

Identity Capital

Adults don't emerge. They're made.

—Kay Hymowitz, social commentator

We are born not all at once, but by bits.

—Mary Antin, writer

Helen came to therapy because she was “having an identity crisis.” She moved from nanny job to yoga retreat and back again as she waited for what she called “that lightning bolt of intuition.” Helen always seemed dressed for an exercise class whether she was going to one or not and, for a time, her casual lifestyle was the envy of friends who had gone straight to the “real world,” or its runner-up, graduate school. She came, she went. She enjoyed life for a while.

But before long, Helen’s inner search for self became torturous. At twenty-seven, she felt as though the very friends who used to covet her adventures now pitied her. They were moving forward while she was pushing other people’s babies around town in strollers.

Helen’s parents had been specific about what college should be about: Tri-Delt and pre-med. All this despite the fact that Helen was a talented photographer who not-so-secretly wanted to major in art—and was not at all the sorority type. From her first semester, Helen hated pre-med classes and did poorly in them. She envied the interesting reading her friends were doing and grabbed every opportunity for artsy extracurriculars. After two years of suffering through biology requirements and packing her spare time with what she really enjoyed, Helen changed her major to art. Her parents said, “What are you going

to do with *that*?”

After graduation, Helen tried her hand at freelance photography. Once the unpredictability of work began to affect her ability to pay her cell-phone bill, the life of an artist lost its luster. Without a pre-med degree, a clear future as a photographer, or even decent grades from college, Helen saw no way to move ahead. She wanted to stay in photography but wasn't sure how. She started nannying, the checks flowed under the table, the years ticked by, and her parents said, “We told you so.”

Now Helen hoped that the right retreat or the right conversation in therapy or with friends might reveal, once and for all, who she was. Then, she said, she could get started on a life. I told her I wasn't so sure, and that an extended period of navel-gazing is usually counterproductive for twentysomethings.

“But this is what I'm supposed to be doing,” Helen said.

“What is?” I asked.

“Having my crisis,” she replied.

“Says who?” I asked.

“I don't know. Everybody. Books.”

“I think you're misunderstanding what an identity crisis is and how you move out of one,” I said. [“Have you ever heard of Erik Erikson?”](#)

Erik Salomonsen was a blond-haired German boy, born to a dark-haired mother and to a father he never knew. On Erik's third birthday, his mother married a local pediatrician who adopted Erik, making him Erik Homburger. They raised him in the Jewish tradition. At temple, Erik was teased for his fair complexion. At school, he was teased for being Jewish. Erik often felt confused about who he was.

After high school, Erik hoped to become an artist. He traveled around Europe, taking art classes and sometimes sleeping under bridges. At twenty-five, he returned to Germany and worked as an art teacher, studied Montessori education, got married, and started a family. After teaching the children of some very prominent psychoanalysts, Erik was analyzed by Sigmund Freud's daughter Anna, and he went on to earn a degree in psychoanalysis.

In his thirties, Erik moved his family to the United States, where he became a famed psychoanalyst and developmental theorist. He taught at Harvard, Yale, and Berkeley and wrote several books before winning a Pulitzer Prize. Hinting at his feelings of fatherlessness and his status as a self-made man, he changed his name to Erik Erikson, meaning “Erik, son of himself.” Erik Erikson is best known for coining the term “identity crisis.” It was 1950.

Despite being a product of the twentieth century, Erikson lived the life of a twenty-first-century man. He grew up in a blended family. He faced questions of cultural identity. He spent his teens and twenties in search of himself. At a time when adult roles were as ready-made as TV dinners, Erikson's experiences allowed him to imagine that an identity crisis was the norm, or at least ought to be. He felt that a true and authentic identity should not be rushed and, to that end, he advocated for a period of delay when youth could safely explore without real risk or obligation. For some, this period was college. For others, such as Erikson, it was a personal walkabout or *Wanderschaft*. Either way, he stressed the importance of coming into one's own. Erikson thought everyone should create his or her own life.

Helen and I talked about how Erikson went from identity crisis to the Pulitzer Prize. Yes, he traveled around and slept under some bridges. That's half the story. What else did he do? At twenty-five, he taught art and took some education classes. At twenty-six, he started training in psychoanalysis and met some influential people. By thirty, he'd earned his psychoanalytic degree and had begun a career as a teacher, an analyst, a writer, and a theorist. Erikson spent some of his youth having an identity crisis. But along the way he was also earning what sociologists call [identity capital](#).

Identity capital is our collection of personal assets. It is the repertoire of individual resources that we assemble over time. These are the investments we make in ourselves, the things we do well enough, or long enough, that they become a part of who we are. Some identity capital goes on a résumé, such as degrees, jobs, test scores, and clubs. Other identity capital is more personal, such as how we speak, where we are from, how we solve problems, how we look. Identity capital is how we build ourselves—bit by bit, over time. Most important, identity capital is what we bring to the adult marketplace. It is the currency we use to metaphorically purchase jobs and relationships and other things we want.

Twentysomethings like Helen imagine that crisis is for now and capital is for later when, in fact, crisis and capital can—and should—go together, like they did for Erikson. Researchers who have looked at how people resolve identity crises have found that lives that are all capital and no crisis—all work and no exploration—feel rigid and conventional. On the other hand, more crisis than capital is a problem too. As the concept of identity crisis caught on in the United States, Erikson himself warned against spending too much time in [“disengaged confusion.”](#) He was concerned that too many young people were “in danger of

becoming irrelevant.”

Twentysomethings who take the time to explore and *also* have the nerve to make commitments along the way [construct stronger identities](#). They have higher self-esteem and are more persevering and realistic. This path to identity is associated with a host of positive outcomes, including a clearer sense of self, greater life satisfaction, better stress management, stronger reasoning, and resistance to conformity—all the things Helen wanted.

I encouraged Helen to get some capital. I suggested she start by finding work that could go on a résumé.

“This is my chance to have fun,” she resisted. “To be free before real life sets in.”

“How is this fun? You’re seeing me because you are miserable.”

“But I’m *free*!”

“How are you free? You have free time during the day when most everyone you know is working. You’re living on the edge of poverty. You can’t do anything with that time.”

Helen looked skeptical, as though I were trying to talk her out of her yoga mat and shove a briefcase into her hand. She said, “You’re probably one of those people who went straight from college to graduate school.”

“I’m not. In fact, I probably went to a much better graduate school because of what I did in between.”

Helen’s brow furrowed.

I thought for a moment and said, “Do you want to know what I did after college?”

“Yeah, I do,” she challenged.

Helen was ready to listen.

The day after I graduated from college, I went to work for Outward Bound. My first job there was as a grunt in logistics. I lived at a base camp in the Blue Ridge Mountains and spent the better part of a year driving vans all over the backcountry, bringing granola and fuel to dirty, haggard groups of students on backpacking trips. I have incredibly fond memories of driving fifteen-passenger vehicles along washboard dirt roads, music blaring from the radio. I was often the only other person these groups would come across for days or weeks at a time. The students were always so happy to see me, because I reminded them that life was still happening elsewhere.

When an instructor job opened up, I jumped at it. I tromped all over the mountains in North Carolina, Maine, and Colorado, sometimes with war

veterans and other times with CEOs from Wall Street. I spent one long, hot summer in Boston Harbor on a thirty-foot open sailboat with a bunch of middle-school girls.

My favorite trip—the one I led more than a dozen times—was a twenty-eight-day canoe expedition that ran the full length of the Suwannee River, about 350 miles from the black waters and cypress knees of the Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia, through northern Florida, to the sandy coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The students on these canoe trips were adjudicated youth, the official term for kids who were fondly (but unofficially) called “hoods in the woods.” These were either inner-city or deeply rural teenagers who had committed crimes: grand theft, assault and battery, drug dealing—anything short of murder. They were serving their sentence on the river with me.

The work was extraordinarily meaningful, and even more fun. I learned to play a mean game of Spades from the kids who frequented the detention centers. After they zipped themselves into sleeping bags at night, I sat outside the tents and read bedtime stories aloud from chapter books like *Treasure Island*. So often, I got to see these kids just get to be kids, jumping off the riverbanks, their troubles back home nowhere in sight. Reality, though, was never far away. When I was only about twenty-four, I had to tell one adjudicated girl—a fifteen-year-old mother of two—that her own mother had died of AIDS while she was stuck paddling down the Suwannee.

I thought my stint at Outward Bound might last one or two years. Before I noticed, it had been nearly four. Once, on a break between courses, I visited my old college town and saw an undergraduate mentor. I still remember her saying, “What about graduate school?” That was my own dose of reality. I did want to go to graduate school and was growing tired of Outward Bound life. My mentor said if I wanted to go, I needed to do it. “What are you waiting for?” she asked. It seemed I was waiting for someone to tell me to get going. So I did.

The clinical psychology interview circuit is a scene typically loaded with shiny recent grads toting brand-new leather portfolios and wearing ill-fitting suits. When I joined in, I had an ill-fitting suit and a portfolio too. Feeling somewhat out of place having spent the last few years in the woods, I crammed my portfolio with scholarly articles written by the faculty who would probably interview me. I was ready to talk smartly about their clinical trials and to pretend to be passionate about research I might never do.

But no one wanted to talk about that.

Almost invariably, interviewers would glance at my résumé and start excitedly with “Tell me about Outward Bound!” Faculty would introduce themselves to me by saying, “So, you’re the Outward Bound girl!” For years to

come, even on residency interviews, I spent most of the time answering questions about what happened when kids ran away in the wilderness or whether it was safe to swim in a river with alligators. It really wasn't until I had a doctorate from Berkeley that I started to be known for something else.

I told Helen some of my story. I told her the twentysomething years have a different economy than college. For some, life may be about neatly building on Phi Beta Kappa or an Ivy League degree. More often, identities and careers are made not out of college majors and GPAs but out of a couple of door-opening pieces of identity capital—and I was concerned that Helen wasn't earning any.

No one was going to start off Helen's next job interview by saying, "So tell me about being a nanny!" This gave me pause. If Helen didn't get some capital soon, I knew she could be headed for a lifetime of unhappiness and underemployment.

After my urging to get an over-the-table job, Helen came in to say she was days away from starting work at a coffee shop. Helen also mentioned she had an interview to be a "floater" at a digital animation studio, an interview she wasn't planning to attend. Working at the coffee shop seemed "cool and not corporate" and, besides, she said, she wasn't sure about "just paying dues" and "basically working in the mailroom" at the animation company.

As Helen sat talking about her plan to work at the coffee shop, I tried to keep my jaw from hitting the floor. I had seen what another one of my clients calls "the Starbucks phase" unfold many times. Everything I knew about twentysomething underemployment, and about identity capital, told me that Helen was about to make a bad choice.

At one time or another, most twentysomethings, including my van-driving self, have been underemployed. They work at jobs they are overqualified for or they work only part-time. Some of these jobs are useful stopgaps. They pay the bills while we study for the GMAT or work our way through graduate school. Or, as with Outward Bound, some underemployment generates capital that trumps everything else.

But some underemployment is not a means to an end. Sometimes it is just a way to pretend we aren't working, such as running a ski lift or doing what one executive I know called "the eternal band thing." While these sorts of jobs can be fun, they also signal to future employers a period of lostness. A degree from a university followed by too many unexplained retail and coffee-shop gigs looks backward. Those sorts of jobs can hurt our résumés and even our lives.

The longer it takes to get our footing in work, the more likely we are to

become, as one journalist put it, [“different and damaged.”](#) Research on underemployed twentysomethings tells us that those who are underemployed for as little as nine months tend to be more depressed and [less motivated than their peers](#)—*than even their unemployed peers*. But before we decide that unemployment is a better alternative to underemployment, consider this: [Twentysomething unemployment is associated with heavy drinking and depression](#) in middle age *even after becoming regularly employed*.

I have seen how this happens. I have watched smart, interesting twentysomethings avoid real jobs in the real world only to drag themselves through years of underemployment, all the while becoming too tired and too alienated to look for something that might actually make them happy. Their dreams seem increasingly distant as people treat them like the name tags they wear.

Economists and sociologists agree that [twentysomething work has an inordinate influence](#) on our long-run career success. About two-thirds of lifetime wage growth happens in the first ten years of a career. After that, families and mortgages get in the way of higher degrees and cross-country moves, and salaries rise more slowly. As a twentysomething, it may feel like there are decades ahead to earn more and more but the latest data from the US Census Bureau shows that, on average, [salaries peak—and plateau—in our forties](#).

Twentysomethings who think they have until later to leave unemployment or underemployment behind miss out on moving ahead while they are still traveling light. No matter how smoothly this goes, late bloomers will likely never close the gap between themselves and those who got started earlier. This leaves many thirty-and fortysomethings feeling as if they have ultimately paid a surprisingly high price for a string of random twentysomething jobs. Midlife is when we may realize that our twentysomething choices cannot be undone. Drinking and depression can enter from stage left.

In today's economy, very few people make it to age thirty without some underemployment. So what is a twentysomething to do? Fortunately, not all underemployment is the same. I always advise twentysomethings to take the job with the most capital.

I heard Helen out. Then I told her that working at a coffee shop might have some benefits, like easygoing coworkers or a good discount on beverages. It might even pay more than being a floater. But it had no capital. From the perspective of the sort of identity capital Helen needed, the animation studio was the clear winner. I encouraged Helen to go to the interview, and to think about the floater

job not as paying dues but rather as investing in her dream. Learning about the digital art world and making connections in the industry, she could raise capital in untold ways.

“Maybe I should wait for something better to come along?” Helen questioned.

“But something better doesn’t just come along. One good piece of capital is *how* you get to better,” I said.

We spent our next sessions helping Helen prepare for the interview. Her less-than-stellar pre-med grades, combined with the sting of her parents’ reaction to her art major, had left her feeling professionally insecure. But what I haven’t yet mentioned about Helen is that she was one of the most personable clients I have ever had. Her college career was imperfect, but Helen had all the pieces of identity capital that don’t go on a résumé. She was socially adept. She was an excellent communicator with a quick wit. She was a hard worker. I felt sure that if Helen got herself to the interview, her personality would take it from there.

Helen and the hiring manager had easy conversations about pre-med and freelance photography, and about the fact that his wife had also majored in art at Helen’s school. Two weeks later, Helen started at the animation company. After six months, she moved from floating to “a desk.” Then, a movie director spent a few weeks at Helen’s office, only to decide Helen would make an ideal cinematography assistant. She was brought to Los Angeles, where she now works on movies. This is what she says about her twenties, about the pieces of identity capital that are helping her now:

I would never have believed it, and it’s probably not the best thing to tell someone still in school, but seriously not one person has asked for my GPA since I graduated. So unless you are applying to grad schools, yeah, everyone was right, no one cares. Nor do they care if you did the “wrong” major.

I think about my parents’ question: “What are you going to do with your art major?” It makes no sense to me now. No one I know really knew what they wanted to do when they graduated. What people are doing now is usually not something that they’d ever even heard of in undergrad. One of my friends is a marine biologist and works at an aquarium. Another is in grad school for epidemiology. I’m in cinematography. None of us knew any of these jobs even existed when we graduated.

That’s why I wish I had done more during my first few years out of

college. I wish I had pushed myself to take some work leaps or a wider range of jobs. I wish I had experimented—with *work*—in a way I feel I can't right now at almost thirty. I felt a lot of internal pressure to figure it out, but all the thinking I did was really debilitating and unproductive. The one thing I have learned is that you can't think your way through life. The only way to figure out what to do is to do—something.

Whenever I hear from Helen, I think about how different her life might be now if she had gone to work at the coffee shop. Her fun and carefree underemployment would probably quickly have become a depressing and alienating experience, one that might have dragged on longer than expected just as other twentysomethings were going to, say, work in digital animation.

She wouldn't have been at the coffee shop forever, of course. But she also would not have been swooped up by a director, because any director ordering coffee from her would have seen her as a clerk, not as someone who might be relevant to the film industry. On it would go from there. Five or ten years later, the difference between coffee-shop Helen and digital-animation Helen could be remarkable. Sadly remarkable. Helen's life got going when she used the bits of capital she had to get the next piece of capital she wanted—and it didn't hurt that she and the hiring manager's wife shared the same alma mater.

That's almost always the way it works.