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The Way of All Flesh

One day more than a decade ago, I ran across a diary of mine from more than a decade before that and ended up sitting awake until the wee hours reading every word. Though short on reflection, the entries were heavy on factual details, and as I read through them I was stunned to find one long-dormant memory after another springing to life. Reading, for example, about a dinner with friends at a restaurant I'd never visited before or since, I was amazed how vividly I remembered the place, the company, the conversation, and my state of mind that night. I was also struck by the ways I'd changed since then. Yet reading proved an act of recovery: as I turned the pages, I found myself slipping back, as it were, into the skin I'd worn all those years ago; so that when I finally closed the book and returned to my then-current life and self, I felt a sense of dislocation that was like nothing I'd ever known before.

I've often thought back to that night of time travel, and on each occasion I've pondered anew the nature of identity, the continuities and discontinuities of the self over time. But nothing has brought that experience, and the reflections it engendered, more powerfully to mind than my recent re-viewing of Michael Apted's remarkable *Up Series*.¹

The first thing you need to know about this twelve-hour documentary project, which has been decades in the making, is that it had its genesis in *Seven Up!*, a thirty-nine-minute special episode—filmed in 1963 and first broadcast in 1964—of *World in Action*, a weekly program produced by Britain's Granada TV between 1963 and 1998. As Apted has pointed out, *Seven Up!* came along at a watershed moment—a time when Britain, after nearly two decades of postwar privation, was undergoing a socio-cultural upheaval, symbolized by the Beatles, Twiggy, and

¹ The first six installments of *The Up Series* are available in a DVD set from First Run Features for \$129.90. The seventh, *49 Up*, can be purchased separately on DVD for \$29.95.

Carnaby Street. (Apropos of the program's timing, the movie critic Roger Ebert, a longtime *Up Series* booster, has quoted Philip Larkin's line: "Sexual intercourse began / in nineteen sixty-three.") It was at this juncture that Apted, then a newly hired twenty-two-year-old researcher for Granada, was told to find participants for a program that (as he recently explained) would look at the country "through the eyes of children." Apted has been candid about the fact that Granada TV "was a very left-wing company" and that *Seven Up!* was intended to be a "barely disguised political diatribe against the class system." In his own words, Granada

definitely had a very political left-wing agenda. I think the idea of the film was to show, from the beginning, that the class system wasn't changing. Therefore, I selected children from the fringes of society, from the extremely wealthy to the extremely blue collar, which ultimately was a mistake and a piece of manipulation. There were very few children from the middle ground. . . . These were socio-political choices although the film transcended these decisions. It was funny and moving and very resonant. It didn't just seem to ape [*sic*] its political intentions.

Seven Up! focuses on fourteen children, all of them seven years old. As it opens, we see them at the London Zoo, gaping at the polar bears as a narrator tells us that Granada TV has brought together these youngsters from "startlingly different backgrounds" in order to get "a glimpse of England in the year 2000." The program goes on to show them interacting with their peers in classrooms and schoolyards, and walking or bicycling to or from school (we don't see their parents at all); mostly, however, they talk into the camera about their lives, tastes, interests, and long-term plans, answering (mostly) unheard questions posed by an unseen interviewer. The narrator repeatedly introduces larger issues (for example, noting that some of the children attend co-ed schools and others don't, he invites us to ponder "the influence of mixing the sexes"), and implies throughout that nothing will influence these young people's fates more than the class system. Yet what makes the program engaging is not the abstract concerns (however valid) to which it seeks to draw our attention, but the particularity of the lives and personalities of the fourteen subjects, all of them identified only by first name: Nick, a Yorkshire farm boy; Tony, an East End lad; Suzy, a rich London girl; Bruce, a Surrey boarding-school student; Symon

and Paul, residents of a charity-funded London children's home; Jackie, Sue, and Lynn, all East End classmates; John, Andrew, and Charles, all pupils at a posh Kensington school; and Peter and Neil, schoolmates in a middle-class Liverpool suburb.

By turns charming, humorous, and poignant, *Seven Up!* was successful enough to give Apted the idea, seven years later, of tracking down the same fourteen children to find out what had happened to them. The result was *7 Plus Seven*, in which he intercut new footage with flashbacks from *Seven Up!* Seven years later, Apted did it again with *21 Up*, at the beginning of which the subjects, now twenty-one, were seen viewing the previous two documentaries in a screening room and discussing them afterwards at a cocktail reception (the only time since *Seven Up!* when all the participants have been together in one place). And *21 Up* was succeeded, in turn, at seven-year intervals, by *28 Up*, *35 Up*, and *42 Up*, each of which mixes new footage with scenes from the previous documentaries to highlight the transformations that Apted's protagonists have undergone over the years. The latest installment, *49 Up*, came out in 2005.

Apted has now followed the same group of people, then, for over forty years.² The result is a work the nature of whose impact can't easily be compared to that of any other documentary—or, for that matter, any work of art—that I know of. For me, perhaps, the series carries a special charge, because I happen to be exactly the same age as the participants and because I've been following their lives ever since I, and they, were very young. Viewing each new installment over the years has been like catching up after a long separation with people one knew as a child. But it's also been something more—it's been an invitation to look back at one's own life, to examine the decisions one has made and the ways one has changed.

Objectively speaking, most of the fourteen subjects' lives have been unexceptional. Though some have made a name for themselves (John is now a Queen's Counsel; Nick is a professor at the University of Wisconsin), all are more famous for having been in the series than for anything else. None of them is unusually charismatic—there are at least two or three, indeed,

² There have, to be sure, been defections: three of Apted's original fourteen subjects have dropped out of the series, only to return later; two left for good—Charles after *21 Up*, Peter after *28 Up*. It should perhaps also be mentioned that in recent years Apted has initiated Russian, South African, and American versions of the *Up Series*, none of which I've seen.

whom you'd probably consider drab and colorless if you met them at a party. Yet watching their lives unfold has never been anything less than captivating. Apted (who has also directed such movies as *Coal Miner's Daughter*) has said that the series "honor[s] ordinary life," and that he "had no idea" in its early days that the participants "would become such rich characters"—which they truly have. "Now," he asks, "is that telling me some great truth, that everybody has a story, that everybody has poetry in their voices? I don't know. I'd like to think in some way it does. If you celebrate the ordinary life, which these films do, then people can really deliver stuff that is illuminating." I can't imagine anyone disputing this claim after watching the *Up Series*. The cumulative effect is, indeed, poetic. Growing out of a program designed by socialists to promote a collectivist worldview, the series might almost have been created by libertarians to underscore the singularity and integrity of the human person. It is, in any event, an unforgettable lesson in the dignity of man and the importance of attending to people as individuals, in all their particularity, and the danger of generalizing about them too quickly on the basis of class, race, sex, or other such categories.

Some, to be sure, don't see the point of the series. This includes a few of the participants themselves, whose putdowns of Apted's efforts he has incorporated into several of the *Up* documentaries. In *49 Up*, for example, John dismisses the whole project as just another example of junky reality TV: "It's like *Big Brother* and *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here* . . . with the added bonus that you can see people grow old, lose their hair, get fat. Fascinating, I'm sure. But does it have any value? That's a different question." It's true that the series' early installments were precursors of today's reality TV—a genre that began in earnest with the 1973 PBS series *An American Family*, that came into its own with the 1992 debut of MTV's *The Real World*, and that entered its heyday with the introduction of *Big Brother* (Netherlands, 1999; U.S., 2000). But the *Up Series* is as profound as *Big Brother* is vulgar and vacuous. To watch it is to stare into the mystery of time, to be confronted with the grand sweep of life. During my recent re-viewing of it, I was reminded of my first trip on an airplane, during which, flying from New York to Los Angeles, I spent virtually the entire time staring down, rapt, as a route that pioneers had taken months to traverse passed before my eyes in a matter of hours. Seeing the continent from such a

godlike perspective, I felt as if I'd magically overcome the limitations of space; in the same way, viewers of the *Up Series* can feel they've stepped outside of time.

Indeed, as I re-viewed the series, I found myself thinking not of *Big Brother* but of Proust, who sought to capture all of life in one comprehensive work. And I found certain lines of poetry running over and over through my mind, especially these two: "The bell tolls for thee" (Donne) and "It is Margaret you mourn for" (Hopkins). Why these lines? Because to watch the *Up Series* is, ultimately, to gaze into a mirror—especially, perhaps, if the subjects are one's own age. At age seven, even if they're British and you're American, they look very much like kids who might have been your second-grade schoolmates. You recognize the way their parents dress them and cut their hair; there even seems to be something indefinably period-bound about the way they move and talk and gesture. To watch them live through the same decades you've lived through, their clothing and haircuts and language adjusting to the passing fashions, may be as close as you'll ever come to watching a film tracking you through your own life. To re-view the whole thing in the space of a few evenings, moreover, is to see the period in which you were first conscious of the world withdraw with terrifying speed into the mists of history.

The technological advances from one installment to the next enhance one's awareness of the passage of time. The grainy black-and-white of *Seven Up!* gives way to color images of steadily improving quality; the sound gets better; the camerawork becomes more fluid; the tone of the narration grows more natural. Apted himself has pointed out that the evolution of his directing technique—from an emphasis on seated "portrait-style" interviews to "interviews on the move"—reflects the fact that "documentary styles have changed" over the decades.

Also reflected in the series are the dramatic shifts that have occurred in social attitudes over the last half century. As the years go by, the subjects feel freer to address once-uncomfortable topics. We see boys who were raised to keep a stiff upper lip grow into men who are willing to probe their feelings; we see the children of emotionally undemonstrative parents who sent them off to boarding school grow into openly affectionate fathers and mothers who would never let their kids be raised by others. We watch illegitimacy, still a scandal in the early sixties (when

Symon's unwed mother placed him in a children's home), become matter-of-fact: in *28 Up*, Jackie talks casually about having a son out of wedlock. Several participants discuss their divorces. Tony and his wife thrash out his adultery. In *49 Up*, taciturn, working-class Paul, the kind of guy whom you might have expected to resolve marital conflicts with a punch in the mouth, opens up about the psychiatric help he's sought (and from a woman doctor, no less) to overcome his crippling lack of self-esteem and save his marriage.

As for the class system, if it was still a force to be reckoned with in the Britain of *Seven Up!*, by *42 Up* the participants were divided on whether it even still existed or, if so, whether it had any clout. In the view of working-class Jackie, "class as such" had disappeared, while upper-class Suzy opined that although it did "still exist to a certain extent," she cited the British royal family ("What a mess!") as proof that "money, wealth, [and] position [don't] give you happiness or health or anything like that." For what it's worth, the *Up Series* is in large part a tale of upward mobility: though the rich kids have remained rich, the poor kids have ended up considerably better off than viewers—or the filmmakers—would likely have expected in 1964. While "England's still governed by . . . the accident of birth," Apted recently said, this is true "to a lesser and lesser extent."

Certainly the project's original fixation on class has come to seem increasingly shallow and reductive, even beside the point, in the face of the complexity and unpredictability of the subjects' real lives. Once upon a time Apted believed that viewers unfamiliar with Britain's class system wouldn't even be able to understand or appreciate the series; not until he attended an American screening of *28 Up*, and saw it receive as enthusiastic a response as it had back home, did he recognize that, as he put it, "these films aren't what I think they are"—that they aren't about class or politics or economic issues but, quite simply, about life, about "being alive and getting through the day and growing up and making all of the choices that we all have to make." In retrospect, Apted has concluded that after *21 Up* "the political side of it became secondary to the human side. We had kind of grown through that [preoccupation with class]. Those arguments weren't meaningful anymore. What was meaningful were people."

What happened to the series after *21 Up* is, in fact, astonishing. In both *7 Plus Seven* and *21 Up*, the mere act of cutting back and

forth between close-ups of the subjects at different ages was enough to keep viewers absorbed. Apted admits to having worried that the series would grow boring after *21 Up* because the differences in physical appearance from one installment to the next would necessarily be less arresting. But after twenty-one, he found, the relative subtlety of the subjects' physical changes didn't matter at all, because their ongoing emotional and psychological transfigurations turned out to be absolutely riveting.

If the producers of *Seven Up!* divided their fourteen young subjects by class, the adults these children have grown into split more naturally along other lines: their marriages have either worked or not; they've either had serious medical problems or they haven't; they've either been ambitious and motivated or they've just drifted along. (Sue, who's worked her way up the professional ladder, says she hopes "my children want something and go for it"; Jackie, who's floundered, resolves to push her kids "a little bit harder" than her father pushed her.)

The most significant distinction of all may be between the more outgoing participants and the more introverted ones—chief among them Neil, long the series' most haunting figure. Cheerful at seven, by fourteen he already had a sadness in his eyes that could still be observed in *49 Up*. At twenty-one, crushed over his rejection by Oxford, he had dropped out of Aberdeen University and moved into a London squat, where he told Apted that "I'd like to be somebody in a position of importance. . . . I'd love to be in politics"; at twenty-eight, plagued by psychiatric problems that made it hard for him to interact with others, he was homeless and unemployed, collecting welfare in a bleak, rural corner of Scotland where he admitted to being "known as an eccentric"; at thirty-five he was living in public housing on the remote, misty Shetland Islands. (Apted: "Do you ever think you're going mad?" Neil: "I don't think it, I know it.") *42 Up* brought something of a shock: though still on the dole, Neil was now in London, serving on a local government council, and was more involved with others than he'd been in decades.

Though Apted could certainly never have planned such a thing, Neil, as it turns out, has played a special role in the series: he's embodied the terrible aloneness of the human condition; he's Everyman, a solitary soul wandering the earth in search of God and meaning, a figure whose fragile, passionate presence reinforces one's awareness of the preciousness and precarious-

ness of life. He also serves to remind viewers not to take for granted some people's ability to work, pay the bills, maintain a relationship, raise children. Neil's example reminds us that even the most "ordinary" life requires real effort, in some cases (such as that of Lynn, who's persevered in a demanding library job in the face of serious illness) a genuinely heroic struggle of which not everybody is capable.

Neil isn't the only series participant whose life has taken an unexpected turn. Between *21 Up* and *28 Up*, Suzy metamorphosed from a neurotic chain-smoker who was acidly cynical about parenthood into a serenely contented wife and mother. In *49 Up* we learned that cautious, conservative Andrew, who'd obediently followed his parents' script for his career and who seemed foreordained to stay at the same law firm forever, had quit the law, was converting an old barn for his family to live in, and was encouraging his kids' sense of adventure. And Symon, who at twenty-eight seemed resigned to a humdrum marriage and a dreary warehouse job, skipped *35 Up* because he was going through a tough divorce only to return in *42 Up* as a happily remarried man who shared his new wife's *joie de vivre* and had an office job he enjoyed. Every now and then, the *Up Series* reminds us that even people whom we've known (or feel we've known) for a long time, and whom we may have come to regard as thoroughly predictable, can astound us.

Most surprising of all was Bruce's about-face. A longtime bachelor who'd consecrated his life to teaching immigrants' kids in the East End, Bruce got married in *42 Up* and seven years later—now a father of two—had traded in his East End pupils and modest East End home for the exclusive, thousand-year-old St. Albans School in Hertfordshire and an elegant country manse. Once a harsh critic of establishments like St. Albans, Bruce now said that he valued its "higher academic level" and that it was important to him to know his children were safe. His efforts in the East End, he confessed, had finally worn him down: "I just thought, 'I don't think I can do this till I'm sixty.'" Though old friends accused him of becoming a Tory, his wife said she'd "stopped him apologizing" for his career move. Was Bruce a fallen saint or a wised-up sucker? Neither—by *49 Up* he, like other Apted protagonists, had grown as complex and ambiguous as a character in Henry James, the meticulously selected and intercut layers of his past adding up to an exquisitely suggestive portrait of a man who, while deeply and genuinely good, had

also, for most of his adulthood, been self-denying to a fault, for reasons at which we can only guess, though various details of his life, vouchsafed to us over the decades, seem to hold out tantalizing clues. The quiet mastery with which Apted shapes his materials into such richly compelling portraits proves that a documentary can indeed be an art work—an art work, one might add, at a very high level indeed.

“Give me a child at seven,” says the narrator at both the beginning and end of *Seven Up!*, quoting a Jesuit maxim, “and I will give you the man.” Viewed forty-plus years after it was filmed, *Seven Up* does indeed turn out to contain clues to the adults these children will grow into. Bruce, who will spend two decades in the East End instructing the children of immigrants, at seven wants to go to Africa and “try to teach people who aren’t civilized to be more or less good.” Nick, who will become a scientist, says: “When I grow up, I’d like to find out all about the moon and all that.” The seven-year-old Charles, who will go on to be a journalist and documentary director, already appears to be an instinctive interviewer: after John answers a question about which newspaper he likes best, it’s Charles, sitting further down the couch, who jumps in with a follow-up question: “What do you like about it?” Yet the *Up Series* is also a lesson in life’s unpredictability. In the director’s commentary on the DVD of *42 Up*, Apted recalls his strong early suspicion that Tony, who at fourteen was hanging around a racetrack and wanted to be a jockey, would end up leading a life of crime; instead Tony became a hard-working London cabbie and at forty-nine was a devoted family man with homes in Essex and on the coast of Spain. (Apted tells us that Tony, when apprised of the future he’d imagined for him, said simply: “Mike, you can never judge a book by its cover.”)

Watching the *Up Series*, one reflects that there have been few half-century-long periods in history during which ordinary people in any given country have been able to live out their lives, find happiness, and prosper (as almost all of Apted’s subjects have done) without seeing their world torn apart by war, revolution, plague, pogrom, or economic disaster. Yet notwithstanding Granada’s original ideological motivation, the series, by and large, has paid relatively little heed to the historical and political background of its subjects’ lives. While they were growing up and growing old, the reins of British government were being passed from Wilson to Heath to Wilson to Callaghan to Thatcher to Major to Blair; man walked on the moon; the

Berlin Wall fell; 9/11 happened.³ Yet Apted makes no reference to any of these developments. “The film,” he has acknowledged, “is often criticized for not being political enough,” for presenting its subjects as if they “live in some kind of vacuum.” Yes, he regrets having included so few girls in the original group and is sorry that none of them quite personifies the feminist revolution; yet it’s a strength of the series, not a weakness, that it doesn’t tidily reflect broad social trends.

That being said, broad social trends receive more attention in *49 Up* than in any previous installment, owing to the rapid demographic makeover of London’s East End, where several of the participants grew up. Bruce wasn’t the only one to move out of the neighborhood between *42 Up* and *49 Up*; so did Sue, who’d lived there her whole life. “The East End,” she said flatly, “has changed—it’s changed a lot.” Her classmate Jackie, now living far from London, wistfully described her new community as being “like the East End used to be.” And Tony the cabbie, who in *42 Up* had lamented the immigrant takeover of his old stamping grounds (“If that’s what they call progress,” he said, “so be it”), in *49 Up* was even blunter: “I like being with my own people,” he said—while sitting on the patio of his house in Spain.

Apted has long ended each installment of his series with the concluding moments of the original 1964 program, in which we see his subjects once again as seven-year-olds—their lives stretching ahead of them, their minds innocent of the things we now know about their future lives. Once again we hear the narrator say: “At the end of their very special day in London, after their trip to the zoo and the party, we took our children to an adventure playground. . . .” This ritual return to the series’ beginning is always deeply, mysteriously moving. How extraordinary, one finds oneself thinking, that before Apted came along, nobody had ever thought to use the medium of film (or videotape) to create such a work. Jaded though one may be by Hollywood special effects, the *Up Series*—which has no need for high-tech wizardry—causes one to wonder anew at the technological miracle that makes it possible to capture moments of lives over the decades and to splice them together, as Apted has, in ways that can seem, to an awed viewer, to transcend the very laws of nature.

³ Two of Apted’s subjects, to be sure, no longer live in Britain: Nick has lived in America since *28 Up*, and Paul moved with his family to Australia soon after *Seven Up*!