

he couldn't decide which to start munching first! It was always so much simpler for young people in less advanced societies, or those in which choices were restricted according to one's caste or race. But who wants such simplicity? Better the risk of making the wrong choice, especially since one can usually start over. Not every choice is a final one, or irrevocable.

The opening words of "Vital Signs" describe this period of exciting uncertainty quite well. It is an unstable condition, but that's only what we should expect. The only things that are stable are petrified stone, cold metal. But instability is a condition of life, a prerequisite for mental or environmental change. There are both the changes within us (mental) and without us (environmental) to cope with, as well as the question as to which affects which! Is your environment changing because your mental changes give you a new perspective on it? Or do your new perspectives and insights actually lead you to change your environment, as did the student radicals of the Sixties?

You start to know new people, and old people in new ways. New beliefs split old friendships and cement new ones. New freedoms alienate you from your parents—or perhaps enable you to see things as your parents do for the first time! Sparks will fly! You are confused but excited by the crackle of atmospheric disturbance, the fever of flux, drunk on the wild wine of human interface and interchange.

This period of new freedom and new responsibility, of genuine self-creation, is a traumatic one. Since the ground is shaky and the path before one uncertain, one's destination largely unknown—how easy to take a false step! More than one! How many people we alienate! What fools we make of ourselves—not that it can really be helped! It's all part of the process, and everyone has his past embarrassments to rue. We do our best, but we are groping. Our impulse is pure, but sometimes it short-circuits due to *external* interference. Think of the Graduate's mob of unwanted advisors. Think, too, of all the stupid advice television gives you, since TV is really just propaganda for the junk-merchants who victimize impressionable youth like vampires sucking a juicy neck!

And for young people, so sensitive to the pressure from their peers, perhaps the worst kind of external interference is that from the Crowd (better, the Herd). In youth we gain a picture of who we are to a great degree by how others see us. In early youth, we care most about how parents and teachers see us. A bit later, the others whose approval we seek are those we run with: our friends or those we desperately *wish* were our friends. So we may try very hard to conform to the standards of the pack. How else can you account for the fact, already noticed in an earlier chapter, that many young people carry fashions and dress styles to the extent of virtually wearing team uniforms!? (In the case of urban youth gangs, the final step has been taken: their