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## THE BEST THINGS IN LIFE ARE . . . . ?

*An Investigation of Valued Incidents and Feelings of  
 Secondary-School Seniors in British Columbia*

### INTRODUCTION

In these days of opt-outs and sit-ins many of us are searching for ways to look at young people and things to do about them. Adults adrift, calling for a guideline.

Reverberating across the surf are relevant concepts—motivation, environmental press, adolescent tension, and, loudest and clearest, *values*. Depending on the moral stance of the perceiver, values are disintegrating or are simply changing, but nearly everyone who says anything about today's youth ends up analysing values. From values flow motivations of many varieties: the propulsion toward political activism, vocational aspiration, competitive spirit, apathy and withdrawal, sexual practices, and a host of other non-random activities of young people. If we could only be clearer about the values of young people, we could start on disentangling their diverse motivations, and we might have a fair grip on a guideline or two.

### VALUE METHODOLOGY

There are at least two distinctly different ways to study the values of individuals and groups. One is to think up or borrow a set of established and agreed-upon values, and set people to rating them, or rank-ordering them, or to acting or not acting in accord with them, or otherwise to revealing value preferences. This is how the many researchers who have used the Allport-Vernon-Lindzey Study of Values (1950) and the few other value instruments cited in the literature have chosen to conduct their studies. The authors of the *Study of Values*, the time-honored grand-daddy of value-research tools, transformed the value formulations of Eduard Spranger, the philosopher, into forced-choice questions. Answers to the questions are in turn transformed into scores on subscales, showing the respondent to be an "aesthetic man," or an "economic man," or some combination of these or the four other types of valuing man. As with any research methods, there are both virtues and drawbacks in the use of "tests" of established values. Their use has, however, been for many years the favored method of most value researchers.

Another method is simply to ask people what they value. When they answer, the researcher can make lists and count frequencies. This method, too, has drawbacks—the first of which is likely to be a blank incredulous stare from the respondent. But even given that he "emits appropriate responses," the resultant data are likely to be noisy, and the chance of tapping his "real" values depends not only on the respondent's honesty (which any research depends on) but on his fluency and ability to express himself accurately. Communication deficiencies coil icy tentacles around all research with humans—how do you know a subject reads your question "the way

you meant it"?—but counting check marks on rating scales certainly neatens up the decoding end of the operation. Open-ended responses present unparalleled confusion even before lists can be made. And there is the possibility that the very value system one attempts to investigate is preventing a "true" response: what of the individual who values highly his privilege of not telling about his values, or who fears that his handwriting or his voice on tape will expose him to some sort of societal backlash? Or the person who values not trusting anyone over thirty, an age which some value researchers may have inadvertently passed?

Nevertheless, the present writer (above thirty) chose, for preliminary and exploratory research into young people's values, this dirty, noisy, messy, open-ended method. The rationale is simple: *if* young people have different, new, or radically changed values, there seemed no way to find this out by using established value propositions as the basis for questions. There may be an altogether new color in the universe, but it will not be discovered by presenting people with the known rainbow and asking them to rate the hues. You may find an increased preference for red over blue, but no one will mention mersin.

The investigation reported in this paper, then, is subject to all the static and lack of precision of the open-ended method: the less fluent, less cooperative respondents are riding on the coattails of the more fluent and cooperative ones; decoding and categorizing of responses were subject to the distorting biases of the investigator, and to the further possibility that she may not have recognized "new" values even if they are in the data.

A further limitation should also be mentioned: although the study was envisaged as research on values, the word itself was not used in the instrument. This was to avoid the blank-stare reaction previously mentioned, and the equally ubiquitous reaction of a spate of "value words"—cliches that had been observed to tumble, without thought, when young people in a pilot investigation were asked what they valued. Instead, the students were asked for the best things that had happened to them or that they had done. Accordingly, the study is, strictly speaking, of "best things," and any translation of these into values is a construct by the investigator, and will be discussed more fully below.

## THE INVESTIGATION

### SAMPLE

Two hundred and ten grade-12 and grade-13 students in three British Columbia secondary schools composed the sample. Table I shows how they were divided by sex and school. A majority of the students were in grade 12 and were 17 or 18 in May, 1968, when the questionnaires were answered. School A, a fairly large urban high school, drew its students from an area that spanned several socioeconomic levels, but neither the very highest nor the very lowest. Schools B and C were in a small town and a village, respectively, both distant from urban centers, and both drawing students from rural populations including mill and "bush" workers, with a sprinkling of trades and middle management personnel. School B's administration was markedly innovative, and the school climate may have been quite different from that of Schools A and C, but no evidence was discerned among the best-thing

descriptions that this possible climate difference was systematically influencing the data.

No attempt was made to obtain responses from young people of similar ages who had left the school system.

TABLE I  
Composition of the Sample, Grade-12 and -13 High-School Students  
by Sex and School. N = 210.

	Male	Female	Total
School A	66	72	138
School B	19	23	42
School C	11	19	30
Total	96	114	210

#### METHOD

School personnel cooperating with the investigator asked students, in time taken from regular classes, to help with university research on "what high-school students like." Students were assured of anonymity insofar as was possible by the following means: they recorded on the questionnaires only their sex, age, and grade; completed questionnaires were placed in an envelope by the students, and the envelope sealed in their presence for mailing or delivery to the investigator. In School A the investigator picked up the sealed envelopes every day that a class group completed them; in School B the counselor who administered the questionnaires mailed the envelope immediately after school; in School C the students themselves mailed the envelope.

Students were asked, "Please describe the best thing that has ever happened to you or that you have done." Assurance was given that the investigator was interested in the best thing itself, not in how well it was written about. They were given an option of writing about more than one "best thing" if they couldn't decide on a single one. They were given ample space for writing, and were allowed about ten minutes, after which they were asked to finish as soon as possible and proceed to a second part of the investigation. (The results of the second part are not reported here.)

Responses were read by the investigator and content categories formed from apparent similarities in the data. Responses were then reread and coded according to the categories. Fifteen categories were formed into which nearly all of the best things could be fitted. In several instances, a best thing was coded into more than one category. Frequencies were tabulated for each category, and a rank order of category frequencies derived.

The data were examined to see whether sex or school differences among them could be discerned, and when frequencies were of sufficient magnitude chi square tests of the differences between proportions were made.

#### RESULTS

The best-thing reports from the 210 students yielded 373 bits of information, of which 369 were assigned to the 15 categories. The 4 unassigned bits

included 3 which concerned recovery from illness or escape from danger which were thought too idiosyncratic to form an additional category, and 1 statement by a male student that "nothing good enough has happened yet." The plurality of information bits over the number of students was caused by respondents naming more than 1 best thing in many instances, or the presence of more than 1 category within a single incident.

Because the reader might enjoy attempting to "outguess" these data, categories and explanations of them are presented in the box on these pages.

CATEGORIES OF "BEST THINGS" DERIVED FROM DESCRIPTIONS ON 210 QUESTIONNAIRES, GRADE-12 STUDENTS—IN RANDOM ORDER	READER'S ESTIMATED RANK ORDER
<p>Valued incidents about, or reported enjoyment of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. AUTONOMY—feeling independent, making one's own decisions, feeling responsible and self reliant.</li> <li>B. PEER GROUPS—being part of, or enjoying companionship of groups of like-aged persons of either sex.</li> <li>C. ACTIVITY—usually of an ongoing nature, including sports and social activities, with the action, not the group with whom it takes place, emphasized. "Wholesome" activities, not "thrills."</li> <li>D. TRAVEL—for its own sake: seeing new places, being on the move—companions not or little emphasized.</li> <li>E. A PERSON OF THE OPPOSITE SEX—love, affection, and pride in being loved or liked emphasized; sexual activities not mentioned or given offhand consideration.</li> <li>F. ACHIEVEMENT RECOGNITION — NON-SCHOOL — NON-JOB — accomplishments recognized by persons or groups who were neither supervisors nor school personnel.</li> <li>G. ACHIEVEMENT RECOGNITION — SCHOOL — accomplishments in academic or extra-curricular school activities; a wide range from simply passing a subject to a major scholastic or sports or leadership award.</li> <li>H. EXPERIENCES — GENERAL — Neither travel, thrill, nor achievement experiences, this category includes religious, mystical, and aesthetic realizations, with high affect indicated.</li> </ul>	

- I. FAMILY LIFE—having a good family, or experiencing a welcome change in family structure, as in the birth of a new sibling or the departure of a disliked step-parent.
- J. OWNERSHIP—getting and having a possession, usually a car or a horse.
- K. ACHIEVEMENT—CAPABILITY—accomplishments viewed with pride for their own sake, not for recognition by others: ability to do something rather than feeling independent or self-reliant in general.
- L. LIVING IN A PARTICULAR PLACE—Canada, for new and some native-born Canadians; a certain town or neighborhood, often after a move.
- M. THRILLS—sexual activities, drug-taking, fast driving, wild parties: activities either explicitly illegal or dangerous; sensations emphasized.
- N. ACHIEVEMENT RECOGNITION — JOB—getting or keeping a job, or being promoted or praised by supervisors.
- O. PEOPLE—meeting, getting to know people in general—not single individuals or membership in peer groups, but much more generalized humanitarian relationships: sharing and helping often mentioned.

Frequencies and the rank order of categories are in Table II on a subsequent page. The frequency distribution of categories was: 60, 49, 39, 30, 23, 23, 23, and the remaining 8 categories with frequencies between 12 and 19.

#### DISCUSSION

The over-all impression that these results have on the reader may depend, to some extent, on the presence or absence in his mind of a stereotype of adolescents. Followers of Coleman's studies of American high-school youth will not find the peer-group oriented, intellect degrading, aficionado of athletics. Followers of Friedenbergs will be less surprised, but may see a less gloomy picture of conformity. Closest perhaps would be the quick stereotype of a professor of education, who just passed by the door and characterized the 18-year-old youth as "a real nice kid who wants to get out of the house."

One decidedly salient aspect of the categories is their active rather than passive orientation: although the request for best things was worded with the passive component first, a large majority of students reported the best things *they had done*. The incidents in categories 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 13 were initiated by the persons reporting them, and although, in many of the

travel incidents, the students appeared to have been wafted along, there were several in which the journey was self-initiated. In several of the other categories, too, the student listed doing, rather than being done to, as among the best things.

Several of the particular categories need additional explanation.

#### CATEGORY 1—ACHIEVEMENT—SCHOOL

Category 1, achievement recognition for school work, should be viewed with caution as "top" category: the time was May, and the schools were bustling with school-leaving festivities and awards days. School A had just held such a ceremony, and in British Columbia a great many students are virtually assured of graduation from grade 12 at this time of year because of a system of "recommendations" by subject teachers, which free them from sitting for final examinations in June. Further, the descriptions were written in class rooms, and an aura of scholastic achievement as a Good Thing in the surroundings may have influenced the respondents into making what they may have felt were socially acceptable responses. (There was, throughout the replies, a persistent scattering of chattiness and good wishes to the investigator, regardless of the fact that she was unknown in Schools A and B, and known only in the long past to a trifling number of the students in School C.) For reasons attributable only to a sort of generalized good will, these students appeared to be eager to please, a phenomenon also noted, also with dismay, by Friedenberga (1967, p. 141). Nonetheless, in defense of the high frequencies of incidents in category 1, it should be noted that a large number of the items in the category were neither May-oriented nor to do with awards and honors in the grade-12 year, as can be seen from some of the examples which follow.

Differences in sex frequencies should be noted. Women wrote on school achievement proportionately more often than men, and the difference in proportions is significant at the .001 level of confidence. This strong feminine valuing of scholastic achievement persisted across all three schools. It is not known whether the women reported school recognition more often because they received proportionately more of it, or because it was differentially more important to them, or because they, more than the men, were inclined to write what they thought were more socially desirable responses, or whether some combination of these factors was at work.

For category 1, also, an interesting inter-school difference appeared. In School C, the smallest, 16 of the 30 students mentioned some sort of school achievement as at least one of their best things. School B, slightly larger, showed only 17% in the category, and School A, where the awards ceremony had just been held, showed 27%. One can only speculate on this finding: Possibly School C spreads recognition for academic prowess more thickly across its small number of students, but this accounts only for the difference between itself and School A. Possibly education is a value which is closely linked with school climate in unexamined ways. The only other inter-school difference of any magnitude appeared in category 3, persons of the opposite sex, for which both small schools had an apparently disproportionate number of students recounting incidents about loved ones.

*Examples of best things in category 1, Achievement—School*

Female, School A:

Grad was the best thing that ever happened to me. I went with a really great guy who won several awards for being so outstanding in sports and school activities. I also got two awards, which surprised me. The whole evening was just wonderful. (Also classified as in category 3.)

Female, School A:

The best thing that ever happened to me is the day I graduated from high school . . . . I think it is a very big step to take, from being sheltered and secure in school. Then finding a job is not easy, (This student is anticipating formal graduation, confusing it, as often happens, with being assured of passing.)

Male, School A:

The best thing I have done was to return to school to complete grade 12 after withdrawing from school for a year. The thing I enjoy the best is going to the mountains camping with a bunch of guys. (Also classified in category 9.)

Female, School A:

The best things I have done is to write an essay on a subject and then the teacher deciding it was good enough to be put in the school library. I was only getting a C in this subject and felt proud of myself when I got the highest mark . . . .

Female, School A:

The best thing that ever happened to me is when I got B and C-plus last year in school. I had never had anything higher than a C so this was a great experience for me. Another best thing that happened to me was when I spent a whole summer away from home. Because it made me more mature and accept responsibility. (Also classified in category 6.)

**CATEGORY 2—TRAVEL**

The travel category proved to be an interesting blend of wanting "to get out of the house" and a more positive delight with change and increased awareness and knowledge for their own sakes. In the extension of the study which is not reported here, these same students made lists of their "likes," and in a section for "aspirations for the future," travel was included by an overwhelming majority.

*Examples of Category 2—Travel Incidents:*

Male, School A:

I went on a trip to Montreal for 2 weeks and across Canada.

Male, School C:

The best thing would be when I went down to California, spent two glorious weeks doing nothing except seeing ball games, walking around the city, and getting lost. Was a very enjoyable trip and having nothing to do made it that much better. On returning I could appreciate Canada that much more and therefore going to California was not only entertaining but informative and educational making it the best thing that has ever happened to me!

Male, School B:

The two best things that ever happened to me were that I hitchhiked across Canada and I once shot a large deer. (Also classified in Category 10.)

## CATEGORY 3—PERSON OF OPPOSITE SEX

A less austere label for this category would be *Love and Ecstasy*, for this is what these best things were about. It is hardly surprising that the category ranked third highest in frequency: what is surprising to the present writer is that only 39 of the 210 students mentioned incidents related to mating and dating when, supposedly, at this time of their lives they are in the midst of this "developmental task." Several possible explanations of the scarcity of love in the data have come to mind, and are presented here as speculations only.

It is possible that many of these 17-, 18-, and 19-year-olds had "gone through that stage," and that memories of conquests and affectionate relationships had somehow paled into relative insignificance. There is the opposite alternative, too: perhaps experiences with the explosive delight of young love were lacking among many of these respondents, but this proposition has an underlying face invalidity. Some support for the first alternative comes from the findings of another study, in which nearly 100 grade-9 girls in School A described best things, also in May, 1968. For the younger girls, the boy was of outstanding importance, and turned up in the responses with considerably higher frequency than he did with the grade-12 girls. More sensible, of course, is the guess that for some of the students the experience was less important than it would have been when they were younger, and for others the experience hadn't happened yet. Nonetheless it seems curious that fewer than 20% of the students thought of a loved young man or young woman as best or even one of the best things. There is an additional alternative explanation—one less pleasing to the investigator, but perhaps most cogent—they *did* think of love, but they *didn't* write about it. Or, as Friedenberg put it, in seeking to explain the bland results he obtained from his Q sort called *Miss Post's English Assignment*, "They lied. (1967, p. 113)." Friedenberg reasoned from his additional evidence that powerful affections and exuberant sexuality were present in many of the students he studied, but that when he came to question them about love in a relatively straightforward way, through the love poems he as Miss Post asked them to rate, they were unwilling or unable to be honest. This may be true of the students in the present study also; although many of them gave evidence of being frank, even about illegalities, many more were perhaps not about to betray something on which they felt so deeply, and may have been made ashamed of.

Speculations to the contrary notwithstanding, it does not do to argue overlong with the data: over 80% of the sample did not mention persons of the opposite sex as best things, and only further research can shed light on the reasons why. For the moment, it appears that for this sample love was on the average not particularly important, a finding decidedly distant from almost *anyone's* stereotype of the teenager.

*Examples of Category 3—Person of the Opposite Sex*

Female, School C:

Learning to love someone is the best thing that has ever happened to me. He is a very special person and I've learned what the word LOVE means, although some parents and adults may say that I am too young to love . . . .

## CATEGORY 4—PEER GROUP

If surprise at the scarcity of love is in order for young people's best things, the even greater scarcity of the peer group may be even more surprising, for only 30 of the students mentioned peer relations as best things. But here, although some of the speculations discussed in Category 3 are applicable, there is an additional rationale in the form of the questionnaire itself. Peer groups, for persons in the last 3 years of their teens, are almost certain to have been joined, not joined, or rejected, probably long since. Further, the joining or acceptance process is likely to have been diffuse—not characterized by a single incident which would readily come to mind as a best "thing." In the students' lists of liked persons in the second part of the study, friends and groups of like-aged persons were amply in evidence. Perhaps one should consider the peer group, in Herzbergian terminology, as a "hygiene need"—once the need has been met, the possibility of enhanced life-satisfaction does not increase. It may be that only if the peer group were in danger of being removed would one be inclined to overtly assign it a high value. Possibly if the students had been asked to describe *worst* things, lack of acceptance from a sought-after peer group might have been mentioned with considerable frequency.

It should also be mentioned that seldom was the peer group the only category assignment for a best thing: in nearly all instances peers entered into a best thing that also included other categories like travel, activities, or satisfaction with a particular locale.

*Example of Category 4—Peer Group*

Male, School A:

The best things that ever happened to me was when one summer about 15 of the group went away two weeks for a camping trip. We had 6 tents in a circle and a large bonfire in the middle. We went fishing and caught fish for breakfast and dinner. After which we brought out the beer and the girls came up and we had a big party at this lake. (Also categorized in Category 9, Activity.)

## CATEGORY 5—EXPERIENCES, GENERAL

This most difficult to name of the categories includes a remarkably diverse set of 23 responses. They have in common that they concerned the inner person of the respondent, but they did not seem to be "about" any particular thing. They were not thrills, but they were invariably moving; they were not travel, in the sense of locomotion; they did not concern others, and they were achievements only by a very remote extension of the meaning of that word. Because they were so idiosyncratic, several examples of them are presented. Possibly the most outstanding impression from this small but distinctive group of responses is that they reveal young people—not numerous, but representing all schools and both sexes in near proportion—who appear to be open to their own inner experiences in a Rogers/Maslow sense.

*Examples of Category 5—Experiences—General*

Female, School C:

The best thing that happened was I watched a calf get born once. . . . It helped me to realize the wonder and beauty of life. . . . It was magical and beautiful. I was amazed at it. . . . It made me see some of the beauty and complexity of life.

Female, School A:

The day I realized that the Pacific Ocean had another side. I was at the beach—the day was calm, quiet—and the eye could see for so many miles. Only the horizon kept you from seeing all of the world. Everything about me, the ocean, the cliffs, the small boats, the tug boats, the buildings, the mountains had a superhuman quality—that left you at peace with yourself and environment. I found I belonged in this “set-up” and so I was part of the two sides of the Pacific.

Female, School B:

The best thing that I have done—gave my life over to Christ. I now have a peace and joy that's incomparable with anything else. I have One that I can turn to Who knows all the answers.

CATEGORY 6—AUTONOMY

Autonomy was explicit in the responses assigned to this category; it was often implicit in 2 others: job achievement and general achievement, but the two latter categories were formed because the best thing related more to particular areas of competence, whilst autonomy as a pervasive characteristic could be phrased simply as “making my own decisions,” or “feeling responsible,” without a job or an event forming a boundary for the autonomy. Like categories 10 and 13, Category 6 in largely a male domain, and the autonomous feeling ranged widely from an emphatic feeling of maturity to a trifling example of personal responsibility, as can be seen from the examples.

*Examples of Category 6—Autonomy*

Male, School A:

The ability to learn and the learning process. Becoming aware that a book is more than a good plot or sex is something you do to prove yourself a man. To enjoy travelling and be aware of the differences in cultures and ways of thinking. And the process of deciding for yourself.

Male, School A:

The first time that I was allowed to go downtown alone near Christmas time and go through the stores looking at everything.

CATEGORY 7—ACHIEVEMENT—NON-SCHOOL

This category includes incidents relating achievement that was recognized by some person or group not connected with either school or job. Winners of Queen Contests, prizes by Community Clubs, and the like are included. It was separated from school achievement simply to show the relative incidence of the two types of recognition. In flavor the best things in categories 1 and 6 are similar. The single example given is representative, although some of the awards were more and some less valuable in monetary terms.

*Example of Category 7—Achievement—Non-School*

Female, School B:

When I got to the PNE to model through the 4-H competition.

CATEGORY 8—THRILLS

In this category are the illegal, highly exciting, sensation-for-its-own-sake activities that worry parents: the wild drive after the wild party; LSD;

Marijuana; the sensations of sexual intercourse with no or little mention given to the partner. Nineteen students mentioned these as best things, and in nearly all instances these were single-category best things: nothing else came close or came to mind in the same 10 minutes. (A note to worried parents: 191 students did *not* call their best thing a thrill experience.) Of course, in considering this category frequency, it is impossible to know to what extent the students were reluctant to put on paper in their own hand writing (several of these respondents used block letters) a thrill incident. There is some evidence, from the very fact that in all 3 schools some respondents did report this kind of best thing, that they were not, as a group, outstandingly reluctant.

TABLE II  
Frequency of Mention of Best Things by Category, in Rank Order

Category Number	Rank	Category Title	School A (N=138)		School B (N=42)		School C (N=30)		Total (N=210)
			M	F	M	F	M	F	
1	1	Achievement— School	9	28	0	7	4	12	60*
2	2	Travel	14	21	5	5	2	2	49
3	3	Person of Opposite Sex	6	12	5	8	1	7	39†
4	4	Peer Group	3	17	2	1	1	6	30§
5	6	Experiences— General	8	7	0	3	3	2	23
6	6	Autonomy	10	6	1	1	3	2	23
7	6	Achievement— Non-School	7	5	2	4	2	3	23
8	8.5	Thrills	12	3	1	0	1	2	19
9	8.5	Activity— General	7	8	2	0	2	0	19
10	10	Achievement— Personal	7	2	5	1	1	0	16
11	11.5	People— General	8	3	0	4	0	0	15
12	11.5	Living in Canada or in a Commu- nity of Choice	5	7	1	2	0	0	15
13	13	Achievement— Job	6	5	1	0	2	0	14
14	14.5	Family Life	1	4	2	0	2	3	12
15	14.5	Ownership	5	1	4	2	0	0	12
TOTAL			108	129	31	38	24	39	369

Mean frequency of mention of a category per student, for males, 1.7; for females, 1.8. Categories 1 through 4 were tested for significance of differences of responses by sex, and 1 through 3 were similarly tested for responses by schools: chi square was found significant for sex: \*— $p < .001$ ; †— $p < .05$ ; §— $p < .01$ ; chi square was found significant for schools: \*— $p < .01$ . Expected frequencies for the remaining categories were too small for chi square to be appropriate.

*Examples of Category 8—Thrills*

Male, School B:

The very first time I had sexual intercourse.

Female, School A:

The best thing that ever happened was my discovery of cannabis. This may shock you, but I doubt it. My reasons for feeling so strongly in favour of this illegal drug are many but I suspect that an escape from emotional anguish is the main one. Also, I now feel a little closer to humanity and nature than I have ever felt before.

Male, School A:

I took LSD last June and feel this is the best thing I have done.

CATEGORY 9—ACTIVITY—GENERAL

At long last, as we work our way downward in the rank order, we find the Pepsi Generation, water-skiing its way to the dance floor. "Activity—General" includes a variety of harmless hedonistic enterprises, with individual sports and beach or bush parties paramount. The data from additional lists of liked activities, mentioned previously, lends support to the non-organized nature of the best things in this category: individual sports were "liked" about 3 times as often as team sports, and there were, in addition, a large number of "activities" mentioned which were more like states of being—walking alone in the rain, staring into the fire, and talking things over with mom. It is, of course, entirely possible that Pepsi activities do not lend themselves to being *things*, and that they may be highly valued by many of these youth. The large number of them that appeared in the additional lists bears this out, and only further research (in progress) can ascertain how they are evaluated when compared to, for instance, achievement.

A single example should suffice, for the joys of skiing and party-going are familiar phenomena.

*Example of Category 9—Activities—General*

Female, School A:

The best thing I have done would be a party I went to where everyone knew each other and everyone had a riot.

CATEGORY 10—ACHIEVEMENT—PERSONAL

"Achievement—Personal" differs from the other achievement categories because the achievement does not involve recognition by others. It is a more inner-directed or autonomous group of best things, as though the 16 students who wrote them delighted most in their *own* recognition of their *own* capabilities. Thirteen of the 16 were men. All of the students who wrote about this kind of best thing appeared to be taking more trouble than was usual in spelling out for the reader exactly what they meant, and few of them combined this best thing with any also-ran best thing.

*Examples of Category 10—Achievement—Personal*

Male, School B:

A thing I vastly enjoyed was the satisfaction and feeling of accomplishment in doing well in high school. Not so much for the marks, but for the taste of the great knowledge that has been accumulated. . . .

Female, School B:

I suppose the times I have felt most useful and therefore happy are when I am doing something for my father that no one else can do such as sail the boat through a storm and not chickening out. Also after working 8 hours picking berries and still being in a good mood. Or else writing a great short story in my opinion.

CATEGORY 11—PEOPLE—GENERAL

Fifteen students refused to be pinned down to an incident or an accomplishment, and insisted that the best thing was people: not single persons, or groups of peers, but meeting, talking to, learning from, and otherwise interacting with people-in-general. Often the relationship was a helping one. Typical is the example below, which was a continuation of a paragraph objecting to the 10-minute time limit, and a discussion of whether "best" meant "most enjoyable" or "beneficial."

*Example of Category 11—People*

Female, School A:

I will say that the best things I have experienced have concerned people and some manner of sharing with them—whether it be emotional, physical, or spiritual. It may seem like I haven't said much, but actually I've said a great deal—perhaps not well mind you, but the idea is there. OK? (Sorry if this information is useless.)

CATEGORY 12—LIVING IN CANADA OR IN A COMMUNITY OF CHOICE

Of the 15 students for whom their place of residence was the best thing, 8 were new Canadians. The others had all moved from somewhere else in Canada. No one mentioning place of residence had lived all his life in the community. It is possible that the entries in Category 12 should, like some of those in Category 4—Peer Group, be considered as hygiene needs which, after being unsatisfied, had been fulfilled. Possibly if the students to whom their place of residence was so taken for granted as to be non-salient were asked to evaluate it, their physical life space would turn out to be highly valued. Examples are omitted for this category: they were straightforward and brief. "Moving to Canada" or their city or town was the general form.

CATEGORY 13—ACHIEVEMENT—JOB

It pleased 14 of the students most that they had been able to do well in employment. Naturally their experience in the world of work had been limited to after-school and summer jobs. Explicit approval or praise from supervisors or co-workers was present in all these best things.

*Example of Category 13—Achievement—Job*

Male, School C:

The best thing I have done is successfully completing a summer job. . . . My bosses, at the beginning, were constantly checking on me. But, towards the middle and end of the summer, they did not check on me any more. They had complete trust in me. This I liked . . . .

CATEGORY 14—FAMILY LIFE

Family life, like place of residence, may be a taken-for-granted value for many young people, and most of the 12 best things in this category were

agreeable changes: the new baby sister in one of the previous examples is typical. A few students, however, chose a good family for its own sake, without any hint of a change having taken place.

*Example of Category 14—Family Life*

Male, School B:

The best thing that has ever happened to me is I have two wonderful parents. They don't drink, fight, or do any other things to make a student's home rotten. . . .

CATEGORY 15—OWNERSHIP

For 9 men, vehicles and for 3 women, animals that were owned by them were the best things. Often ownership was combined with other, less materialistic, best things. But those who are inclined to cheer at the low magnitude of this evidence of materialism should be wary: in the additional lists, a division called "Aspirations for the Future" included a seemingly endless enumeration of beautiful homes, two-car garages, boats, and bank balances. (They also included, nearly 50% of them, concepts like world peace and the brotherhood of man.) Possessions, it would seem, are valued, but seldom valued most of all. The curious prominence of School B and paucity of School C in the ownership category is unexplainable: School C students own cars and horses too. Presumably this is a chance datum; at all events, numbers were too small for a significance test to be appropriate. Examples for this category are omitted: they were brief and repetitive.

### CONCLUSION

The best things of 210 grade-12 and grade-13 students aged 17 through 19 have been reported. Given that sampling and methodological weaknesses may invalidate many of the comparisons of frequencies, and that a tendency of the respondents to present their public faces may obviate the possibility of claiming that these are truly the best things for these students, it may still be possible to draw a few inferences about the values of these young people.

Certainly no claim can be made that anything even approaching a total picture has been obtained for any individual. Very little, when one asks for a best *thing*, reveals itself about such traditional normative values as honesty or kindness or courage. And, of course, when one asks for a *best* thing, one gets just that—or at most 3 or 4 "bests." Nevertheless, with 369 best things, the domain of student preferences has been to some extent tapped. These preferences are akin to what Margenau speaks of when he defines "factual values" as "observable preferences, appraisals, and desires of concrete people at a given time (1959, p. 39)." In some instances, the best things included, implicitly or explicitly, some of the domain of normative values also, as when students mentioned sharing, kindness, independence, and the like, as having a part in their best-thing experiences. But for the most part these were factual values.

But is there something new in this sample of the factual-value domain? At first glance, not much: recognition for achievement, activity for its own sake, approval, autonomy—all have long been recognized as developmental tasks and it is scarcely amazing that they appear in these best things when

they have been satisfactorily accomplished. But there is a certain complexity in the data which defies easy analysis. Where in the developmental models does one put the young woman who illustrates her sense of being "useful and therefore happy" with being in a good mood after 8 hours of hard work? This seems hardly the traditional work value of the Protestant Ethic. Or the student who "realized" the other side of the Pacific Ocean? This surely belongs more in the upper reaches of a Maslow hierarchy than it does in the formulations of either Havighurst or Coleman. And sympathetic though one may be to Friedenburg's anguish at the resentment, a kind of free-floating ill temper, he found in American high schools, there is some evidence that if one asks students simply for their best thing, and not their best thing "in high school," as he did, the picture changes. One cannot find a shred of resentment, for instance, in the youth who "hitchhiked across Canada and . . . shot a large deer."

But these instances are difficult to translate into useful and accurate generalities: the dead large deer, the far shore of the Pacific, and the good mood after a day's work. They have elements of self-awareness, of self-pride in the best sense, and of being at home and comfortable in the real world. It is not claimed that they are new values—far from it—but they are not widely publicized as looming large in the lives of even a few adolescents. But in both the Autonomy and Personal Achievement categories they appeared—about 30 of them.

And to conclude in even more Pollyanna-like vein, it is possible to draw some very tentative inferences from what was *not* included in *any* of the best things: there was no brutality, no sadism, no meanness. Even in the 19 Thrill best things, the reported delight was in the self-indulgent sensation—there was no hint that anyone would be hurt, except possibly the writer of the best thing. Of course it was not likely that students would write of morbid pleasures for the eye of an adult—indeed their compliance was in one way a source of dismay, as has been mentioned—but there was not even an inadvertent hint—not one—of the sick nastiness of which one sometimes hears. If adult values are in fact being upended, reversed, distorted, or decimated by today's youth, this investigation failed to find out how.

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#### LES MEILLEURES CHOSES DE LA VIE . . .

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Une enquête fut menée auprès de deux cent dix (210) étudiants de 12ième année de Colombie-Britannique; on leur demanda de décrire "ce qui leur était arrivé de meilleur ou ce qu'ils avaient fait de mieux." Après analyse des réponses, on établit quinze (15) catégories où l'ordre et la fréquence varient de façon importante selon le sexe. La méthode employée pour en arriver à retrouver l'échelle des valeurs chez les étudiants est ici étudiée; on ajoute également bon nombre de ces "bonnes choses" signalées par les étudiants.