Possibilities: Anticipating the Future

Amidst their troubles when they are separated from their family or guardian, street-involved youth are often still optimistic because they have left a perceived bad situation. They are newly flush with some relief at achieving separation from stressful or distressing familial circumstances, excited about newfound independence, and enjoying the discovery of a community of other young people in similar circumstances. For most the present is enough. “I’m not really seeing myself in the future. I don’t do that because, you know, you see yourself in the future and the next thing you know it’s not the future anymore and you don’t see yourself anymore--that’s why I don’t see myself anywhere in the future.” The gratifications of these new experiences fades after a few months or years for most youth; street life becomes less satisfying. They tire of their own lack of educational and employment progress; drug use becomes less interesting and more troublesome, and their street relationships turn out to be less deep than previously perceived and sometimes less reliable than what they hoped. They want more from life. They have had happiness in the present, but they also want hope for the future.

This chapter is about the emerging adulthood characteristic of *possibilities* and the advent of a different kind of hope later in their street-involved experience. There is a shift in the perception of both “future” and “possibilities” that comes with increasing experience. The different possibilities that are perceived as being available are quite different after experiencing street life for an extended period of time. Similarly, the earlier focus on the present and the immediate changes in favor of more distant prospects. There are psychological and circumstantial similarities between their transition from street life and their former transition from relative dependence on guardians. They take some risks in both cases, under challenging circumstances. The transition takes some time, often years. Initially there are failures.

The desire for change is developmental and existential, a broadening of their horizon. They respond to: a) recognizing that their friendships need to change if their life is to change, b) boredom and wanting something more meaningful, c) unhappiness with their own drug use, d) weariness with being financially vulnerable or homeless, e) being frightened at the direction of their lives, g) a desire to be better than their parents, f) responsibilities to others, including a partner or a child, and g) utopian aspirations.

We also describe some characteristics of their newly emerging lives, what adulthood looks like in their experiences, and their dreams for the future. Finally, things do not work out for everyone, and we also describe the experience of some youth who had hopes but, at the time of our final meeting with them, were discouraged and had absorbed the street-identity into their long-term idea about who they were. We begin with the relevant experiences of three youth. Natasha was violent and became scared of the circumstances of and people in her life. Nate was gay and had been persecuted because of it. Anne was a profligate drug user, early and often and with variety. Eventually she found herself “disgusting” and decided that she had to stop.

<1>Natasha

A few weeks after leaving home, Natasha was happy, though not very hopeful. She was happy to be away from her mom and stepfather, describing them as "stupid;" her stepfather was abusive. Life at home and at school had never been great. Natasha and her siblings were left alone much of the time, because their mother worked many hours, and so they would try to make do. Drugs and alcohold were available in the house: She had her first alcoholic drink at age 5, marijuana at 10, mushrooms at 11, ecstasy at 13, and acid at 15. At school she had trouble learning, did not have any friends, and was put in the "slow person's class." Eventually she started to "feel dumb."

There had been other trouble: At age nine, she attempted suicide. She was hitting her siblings and using more and more drugs. At age 13, she was sent to a residential behavioral treatment program for a few weeks. Her mom and stepfather would not allow her back home after she got out, so she had been staying with relatives, at a detention center, a shelter, and also some time at the hospital. She also had an eating disorder, possibly linked to her drug use, and in the past she had suffered from clinical depression, panic attacks, and flashbacks.

As a result, leaving home made life better. She was happy to be away from the abuse, and at first someone introduced her to everyone on the street, the people she came to describe as her family. She said they "have my back." To pay her bills, Natasha took on temporary work-- picking flowers at a local farm--and she had tried to get another job as well. It was difficult to do because she had some noticeable physical scars, and she believed that most people would not hire her. For income she was breaking into cars, sometimes to steal and sell the car and always to look for things in the car to sell. She was making about $400 per week from theft. Because of this she had realistic worries about the police, and she worried about being beaten by someone on the street or by someone who caught her stealing. She had been arrested more than once for underage drinking, assault with a weapon, and armed breaking and entering. Despite having cash she was frequently concerned about not having enough money.

The next year she reported having spent some time living with mom, some time on the street, and with friends, but most of the time she was living with her sister. She was looking for work again, and she was going to school part-time, working on grade eight. In some respects she did not seem a very good candidate to go back to school, but life seemed to have calmed down, and she had a mainstream, instrumental idea about the purpose of education, and she worried about being left out:

Well, without a school, without education, I’m not going to get a very good job. And school is something you need. And that is why I was taking it. And just doing nothing all day, every day, gets really depressing and really boring and you’re going to get fat and lazy. So that’s why I want to go back to school. But school’s really hard for me. It’s always been hard. I don’t know why. I went to get registered today and the people there--they almost won’t accept me because of my background and stuff like that. Because I’ve been to an alternative school and the reasons why I got kicked out of my school and stuff like that. They put me on a month probation for school so I can’t leave the property, the teacher has to always be there with me.

Natasha was frustrated by the restrictions but willing to put up with them to attain her schooling. There was also a big change in her future outlook--for the first time she reported being "always" hopeful. She quit seeing her counselor, because she got tired of the drug prescriptions and being called "crazy." Her counselor had recommended that Natasha quit school and get a job, and Natasha was disappointed by this recommendation, thinking that education was going to be her new pathway and thinking that her counselor did not recognize her academic capabilities. Instead of a counselor, Natasha would have liked access to a support group for people who have "problems and mental illnesses." Her immediate goal for the next year was "going to school, doing my homework, and making friends." Natasha hoped she “doesn't screw up.” One reason was that she had not completely left her old life. She was still worried about the police, going to jail, health risks and, for the first time, reports being afraid of addiction and being able to afford to feed an addiction.

These worries were legitimate, and a few months later she was definitely not doing well. Because of her history of violence, her previous attempt to get into school did not work. Even the alternative schools thought she was too much. She loved to drink, and her boyfriend supplied her with a lot of alcohol in exchange for sex. While drunk she was raped by four men, and she contracted an STI. Then that boyfriend committed a murder, and he was jailed. She was charged with assault with a deadly weapon and making death threats and the police believed she was present at the scene of the murder, though she denied it. She had also been beating up kids to make them give her money, and she was stealing purses from "old ladies."

At the same time she continued to aspire to simpler ambitions--an ordinary job and an apartment. She was worried that no one would hire her, she said, because "I’m crazy. I’m too – I’m just – a stupid street kid, nobody wants me working for them." And she believes that employers think that "[she] will just slack, and then she’ll end up quitting." She was also receiving $450 per month from the "Children in the Home of a Relative" program, money paid directly to her sister to provide a home for Natasha, but her sister was giving it directly to Natasha, even though she was not staying there very often.

Within the next year, Natasha proved that she had meant what she earlier said about her goals. A caseworker helped her get into foster care and then into an employment program. There she met a new boyfriend who helped her quit using drugs. He was the first person to ever take her on a real dinner date, and she fell in love with him because of that simple invitation. They moved into an apartment together, decrepit though it was, but at least it was their own place. She began talking to her parents daily; perhaps this was the most surprising change. She said: "I guess I scared myself.... it’s just the situation that I was in, where I was living, the people I was with, what I was doing wasn’t very healthy..." And she had all new friends, mainly the friends that she had before she started doing drugs. For the first time ever she had a straight job working as a grocery store cashier.

The main challenge for Natasha was to find the right time and place to go to school; making enough money for the rent was taking most of her time. School was still important to her, because she heard that people with high school degrees make $20,000 more. "Everything’s kinda falling in place, kind of. Step-by-step.... We are so much more mature now. I used to be like a little goof, right? And now I’m like, ‘I got to go to work. [she laughs].” She said that for the past year a support worker at the Boys and Girls Club had been crucial, helping her figure things out, being available when she needed help, and being a friend:

It’s just...it’s just like a few weeks ago there was these kids partying outside of my house and like I had to go to work in the morning and I was getting so pissed and I was like throwing stuff, telling them to shut up, and then I realized that I was one of those kids like a few months ago, and it’s just, ‘Wow!’ Oh I’ve changed. [laughs] I’m gonna try and live normal-a normal life where I’m fed, happy, all that kind of stuff.

<1>Nate

Nate, who is Metis (a Canadian ethnicity of mixed Indigenous and European) and gay, has been only recently thinking more long term. Three events seem to have triggered his self-reflection. One was a serious relapse into drug use caused by hanging out with the wrong friends. A second is that he has recently spent time in jail, and he says that he is currently “on remand,” although he is not in jail. The third event is that Nate just found out he is HIV positive. He is learning about how the drugs work, and he’s considering his options. He’s now thinking about his future in a way that he had not before. He is also talking to his ex—he describes his ex as his former husband. He is trying to “push forward,” in the middle of deciding which friends he should rely on and which are causing him trouble. Some have “led me down the wrong path, because right now I need to focus on my health and keeping healthy… it’s been kinda hard… there’s certain people out there I really miss but, you know, they also kinda fall into that category of people I can’t really trust; so that makes it harder and easier…” He is living temporarily in a foster home while he sorts out what to do.

Nate had an adventurous route to his current situation. He lived with his aunt until he was six and then with a foster family until he was 10. He was quite lonely when he was young. He did not know he had any biological siblings until he was 16, and he says in elementary school he was not interested in friends. At about age 12 or so he acquired a couple friends, and they used to cause a lot of trouble, pulling pranks on other people in school. He also had some trouble in school with being harassed because he is gay. Someone outed him during his first year of high school, and other students superglued his locker, repeatedly. Some would run over him, on purpose when they walked to class, almost every day.

He attributes his foster carers with helping him learn to respect himself and others. They were there to “support and nourish me.” They helped him learn some practical things like swimming and Food Safe (a qualification for working in food service). He is thankful for his foster family, “Because if they weren’t there, you know, I’ve kind of had a look in the mirror and it’s a scary other side sometimes. I still, you know, I still deal with my biological family almost on a daily basis and just some of the paths they’ve chosen, you know, growing up between 6 and 16 I don’t think I would have a skill set for adulthood. Also, his grandfather molested him when he was little, and foster care protected him.

Even so, he left foster care for the street, and he lived on the street and couch surfed. He feels some guilt about the extent of his couch surfing, because he said most of the time he was “mooching off people.” He says that family is important to First Nations, and so he had several families willing to let him stay with them for a few days at a time, so he had a rotation. But he also felt like he was betraying his cultural values by not also making a contribution to each of the families. At the time of the first interview he reported some recent suicide attempts, so he was not feeling too good about himself or his situation. He had been back in regular school but found large groups of people made him anxious.

A few months later he was admitted into another foster home, but he described it as a “no-win situation” for all involved. He felt like he could never do anything right even when he tried, and once when his foster mother criticized him he slapped her in the face. He had also exchanged sex for drugs a few times, something he was not happy about having done. As a result of slapping his foster mother she reported him to the police and he was moved to another home that was more like independent living. He said that because of his upbringing it is better to “not have parents.” While in independent living, for the first time in years he began to have moments of happiness. He was trying again in school and could see a pathway to graduation. He tried an auto mechanics class, and he said “That has opened up so much more opportunity for me in the job world.” He was hoping to pick up an apprenticeship in an auto shop “for, like, $10 an hour. For a person my age to be able to do that, it’s good; it’s gone from being shit-in-the hole to getting better…”

About the same time he met someone he describes as “having me from ‘Hello’” and “my soulmate.” They “clicked” and it was a great friendship but both of them are “moving on” and he does not know why. It hurts. Still, “They’re like everything to me, and they’ve been so kind to me and so nice to me and so everything to me… they’re a wonderful person, and I’m glad I had the opportunity to get to know them.” Life alternates between glimpses of possibilities for himself, like this relationship, and extreme stress.

The stress from my family, the stress from being in the foster home situation, the stress from the [criminal] charges, the stress from the person that I care about the most that’s hurting me and, like, what I was saying about just like the stress pulling at me from all sides, it’s just I was so stressed out that I just could not feel happy…. there were days where I didn’t know what to do and I didn’t want-I didn’t want to do anything, I just wanted to crawl in a hole and die, but I got up. I got out of bed. I did the shit that I needed to get accomplished that day…. it’s like indescribable because like, I felt like...getting more and more depressed, and depressed, and depressed. And more and more emotionally hurt, more and more emotionally hurt. And then like, on top of that, like, my whole family situation with like the amount of dysfunction that like my original birth family has, like, attempted to bestow upon me has been like outrageous to the point where I was screaming and shouting at my grandmother, telling her to shut the fuck up, to fuck right off, and that she can go fuck herself and go fucking die.

But things improved. The problems were “ushering in a new era of my life. And this is now the time to embrace it….” He tried to repair his relationship with his mother, who was schizophrenic and addicted to crack. This was difficult, because she’s hard on him and abusive. Also, he hides her drug paraphernalia, and she yells at him about that.

He was having trouble with housing, even though he was working. Because he needed money, he was working, but working made it hard to keep up with school. He also joined a Buddhist temple, and so he is participating in religious rituals each day with other people, and the community is helpful: “Blessings for a good day and a good night.” A few months later he found a place to live, and to pay for it he had to postpone full-time school to work full-time. But he was on his way back.

<1> Anne

At 17 years of age Anne had been spending time with friends on the street for three years but was not yet living away from her parents. She was living at home, but she knew about how the youth shelters work. She wanted to get away from her mom, and she was counting on her boyfriend, because he had money and bought her whatever she wanted. She moved in with him, but that did not work out because he was then convicted of a crime and sent to jail, and she missed the money and support. She hoped he would get out of jail so that she could live with him. Soon Anne was sleeping rough (outside) but with some occasional relief time at her parents and at an aunt's house. Her friends were definitely "street," supporting themselves by selling drugs and small theft. At this point hope was ebbing. She did not trust anyone and had no one to share problems with, though she had an emergency network. Part of the emotional dynamic was that Anne had frequent contact with her mother, every day, but she did not ever feel close to her mother. She did not feel close to anybody and said others have trouble getting close to her.

In her early childhood Anne lived with her grandparents; her mother was 16 years of age when Anne was born; and her mother was in and out of addiction treatment. Her dad was not involved in her life, because he was in jail for several years. Then about age five Anne went to live with her mother and stepfather. As she aged she started feeling like her mother had abandoned her. At 14 she started hanging out downtown and not going home or going to school, and she had a big group of friends for the first time. She was working part-time, in fast food, and much of the rest of the time she was using drugs: cocaine every day and heroin, crystal meth, ketamine, MDMA, and acid once a week, ecstasy and marijuana occasionally. She was busy! She was also taking an anti-depressant for depression, along with some serious trouble with anxiety and flashbacks.

Anne’s substance use was troublesome enough that she resorted to a desperate measure of not leaving the house for six days so she would not be tempted. But it did not really “take” once she returned to daily life. Because of her drug use she had some problems with weight loss and not feeling hungry. She also worried about her safety when she was around other people who used, people who "don't care they have nothing to live for." She feels dirty when she uses, and she says users "look disgusting" and "feel like shit." She knew she needed help for her addiction but did not want to go to treatment. She depended on drugs to be happy, though they also made her "dope-sick." She had been fired from a couple jobs and she was looking again for a new job. In the midst of all of this her career ambition was to work in detox!

Eventually she began sharing a house with other people, and she spent an occasional night with her mother. She acquired a new boyfriend with whom she was mostly happy. She was still unemployed and was looking for work. She now perceived many more opportunities to sell drugs and sell sex and thought that she might be able to earn up to $3500 in a week, though she was trying to do less of that and even though her friends were earning money from theft, selling sex, selling drugs, fraud, and extortion. She cut way back on drug use, except for marijuana, which she was now using frequently. She became more optimistic, and she had people to trust though she still did not feel that close to anyone. She was reporting more fears--police, health risks, being alone, debt, addiction and the costs of addiction, and she was worried about STIs. Her house had been raided by the SWAT team, and she was arrested and investigated. She said she had been approached by the police 15 times in two months and held in custody once.

These mixed trends continued in the next year. She was more open about the opportunities to make money selling sex, though she would not explain much about whether and how she participated. Her friends were still making money selling drugs--no one had a straight job. The trend toward less drug use on her part continued; she used marijuana only twice in two months. Her mental health improved, with no anxiety attacks or flashbacks. Most of her former fears were not an issue, but she was more afraid of being raped. She scored low on the well-being scale--feeling like a failure, guilty, discouraged, disappointed, blaming herself, and quite worried. Even so, in the interview she said she was doing better. She was interested in her dad and visited him occasionally, though he lived several hundred kilometers away. She was attending school a couple hours a day, and it was okay. By comparison with the previous year, she seemed to be a little better.

A big change occurred a few months later: She was now staying with her mom and stepfather almost full-time and occasionally with a friend, though the friend had a couple children so Anne did not have much privacy there. She had a job, and she says it had been a year since she earned money from the underground economy. She now saw a psychiatrist for help with the depression. She was using marijuana and ketamine several times a day but had cut out other drugs. She was feeling a bit better mentally and much better physically. On the mental health scale she was also better, although not yet great. She still blamed herself and felt guilty. She was more worried about money, police, health risks, and feeding her addiction. Still, she again said she was happier, less lonely, and more hopeful than she has ever been. The job helped and so did a new boyfriend, though he also had an addiction problem and was fired from his job. She also recognized for the first time that she needed to leave her current friends behind and acquire new friends. She was being investigated for theft, and her friends were part of that problem and they made it harder to stay away from drugs and the sex trade.

Shortly after that she obtained a new job, and she was not doing anything illegal, because she did not “want to mess up the future." She was not worried about her health anymore, though she still felt some guilt, and was not always satisfied with life. This switch from formerly being happy with little hope to being less happy and more hopeful was common among our sample. Further, this was the first time Anne reported that others did not have trouble being close to her and that she did not miss closeness with others. She was not seeing anyone for depression anymore. She drank alcohol every day, but she was not using any other substances. She had new friends, was making plans to start going to school again, and she loved her job. Things were not perfect, but they continued to improve.

<1>Change and Growing Up

Natasha, Nate, and Anne are examples of street-youth transitions to a new life driven by disgust with drug use and being frightened, respectively. Other drivers of change are a) recognizing a need for new friends, b) boredom and meaninglessness, c) weariness with vulnerability, d) a desire to be better than one’s parents, and f) responsibilities to others.

<3>Old Friends/New Friends

The friendships in the first year or two of street-involvement were crucial to the management of everyday life: learning how the street-world works, avoiding dangers, and finding a community. This community had open boundaries and was easy to access for youth new to this world, both before and after a youth had left their guardian. Friendships "laddered in" to their lives a bit of a safety net and anchor. This was important at a time when they had decided that they do not want what their guardians had to offer and before they had figured out what to do with themselves. These fleeting friendships were transitional as were drugs, alcohol, and romantic partners. Street "drama" was part of the daily ritual of entertainment and preoccupation. Enjoyment of these did not last, as youth matured. Winnie put it like this:

I’m not having a boyfriend anymore. [laughing] It’s too much to handle, there are too many dramas. Seems like everybody nowadays is just getting jealous and crazy. And he was really like – didn’t want me to hang out with anybody else but him, and all this other stuff. And it was just like – I’m not co-dependent with anybody, I can’t stand like constantly being with somebody, and constantly, you know, having to worry about how he feels or what are you going to feel. And it’s just like [sigh] I’ve kind of taken... a hiatus on the boyfriend thing. I’ve made up my mind, I’m gonna go to school and get another job, I want to go to school before I have to deal with anyone else.

Many street-involved youth in our sample said that getting new partners and new friends was crucial to maturing. Thus Moises explained: "Like I’ve hung out with newer people, I’ve gotten rid of a lot of people that I used to hang out with, just because they definitely don’t think. My boyfriend hasn’t changed since – in the last two months, in the last going on seven months, actually."

Friends not only sometimes prevented progress but they also could drag a youth down, as Summer related: "I’ve been trying not to [hang out with the same friends], because… I’m under investigation, so I got charged with mischief under five thousand; so it’s like, clearly those people aren’t helping me do what I want to do right?" Also, "And I’m avoiding downtown. Too much drama. Too much...I don’t wanna like go down there and listen to other people’s problems. I just cut myself off from downtown."

One source of new friends was the "pre-scene" friends. Several people said something like this, from Tabbie:

I had a lot of my friends from back in school that I used to hang out with that I stopped hanging out with when I was using. And they all kind of came back, and they’re like, I knew you could do it. And blah blah blah blah blah, and the rest of the people I hang out with, I don’t talk to them. Even though, like, some of the people I used to do drugs with, they’re clean now too, but I still don’t hang out with them.... It’s not that I don’t have love for those people, that they got clean, but I think together it would be too dangerous to stay clean. Like I have no desire to use drugs again, I never have. Even since I quit, like the day after I was methadone, it was like, fuck, I feel so much better. I’m never doing that again, so. It was quite easy, but I just don’t – I don’t want to be around people that might not have the same willpower as I do.

Youth made some very basic distinctions between helpful friends and unhelpful friends. All youth were asked in every interview what their friends did to make money, and the answer to this question was often a signal of the change from old friends to new friends: "They worked" rather than sold drugs, stole or panhandled. Another interpretation of this was that they had now acquired new standards for what friendship looked and felt like. Quentin said: "I just feel like filtering out my friends… for a while, and just like it feels better to like not have these like… bad influences around me anymore.... like making… better friends with the friends that I want to keep in my life and not with the ones that I don’t want in my life anymore."

<3>Boredom and Meaning: “I need to do something with my life*.”*

The excitement of drug use made it easier to avoid thinking about other issues, but the effect did not always last. Sometimes the feeling of a lack of purpose was organic. Dana related: “... the whole reason why I went to detox was because I can’t live on the streets, I need to do something with my life and so I went to detox and then I was like-I need to eat and I need to find a home and I need to go back to school. It took me a long while..." The substitute for drug use was listening to herself--body and mind--and noticing that she needed basic things, like food and shelter, and she needed to participate in something bigger, like school.

Living purposefully helped spur change for some youth: ".... like my friend…she dropped out of school in Grade 10 and this summer she took summer classes like all through the summer and she’s working so hard. She’s going to S.J. Willis (an alternative school), and she’s trying to get caught up. She’s nineteen-almost twenty--actually she might be twenty now-and it’s pretty cool because it’s like she doesn’t have to go to school if she doesn’t want to but she chose too and that’s like the type of person I give respect to.” Many recognized the connection between drug use and a lack of meaning. "...well the people that are just down there like that do it, like that have taken it too far, like they don’t care they have nothing to live for...” And some youth get tired:

Sam: Well, I was homeless –for a really long time, and then I decided that I didn’t want to be homeless anymore. So I just talked to a bunch of people, and got a bunch of stuff worked out.

Interviewer: And do you know why you didn’t want to be homeless anymore?

Sam: ...it’s cold, it’s fricking – I don’t know, it’s just like, you don’t get to have showers a lot, and you know, get to like, just do normal things.

Interviewer: So what did you do? Who did you get in touch with when you decided you didn’t want to be homeless anymore?

Sam: Just my social worker.

He is interesting because the solution in his mind was simple: just talk to my social worker. It is a different experience than the social worker talking to him, and it has different consequences.

Part of finding meaning in one’s life is being different than one’s parents. A common refrain was: "I learned fairly early what not to do from my parents."

I consider it [school] important ‘cause… when I was very little I made a promise that I was not going to be anything like my father who is a… junior high dropout and then… went to high school and got kicked out [laughs a bit]. And so, I made it very clear that I was going to go and get an education and be smarter than him [laughs a bit]. And I really want to go to a technical institute. Because I like working on cars. And designing aspects of cars.

<1>Kick Starters to Maturity

Sometimes it was necessary to do something more abrupt to clear the way for change to happen. One choice was to change the geography of one's life, not just friendships. “And I’m avoiding downtown. Too much drama. Too much...I don’t wanna like go down there and listen to other people’s problems. I just cut myself off from downtown." Sometimes one has to leave. "All I know is I want out of Victoria. [laughs].... This place is soul-destroying. [laughs] I don’t know. I just, I’ve been here too long. Everybody knows me, I know everyone. Just enough. [laughs] Want to meet new people..." Several people did hit the road, traveling through Canada, though most returned, eventually. This was the case for Kenton:

...[I’ve] just been really busy lately... Oh I’ve just had a lot of stuff to do, getting ready to leave town now finally, been waiting for months and months…. [I’m] probably [leaving] tomorrow.... I might find a place that I really like and decide to just stay there, I don’t know yet. It’s hard to say.” After he returned… “I just went traveling, I went to um, I don’t know, went all over the place, Castlegar, Cache Creek, Osoyoos, Kelowna, Kamloops, went all the way up to Prince George and came back, it was nice... Ya, two of us and the dog, man it was the best trip I had, it was relaxing, I had to get outta here. Otherwise I think I probably woulda ended up killing somebody.

Another way to induce change was to go back to school, and sometimes it was best to do so as a way of causing other changes, as was the case for Sean:

I think [education] gives us a certain confidence that everyone deserves. It makes us feel, I hope, comfortable in our own skin and you know, able to handle everyday situations. And unfortunately, whether we like it or not, it is the gateway to any job we could ever, ever want or have. So it’s like, you know, it’s essential by everyone else’s standards. Like, “You really need this stuff” but then it should be kind of important to us to because like, I dunno, it gives me confidence, it makes me feel comfortable interacting or just doing things. Yeah, I hate feeling dumb. It’s debilitating.

A job could do the same thing. One person obtained a job working housekeeping at a hotel, and it led to new friends that gave her an anchor in a different world.

<1>When Things Go Badly

Theresa was 18, older than most of our sample at the first interview. She and her boyfriend had broken up recently, and she lost her apartment because of it, forcing her to once again start sleeping at the youth shelter and then for a time in a parking garage. About then she was ill and found out that one cause of her symptoms was anemia, so she went home to her parents for a week to recover. Theresa's family was well off, and her father was well known. They were supportive, wanting her to come home, and every month they put money in her bank account. Also, there was a trust fund for Theresa, available to her when she turned 19. Theresa said she "had an awesome upbringing," and she knew she was lucky, compared to most other street-youth. She had been adopted as an infant, and she had attended a small, private high school.

Theresa did not take street-involvement very seriously. She had been street-involved for over two years, and she was a heavy user of crystal meth. It was play for her, and she treated her family like a safety net. As she said, "Victoria is not a hard place to be on the street." She partied hard, and when she needed a break, she went home briefly. Despite the money, she relied on the free food for most day-to-day needs. She had three more classes to finish for her high school degree, but she said, "...before I finish grade twelve I want my own place and, you know, still [be able to] party and stuff." She had never worked and saw no need to. She made about $200 a week selling drugs, and she spent that money and the money from her parents on things for herself and drugs. Her parents pressured her to come home, get things straightened out, and get a job, but she says, "I just want to try to figure things out for myself out here...and make it work." Later, for the first time she began to see the need to moderate her using: "I don't have to smoke it constantly." She also managed her contact with institutions: She knew she did not want a criminal record, so she avoided illegal activities that were more likely to get her arrested. She also did not have contact with any other institution that was not charitable.

By age 19 Theresa was alternating time on the street doing drugs with time at her new boyfriend's family home, where she took her breaks. When in town she was panhandling the bar rushes to make a few dollars, using drugs, and not sleeping much. She was scrounging for money because her family made an ultimatum: Get treatment for your addiction or we'll cut you off. Theresa believed that, "They're just trying to scare me." Theresa was not eating, because she did not feel hungry; already thin, she was losing weight. When she did eat she had started to use some adult meal services, and because of that she was starting to think that the treatment program was a good idea. "I need to grow up cause, you know, like too much freedom.... Nothing's free out here anymore." She was too old for the youth shelters. She was pretty unhappy, worried about her health, but she was also hopeful that the future would be better.

In another year, at age 20, Theresa managed to get enrolled in some kind of "welfare" for a little cash, and she was also obtaining money illegally somehow--she was not willing to say how. Nothing was said about the trust fund that she was supposed to receive at 19. Less hopeful, she and her boyfriend were squatting, and she was still alternating time on the street with time at her boyfriend's family home. She was still managing her life, but time on the streets was now starting to feel normal: "I'm just used to being outside"--part of her identity. By then she had been street-involved for over four years, with no end in sight.

<1>Toward A New Life

Once the decks have been cleared for change, things can move quickly. As one person said, “Actually, when I was into that whole scene, I never thought I’d be where I am right now. Especially so soon. I could see myself like getting better, but, like, not for a while.” One can also be surprised by one's own initiative. "I don’t know, just the fact that I’ve been, like, working harder to, like – I don’t know, I don’t know how to explain it. Like, just that I’ve been like getting in touch with my social worker, and like trying to find a place to stay, and trying to go back to school and trying to get a job." Another said, “I just kinda put more focus on like going to school and stuff and getting my life started.” Being adult means, “You gotta do this. You’ve gotta do that….the big ‘C’ word, commitments…some commitments are very needed.”

Some chose to spend more time with those with whom one has long-term relationships, like family, and setting aside those whose interests are short-term. “I’ve actually disassociated myself just so I can deal with work and getting a proper living style going on, cause I am spending more time with my relatives and my family cause my grandma’s getting old enough to pass away soon and she’s had a couple of heart attacks already… I’ve realized a lot of things. You can’t just play around for the rest of your life. You do have to grow up sometime and have a life and have a job and responsibilities.”

For one girl and her boyfriend, whose parents were addicts, aspiring to small measures of stability were important. “I mean, my boyfriend has got a job, he’s got a place to stay, like his foster home’s really good, he finally has like a foster dad for the first time and… he has a job and I can get a guaranteed job at McDonald’s as well, I just gotta bring my resume in, and so… that part is going okay.” Their commitment to each other was the center of their efforts to find stable incomes and residences.

This ability to move past the immaturity of former caregivers and former hurt was important to many. “… and I was just like, alright, well, maybe it’s time to start being nice and forgiving people and, like, not having so much anger towards the world.” Similarly,

…no matter what I do, [my moms’ death] can’t be changed. Mom had AIDS and used drugs. I’m starting to feel a lot of resentment because if someone had taken better care of me then, I’d be in a better situation now. You never know. And I’m feeling a lot of resentment towards my family, but I know that I can’t hold grudges like that. It’s not – not a good thing. And it’s not really their fault. I mean, they – there’s things that they could have done, but there’s things that I could’ve done, and I didn’t. And if I’m gonna feel that kind of anger towards them, might as well feel it towards myself too. I choose not to, you know? I choose not to be angry at them. It – what they believe is everything they could, and that’s all anybody can do.

In developmental terms, youth move away from being a self that is controlled by hurt. And they start to feel different. “I'm an adult now. I feel like I’ve really grown up and like, just had things go well for me for the past couple months, like, I started working, you know, I’m going through a graduation course, I have my own place to go to when I want to be home and it’s clean and I get to spend time with my boyfriend there.

The most important thing might be that they have “something to live for.” In the early days of street involvement that something is immediate and day-to-day. What they want from helpers is food, shelter, assistance avoiding health risks, and help with crisis. They are not often interested in other options. Later, when that lifestyle is no longer fulfilling, youth begin looking around for people who have wider interests and opportunities for more fulfilling experience. At this point they are sometimes ready to receive assistance. As we cited earlier, one said, “I called my caseworker.” Fortunately that caseworker was ready.

Not everyone is that lucky—or has a caseworker. What happens next is the subject of the next two chapters, on feeling “in-between” and on identity. When youth begin to look forward and start to move on, we are usually not ready to help.