a way of dealing with their psychological problems. Going away to college was a key event in making her feel like she was reaching adulthood, because it meant "being away from my parents and everything and being independent." She loved being on her own, and she would have liked to finish her bachelor's degree at Michigan State. However, she decided she wanted to change her major from horticulture therapy to "just plain horticulture," and when university officials resisted she dropped out. She plans to finish her degree gradually at a local college. Meanwhile, she is working at her landscaping job.

Angela has known since high school that she wanted to pursue a career in horticulture. "I've always been an outdoors person, and I took a class in
high school in horticulture. They had a greenhouse and stuff, and my teacher, I really liked her and she kind of showed me where some schools were and stuff, and that's why I went over there to Michigan State.” She feels “a little bit disappointed” that she didn’t graduate when she had intended, but she knows she is not alone. “It sounds like a lot of my friends aren’t going to graduate, either. A lot of them have dropped out.”

Toward the end of her time at Michigan State she was feeling exhausted from working full time in addition to carrying a full load of classes. “I was burnt out on school I think, so I’m kind of glad I took some time off.” Now she can finish school gradually as she works in a job in her field. She is learning a lot about landscaping through her job. “We do all the planting and design of flowers and shrubs, and we do irrigation, we mulch, we cultivate, fertilize, all kinds of stuff. I enjoy it.”

Although Angela is glad she chose horticulture and glad she went to Michigan State for two years, she is concerned about the debt she has taken on in order to finance her education. “I’ve got loans, and I’m worried about that. How am I going to pay off my loans? I’m in debt probably about $15,000 now.” Her mother and father are both well-off financially, but neither of them supported her college education. “My parents could have helped me pay, you know. They say they can’t afford it or something, but I mean, they both have nice houses and my mom has a condo down in Florida and on and on and on, and they didn’t help me at all.” Why didn’t they? “I don’t know why. I don’t know if they were trying to teach us responsibility or whether they’re just selfish or what. I don’t know what the deal is.” She feels burdened by her debts. “It’s kind of depressing. I wish I could win the lottery!”

Angela’s parents divorced when she was 4, and her mother remarried two years later, so she mostly grew up in the household of her mother and stepfather along with her older brother (now 24) and younger sister (now 16). Her mother is a medical technician; her stepfather is a professor of astronomy. She has always gotten along well with her mother, but she has never liked her stepfather. “I stayed away from him basically. He was just a jerk.” His alcohol use was a source of conflict between him and her mother, and still is. “He gets to drinking and she says, ‘Don’t drink a lot,’ and they start bickering back and forth. It’s ridiculous.” All the conflict made for a difficult environment to grow up in. “When I look back, it wasn’t the best childhood, I think.”

As for her father, he is a professor of medicine at a college in South Carolina, where he remained after her parents divorced, and Angela has seen him rarely. He’s suasive for never any and work. talks to him well as I. With cause she “I went on time because ask me out. She still has view of it. It meant thing that. At M a love for up a year and I think she doesn’t until I’m good job.

Angela last year, I drinks too deal with them to construct of conflict is a poor f. Her boyfriend which she How what she mind.” Sh turbing re alarms her does, so I’
him rarely since then. In fact, she hasn’t seen him at all for the past seven years. Her reasons for why she hasn’t seen him in so long sound more persuasive for explaining seven weeks than seven years. “It seems like there’s never any time because he’s busy all the time, and with me going to school and working I don’t know when is the last time I had a vacation.” But she talks to him a couple of times a month on the phone. “I don’t know him as well as I would like to, but we talk about a lot of stuff.”

With regard to her own love relationships, Angela got a late start because she was taller than virtually all of the boys. In high school, she says, “I went out with a few people but never dated anybody for a long period of time because I was tall and the guys were all short and they didn’t want to ask me out. They were really intimidated. I was kind of paranoid about it.” She still finds that some men are intimidated by her height, but her own view of it has changed in emerging adulthood. “It doesn’t bother me now. It meant more what your friends thought then and it was more the peer thing that was so big, and you had to fit in.”

At Michigan State, she dated a young man for two years. They shared a love for sports and the outdoors, and they got along well. But they broke up a year ago, shortly after he graduated. “He was wanting to get married, and I think that scared me off. I think that’s why we broke up.” At age 21, she doesn’t feel anywhere near ready for marriage. “I just can’t get married until I’m about 26 or so, because I want to get my life in order, like have a good job, be set financially. I don’t want to depend on a man.”

Angela met her current boyfriend shortly after returning to Missouri last year. It is clear she has a lot of reservations about their relationship. He drinks too much. “He’s got a drinking problem, and I just don’t want to deal with it.” The difference in their educational levels makes it hard for them to understand each other. “Tom doesn’t have a degree, so he does construction, and I think we just have two levels of thinking that just kind of conflict.” He is older, 29, divorced, and has a son, and Angela thinks he is a poor father. “He has no patience. He just can’t handle him, basically.” Her boyfriend expects her to take over the childcare when the boy visits, which she resents. “I’m 21 years old. I don’t want to be a mother right now.”

How did she get herself into such an unpromising relationship? That’s what she wonders. “I think I’ve been insane here for the last year. I lost my mind.” She has noticed that her relationship with her boyfriend bears a disturbing resemblance to her mother’s relationship with her stepfather, which alarms her. “My mom puts up with a lot of crap, and I don’t know why she does, so I’m looking at my relationship now and I’m like ‘Boy, this is the
exact relationship as they have' and I'm going, 'What is going on?' I don't know how I got myself into this situation, but I need to get out of it!"

Despite Angela's concerns about her boyfriend, they are currently living together. "That's another thing I can't believe I did," she says regretfully. She moved in with him strictly for practical reasons. "I didn't want to live at home any more because they drove me nuts, and everybody else already had apartments, and some of my friends were living at home, and they didn't want to move out because they couldn't afford it. So I figured I might as well try it." But she doesn't plan to try it for much longer. "The lease is up here at the end of July and I think I'm going to say 'see you later' then."

Angela hopes to marry someone who shares her interest in the outdoors, as her former boyfriend did, but even more important is finding someone with the right personal qualities. "Someone sweet, honest, who can be my friend, who's not temperamental all the time, who can be happy. Because I'm a happy person, and I just want to have fun and have a good time and not worry."

She also looks forward to having children, eventually. "I think it'll be neat having a kid." She hopes that by waiting until at least her late twenties to marry, she'll improve her chances of having a successful marriage, unlike her parents. "I don't want to have kids until my upper twenties and I really don't want to be married until after 25 or 26. No hurry. Because my parents are divorced and it's just a pain in the butt."

If you look at Angela's life right now, as it is, you might not see much in her favor. She has dropped out of college, and she is working at a job she enjoys but that doesn't pay well and doesn't offer much in the way of long-term prospects. She is living with a boyfriend she doesn't respect and certainly doesn't want to marry. Yet she is reasonably happy with her life, less for what it is now than for what she believes it will be in the future. Ten years from now, she sees herself in a successful career doing something she enjoys. Ten years from now, she sees herself married to a man she loves, raising happy children with him. Although the fulfillment of these goals is far from imminent, she is confident that eventually she will be successful and happy. At age 21, even if she is currently adrift in many ways, all of her hopes are alive and well.

Conclusion: Themes and Variations

Four lives, each of them unique, each with its own history and its own prospects. Yet they share certain common characteristics as well, characteris-
tics that are also common to many of their peers in this age period. In each of their lives we can see the themes laid out in the first chapter: emerging adulthood as the age of identity explorations, the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities.

All four of them are engaged in identity explorations in love and work. All have ideas about what they would like to do in their future work, although their ideas range in clarity from Charles’s devotion to music to Steve’s vague hopes of managing a restaurant. But none of them has settled into a definite work pattern yet. Rosa likes her job in the Internet company, but she views it only as a way of gaining a broad range of experience on the way to something else, although she is not sure what. Steve’s position as a waiter is a long way from ownership of a restaurant, and he concedes that he is only “treading water” right now. Charles is committed to a career in music, but the precise form of that career remains to be determined. Angela loves horticulture, but she has not decided yet how this love will translate into a career. All of them are still exploring different career possibilities to see which ones appeal to them most and which ones will work out for them. All of them are still in the process of answering the questions “What do I enjoy most? What am I best at? How does that fit with the options available to me?”

In their love lives, the same process of exploration is evident. Steve, Charles, and Angela are all in relationships that seem unlikely to last. None of them has any desire to marry any time soon. Charles’s first priority is his music, Angela and her boyfriend seem poorly matched, and Steve’s life is too much up in the air to include commitment to anything right now, including his girlfriend. Rosa is the most settled of the four in terms of love, but even she wants to wait a while before entering marriage, and she wonders if it wouldn’t be a good idea for her to explore her options a bit more. All of them are still pondering the question of who they should commit themselves to for life.

For all of them, the explorations of emerging adulthood go in tandem with instability. Exploring in love and work means that they may change direction at any time, as new possibilities come along. Steve is the extreme example of this, with his determination to sign only month-to-month leases so that he can take off on short notice. But none of them knows exactly what he or she will be doing a year from now, much less 10 or 20 years from now. With the possible exception of Rosa, none of them know who their intimate partner will be a year from now, much less 10 or 20 years from now. But instability doesn’t trouble them much. They accept it as part of the
process of exploring, as a reflection of the fact that they are still in the process of deciding what form they want their adult lives to take.

Their concentration on identity explorations makes emerging adulthood a self-focused time of their lives. Rosa is the most explicit about this, when she says, "I want to be a little selfish for a while," but it is an undercurrent for all of them. Steve and Charles don't want to commit themselves to love relationships because they want to be free to go where their wishes take them, on their own. Angela doesn't feel ready for marriage or children for many years yet, not until she has had enough time to focus on her own life and achieve self-sufficiency. All of them want to commit themselves to others eventually, but for now, during their emerging adult years, they want to focus on personal goals and self-development.

They are aware of being in a period of exploration, of not yet having made the choices that will provide the foundation for their adult lives, and this awareness makes them feel in-between, no longer in adolescence but not yet fully adult. They feel like they have reached adulthood in some ways, but in other ways they feel like they are "still trying to grab ahold of it," as Steve said. Of the four, only Charles feels he has definitely reached adulthood, and Charles also realizes that he is in a temporary period of being "highly portable," prior to taking on the responsibilities of adult life.

Although there is a lot of exploration and instability in their lives right now, all four of them are confident they will get what they want out of life. Everything seems possible for them, and their hopes are high. They expect to have happy marriages, and they expect to find meaningful work and to be successful in it. At this age, there is nothing to impede their dreams. Angela may have her career in horticulture, Steve may have his restaurant, Rosa may have her bakery, Charles may turn his musical ambitions into reality. All of them may find a lifelong love. Or maybe not. But here in emerging adulthood, no dreams have been permanently dashed, no doors have been firmly closed, every possibility for happiness is still alive. This is the glory of emerging adulthood, that it is the age of possibilities, the age of unvanquished hopes.

Not all emerging adults are like the ones profiled in this chapter. Some make enduring decisions relatively early and have settled lives by their mid-twenties. Others find their opportunities for exploration restricted by poverty, poor schooling, or family chaos. We will explore their stories, too, in the chapters to come. However, we will see that most emerging adults resemble Rosa, Steve, Charles, and Angela in having lives characterized by exploration and instability and in focusing on self-development as they seek to translate their possibilities into real life.