

**NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER**

# **RENEGADE**

**DEFENDING  
DEMOCRACY AND  
LIBERTY IN OUR  
DIVIDED COUNTRY**

**ADAM  
KINZINGER**

**WITH MICHAEL D'ANTONIO**

VIKING

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THE OPEN FIELD

Dear Reader,

Years ago, these words attributed to Rumi found a place in my heart:

*Out beyond ideas of  
wrongdoing and rightdoing,  
there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

Ever since, I've cultivated an image of what I call the "Open Field"—a place out beyond fear and shame, beyond judgment, loneliness, and expectation. A place that hosts the reunion of all creation. It's the hope of my soul to find my way there—and whenever I hear an insight or a practice that helps me on the path, I love nothing more than to share it with others.

That's why I've created The Open Field. My hope is to publish books that honor the most unifying truth in human life: We are all seeking the same things. We're all seeking dignity. We're all seeking joy. We're all seeking love and acceptance, seeking to be seen, to be safe. And there is no competition for these things we seek—because they are not material goods; they are spiritual gifts!

We can all give each other these gifts if we share what we know—what has lifted us up and moved us forward. That is our duty to one another—to help each other toward acceptance, toward peace, toward happiness—and my promise to you is that the books published under this imprint will be maps to the Open Field, written by guides who know the path and want to share it.

Each title will offer insights, inspiration, and guidance for moving beyond the fears, the judgments, and the masks we all wear. And when we take off the masks, guess what? We

will see that we are the opposite of what we thought—we are each other.

We are all on our way to the Open Field. We are all helping one another along the path. I'll meet you there.

Love,  
Maria Shriver

*For Sofia and Christian.  
I hope I make you proud.*

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# Introduction

I started writing this introduction on January 5, 2023, two days after I was *supposed* to end my time in Congress. Kevin McCarthy, head of the GOP caucus, was expected to become Speaker of the House on January 3. Instead, those who joined the government to tear it down reached the logical end of their effort—utter chaos that paralyzed the legislative branch. McCarthy was being denied a majority by about twenty members who seemed to believe they were engaged not in a political process, but in an inquisition. They had found that he had sinned against their orthodoxy of conspiracy theories, worship of former president Donald Trump, and devotion to the destruction of social norms. He had not atoned by giving every member of the House the singular power to call for his removal and be indulged with a vote. And so he struggled on, losing three votes on day one, three on day two, and another one on day three. All this mattered to me only because although I had resigned months ago, I would not be fully freed from my office—representative for Illinois’s 16th Congressional District—until someone became Speaker of the House. Only then would new members be sworn in and the work of the 118th Congress, such as it is, would begin.

I would eventually be replaced by a veteran representative named Darin LaHood, who became eligible for my seat due to redistricting. He had grown up the son of GOP giant Ray LaHood, a figure of great decency who was so respected that Barack Obama ignored party ties and named him to be secretary of transportation in his administration. The elder LaHood’s autobiography was titled *Seeking Bipartisanship: My Life in Politics*. In 2016, he said he could not vote for Donald Trump because of the terrible slurs he has uttered about women, Muslims, and prisoners of war.

When Darin first came to Washington, he joined the moderate Main Street Caucus, which focused on using government to help communities and bucked the GOP trend by saying climate change had a human cause. (Republican orthodoxy held, contrary to science, that the link between air pollution and rising temperatures was unproven and climate change could be a natural phenomenon.) The blowback Darin felt from the more reactionary corner of the local party was so intense that he abandoned his moderate positions, quit the Main Streeters, and raced to the unreasonable Right. In 2022, LaHood assessed the state of the party and accepted the campaign aid of the man his father couldn't bring himself to support. A member of Congress who had bragged continually about his commitment to open, honest government had tied himself to the most unethical and least transparent president in history.

My guess is you've never heard of Darin LaHood, even though he holds a high-status position. Like most members, he's essentially unknown outside his constituency. This seems to be by design. In seeking to create a body of officials who were "representatives" of their districts, America's founders ensured that they would be concerned, mainly, with the folks back home. Thus, while Congress as a body wields true power, few individual members ever do. The only truly powerful representative is the Speaker of the House. The Speaker is the one who sets the legislative agenda and bargains with the White House. This individual power explains why you know the names of the two most recent Speakers, Nancy Pelosi and Paul Ryan. Their vision and skill made an unwieldy institution function and, occasionally, achieve something important.

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IN EARLY JANUARY 2022, WITH THE NEW GOP MAJORITY IN THE CHAMBER, unlike his predecessors, Representative Kevin McCarthy of California was busily negotiating with a number of GOP extremists in order to win their support for his drive to become the 55th Speaker of the House. McCarthy was, like Darin LaHood, a former moderate who read the relentlessly rightward trend in his party and scrambled to join it. The trouble was that he had criticized Trump after his loyalists attacked and occupied the Capitol. McCarthy tried to make the hard-line Trumpers forget this spasm of moral clarity, but it was too late for twenty members of the nihilist wing



of the party, who decided to punish him by blocking his bid to lead the House. Thanks to them, for the first time in a century, the main candidate for Speaker failed to win the office on the first ballot. McCarthy also lost on the second ballot, and the third. As he lost the seventh ballot, he became the losingest candidate for Speaker since Frederick Gillett needed nine tries in 1923. Still he pressed on, acting as if he were in some kind of war in which surrender was just not a possibility.

Having served in a real war, I have watched with increasing alarm as many politicians speak and behave as if Congress itself were a battlefield, and as if they had been elected not to serve the public and protect the Constitution but to score points for their side, no matter the cost. Ever since my final falling-out with the GOP on the day of the deadly January 6 attack on the Capitol by Donald Trump's followers, I have wanted to tell the inside story of how my party and my faith have been hijacked by extremists who represent a real danger to our democracy. This book is the result, a full telling of my experience—from a pilgrim with genuine values to a conservative who has no home but is determined to play a role in our recovery from a devastating political conflict that became increasingly destructive during my lifetime, until it reached the point of physical combat on January 6.

Ironically, if McCarthy had stood the ground he had seized in the aftermath of the Capitol attack, when he denounced Trump, the party would have had an opportunity to move toward the center. More centrist candidates would have added to the party's 2022 majority, and McCarthy would have become Speaker on the first vote. Instead, he immediately visited the man who had raised the GOP derangement level to eleven and aided his drive to be not an election loser but the martyred victim of a conspiracy. This is why, on the day McCarthy intended to achieve his goal in life, he was forced to call a meeting of the entire GOP caucus. He said that he was being blocked by grandstanding wackos. The head, a high school dropout from Colorado who embraces the bizarre conspiracy theories of the so-called QAnon website, cried, "Bullshit!"

Another scandal of that day—all of which reflected McCarthy's failure to stop the GOP's decline into a cult built on dangerous nonsense—involved the arrival of freshman Republican congressman George Santos

of New York. Santos had fabricated his entire identity, lying about working for two major Wall Street firms; attending a prestigious prep school and graduating from both New York University and Baruch College; founding an animal rescue nonprofit; employing four people killed in the Pulse nightclub mass shooting; and grieving a mother who was killed when the World Trade Center was destroyed by the terror attack on 9/11. None of what Santos claimed was true. In May 2023, Santos was indicted on charges of wire fraud, money laundering, stealing public funds, and lying on federal disclosure forms, and McCarthy still did not ask him to resign. And, oh yeah, he was wanted for arrest by the Brazilian government. True to form, Santos issued a press release announcing that he had been sworn in when he had not been, and when reporters confronted him in a hallway, he ran away. No one would sit near him when he was seated in the chamber, where he occasionally yawned without covering his mouth.

Knowing good drama when they see it, cable news channels covered the McCarthy debacle and the arrival of George Santos minute by minute. If the Santos story marked a special low for a GOP candidate for Congress, then McCarthy's pursuit of the speakership offered more serious evidence of how Republican leaders will debase themselves.

McCarthy's hunger for power was so strong that even as he endured a total of fourteen humiliating rejections, he never stopped suggesting compromises to win support from the extremists. One of their number, Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, lent McCarthy early support, which reassured hardcore right-wingers who doubted him. Greene's status as an extremist was undeniable. She had risen to fame with stunts like holding a military-style assault rifle in a campaign photo and supporting ideas promoted by anti-government conspiracy theorists. She has stated, falsely, that there "was never any evidence" that a "so-called plane" commandeered by terrorists crashed into the Pentagon on September 11, causing 187 deaths.

After she helped McCarthy win the Speaker's job, he appointed her to two highly coveted committee assignments: Homeland Security and Oversight and Accountability. Both give members a chance to investigate officials, policies, and programs in the executive branch. Others who had

fought McCarthy's campaign to lead the House won a rules change that would force the House to vote on any call for McCarthy to resign, even if it were offered by a single member of the House.

This meant that instead of setting a policy agenda and organizing the GOP caucus to follow him, McCarthy would have to carefully consider what ordinary members wanted before moving forward on anything. In effect, he would be as much a follower as a leader. Those he would have to monitor closely included more than a dozen members who had joined Donald Trump's deranged effort to persuade the country that the 2020 election had been rigged against him. Their loud campaign to somehow overturn Joe Biden's seven-million-vote victory persuaded huge numbers of people to believe that the election, conducted by the most reliable system in the world, had been riven with corruption. And they demonstrated how they could, on a whim, paralyze the legislative branch. A once radical anti-government fantasy had become a reality. As House Democrats chomped popcorn and marveled at the disarray, McCarthy was chewed up by a monster he helped create.

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ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, THE HIGH-LEVEL FIGURES—including TRUMP—who planned, organized, and incited the violent attempted coup will be held accountable. In the meantime, it seems as if the radicals in Congress, who inflame partisan hatreds and seek attention through various stunts, are following his example by doubling down on obnoxious behavior. One of the most prominent in this group, who is the political version of a juvenile delinquent, posed such a big threat to party leaders that they agreed to let her into their circle of power. Once she reached this goal, Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia returned to her narcissistic nihilism. Weeks after she helped him become Speaker, McCarthy welcomed President Biden to deliver his State of the Union address, and she tried to turn the gathering into a pro-wrestling match. Dressed in an oversize white alpaca coat with a giant white fur collar, she heckled Biden with shouts of "Liar!" and stood to signal thumbs-down, as if she were Caesar at the Colosseum. (By the way, the best research shows the signal for a gladiator's death was a thumbs-up, not thumbs-down.) The coat made it easy for TV viewers to focus on her and guaranteed that her likeness and

behavior would get the kind of attention that can be converted into power within the party.

I feel some responsibility for January 6 and the rise of Greene and her ilk, if only because I was a participant in, and witness to, the GOP's gradual descent into a dysfunctional and destructive force in our politics. Intoxicated by my status and addicted to the level of attention, I made compromises to—let's face it—feed my ego and sense of importance. The correction I made as I embraced my inner renegade and voted to impeach a president of my own party came late, but it did arrive.

This book is a memoir, a declaration of principles, and a call to action. It draws on my life experience, beginning with the lessons I learned from family, school, church, and community, and ending with military and government service. You might say that my journey from Illinois kid to Congress marked me as a success. I did reach my goal of higher office, becoming one of just 535 members—counting representatives and senators—in the most important legislative body in the world.

I accept that people across the political spectrum could reject my voice in national affairs. Millions of people in what's left of the Republican Party clearly detest me as a traitor, and many of those outside the party mistrust me. However, I believe this book will explain my journey and clarify my values. It is not an argument against hard-fought politics. I am no innocent. I participated in, and often enjoyed, sharp-elbow campaigns for office. I didn't realize, though, how the most extreme tactics and positions would cripple the institution I fought so hard to join. No one tells you that a campaign based on sowing fears and treating opponents as enemies, not as rivals, eventually infects even your side. Both major parties do this, but I'd have to say we in the GOP have been more aggressive and effective attack dogs. Consider the habits this style ingrains and the kind of observers who say to themselves, "I want to do that!" and it's easy to understand how after thirty years of these tactics Republicans are using them against one another, on live television.

As Kevin McCarthy's humiliation continued, I watched as one of sixty-six members who had resigned or been defeated and were waiting for their successors to be sworn in. This couldn't happen without a new Speaker there to administer the oath of office. I was suspended between

my old role and a new, as-yet-undefined one, as founder of a new centrist political organization and as an analyst for CNN. I do know I will continue to argue that no one should ever be exempt from accountability, and I will plead for a return to a politics of good faith.

Where do I get off writing a book like this one? Well, for one thing I have lived through all of the shifts in religion and conservative politics—I long considered myself to be a religiously inspired conservative—that led to the Republican Party backing an authoritarian for president. I know the culture of resentment that Donald Trump has tapped for his core base of support, and I have dealt with the man himself, in the Oval Office. I have also dealt with political violence and threats of personal assault. I have lived with police officers on guard outside my home. I was present on Capitol Hill when the Trump mob attacked.

This is why I felt it was important to write not just about January 6—you likely know all about that day and its aftermath—but to also describe the life path that brought me to the point where I would defy the party I had embraced forty years ago. I had dedicated my working life to becoming a kind of star within the GOP and for a time, that was who I was. Now, to my surprise, all that effort has led me to the point where, instead of acting as a GOP champion, I am required to act as its critic.

We have just survived the most threatening attack on our democracy since the Civil War. This success, and today's demonstration of the dysfunctional reality of a party that has become Donald Trump's cult of personality, prove that we are stronger than many expected. It is not the crisis that matters, but how we respond. I am arguing for us to prepare for the next one, which, without our vigilant opposition, could lead to the breakup of the country.

And by the way, McCarthy finally got what he wanted on the fifteenth ballot. I can find no record of any candidate for Speaker needing that many mortifying ballots to finally win. Thus, he made history, of a sort. He took the Speaker's chair so beholden to the extremists whom he had to court with promises of power that he literally taught them how they could thwart his agenda in the future. It's hard to imagine how he could have made himself weaker.

## CHAPTER 1

### What Do You Stand For?

The list of appalling events examined by the House committee investigating the lethal attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, was too long even for me, a member of the panel, to track. The worst was that for weeks President Donald Trump riled his base to support his claims of election fraud, even though aides told him they were false. Knowing it was likely illegal, his lawyers helped construct a failed campaign to send to the Electoral College fake pro-Trump electors who would insist that they represented the true results of voting in key states like Pennsylvania and Michigan. Then, called by Trump to Washington for a day he promised “will be wild,” his followers waged a bloody, medieval attack on the Capitol. As the police battled them for 187 minutes, Trump watched the violence on TV and refused to call the attackers off. He watched and waited as his loyalist marauders injured more than a hundred police officers and entered the Capitol waving Confederate flags and chanting, “Hang Mike Pence! Hang Mike Pence!”

America has never experienced anything like January 6, which was what we must call an attempted coup. Now a movement backed by tens of millions, this Trumpism is un-American in the extreme. It seeks to undermine our elections, place controls on the press, sharply restrict immigration, politicize the judiciary, and polarize the people. This is a reality that demands that we all examine our basic beliefs. Do we want a democracy governed by free and fair elections? Can we consider our differences in matters of politics, ethics, and faith in a respectful way? Do we value our pluralism? Our success at managing these issues has made us the envy of the world for centuries. Do we want to discard what the Constitution gave us? What do we, as Americans, stand for?

I stand for the values I learned in my formative years, before Trump and, for that matter, before conservatism and the GOP began its slide away from policies and toward gaining power at any cost. For years I

accommodated this trend, hoping it would stop while I enjoyed the time when we, the Republican Party, were in the House majority. I approached a breaking point with Trump's first impeachment but was talked out of voting *for* the Articles of Impeachment that authorized a trial in the Senate. The second time around, when he was impeached for January 6, I crossed the partisan line with nine GOP colleagues and voted "Yea."

A record number of his own party's senators voted to convict Trump, but he prevailed because of the rules. A two-thirds vote is required to convict an impeached official. The 57–43 tally showed that my party was still in a wilderness of its own design.

My vote for the House impeachment article made me a marked man among Republicans, even as it brought me praise from Democrats and independents who make up the overwhelming majority in our country. It also earned me an appointment to the investigating committee. On the committee, I was privy to a huge volume of documents, video evidence, and testimony. I also came face-to-face with the people who developed and executed Trump's scheme to overturn the election, as well as its aftermath. However, no one was affected as directly—not *nearly* as directly—as the vastly outnumbered police officers.

The officers began their defense of the Capitol at 1:00 p.m. as the attackers breached the lightly manned barriers in front of the building. Faced with a mob that included many bearing two-by-fours and toxic sprays and wearing helmets and body armor, the outnumbered police retreated to positions inside the building. More than a thousand attackers came at them in waves, trying to break through windows and doors. At times there were hundreds gathered at a single door, pressing in a grotesque rhythm and shouting, "Heave-ho! Heave-ho!" At times it looked like a child's fantasy of medieval battle. Of course, these were not kids but grown men and women, and they weren't playing. They were determined to stop Congress's certification of Joe Biden's election as president.

. . .

ABOUT SIX MONTHS AFTER THE ATTACK, SOME OF THE OFFICERS WHO HAD defended the Capitol from the mob on January 6 testified before our committee at its first public hearing. I had met each of them and learned how much they had endured, so it wasn't abstract to me as Harry Dunn

recalled the racial slurs hurled at him and Aquilino Gonell decried the “continuous and shocking attempt to ignore or try to destroy the truth of what truly happened.” Michael Fanone recounted how he had been dragged to the ground by a group of attackers who threatened to kill him with his own gun. They did manage to grab his police Taser and shoot him with it, causing a heart attack. Knowing the world had seen video showing him lose a struggle must have pained Fanone, who in appearance and demeanor seems like one tough dude. At the hearing, he didn’t dwell on how he suffered but rather focused on the main events of the day and the aftermath. “I feel like I went to hell and back” to protect members of Congress. “But too many are now telling me that hell doesn’t exist, or that hell wasn’t actually that bad.”

Nothing in what the officers said made me think they felt defeated, but in certain moments their shoulders slumped and sadness crossed their faces, and it was clear their trauma persisted. As they spoke, I felt a lump rise in my throat. They reminded me of soldiers who became like family, bonded by war, and who would forever have my admiration and sympathy. When I got a chance to speak, I said, “You guys may individually feel a little broken. You guys all talk about the effects you have to deal with, and you talk about the impact of that day.” It was at this moment that I felt overwhelmed, and my voice trembled a little as I said, “But you guys won. You held.” I recovered a bit, but still struggled as I said, “Democracies are not defined by our bad days. We are defined by how we come back from bad days. How we take accountability for that.” I then swept away the overheated rhetoric surrounding our committee and said, “Our mission is simple. It’s to find the truth and ensure accountability.”

Fanone and I embraced after the officers finished their testimony. I was taken aback by the weight he put on my shoulder. Of course, I knew how the mob had screamed for his execution and that many of those in Congress, whom he had helped to save, now denied the seriousness of the attack so they could stay in Donald Trump’s good graces. Their attitudes were all the more cowardly given that they had experienced the attack and knew the damage it had done to individuals like Fanone, the institution that is Congress, and the country. I felt honored to have him lean on me a little because the weight he carries—the sounds, the sights, the smell of



tear gas, and the sense that he was about to die at the hands of a political mob—is incalculable. He will feel it long after post-January 6 generations are born and grow to adulthood and talk of that day fades.

Those who do consider January 6 will likely focus on President Trump’s obvious crimes and the many efforts, including ours, to bring him to account. After more than a year of committee work, in which members and staff interviewed more than a thousand people and received more than one hundred forty thousand documents, I know that sometimes it’s hard to recognize anyone but Trump in this event. But then, in a fraction of a second, my mind brings up the sight of those officers as they testified and the feeling of hugging one of them, and that day stands out for the hope it provided in a very dark time.

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AFTER THE HEARING I DID WHAT I OFTEN DO WHEN FINISHED WITH WORK FOR the week. I drove out to a private airfield in Maryland where I keep the single-engine airplane I use to travel between Washington and Illinois. This little airport is the closest one that allows you to move around the Washington area without being guided all the way by air traffic control. The main thing you need to do is announce the corridor you’ll be using to get out of the area—I don’t know why but the one I use is called the FLUKY Gate—and you’re good to go. In the busy metropolitan area I stay low, beneath the altitude of the big planes, and climb only after I’m well clear of them.

Most people hear you have a plane and they think it’s something fancy, or that you must be rich to have one. It *is* expensive, but a middle-aged plane, like the simple Mooney Bravo I fly, was within reach when I was single and is still financially manageable—and safe—now that I have a family. Besides, flying has been in my blood since I was a kid going up with my father, who flew, and once you figure the price of commercial flights and the time involved in traveling that way, a small plane makes sense costwise too. Yes, a commercial jet will make it from DC to Chicago O’Hare almost an hour faster. But add airport hassles and expenses on both ends, plus the hour-long drive to my home in rural Illinois, and there’s no question that the Mooney is the better option.

The flight also gives me a chance to decompress. As I cross the Appalachian Mountains and the farmlands of Ohio come into view, I see a different America from the dominant political and economic centers on the coasts. This is the country that raised me, and while I don't harbor the resentments of those who feel they are dismissed as rubes from "flyover country," I do know that they are metastasizing in a threatening way. This is happening, in part, because too many in Hollywood, the press, Wall Street, and Washington *do* look down on small-town people across the country. But we who live in these places know ourselves to be decent, moral, intelligent, hardworking, and committed to our country. We may not write much code, but we make and grow much of what the country needs. Our children make up most of the soldiers and sailors who see combat in our military. This alone should guarantee respect.

As the place where Abraham Lincoln began public service, my home state of Illinois gave America the president who saved the country in its darkest hour. He remains, without peer, the greatest president in American history. I think every schoolkid in the state goes on a class trip to the capital, Springfield, where the sights include the Lincoln Museum, which is filled with documents and artifacts. In 2007, the museum acquired Lincoln's stovepipe hat, to go with his glasses and the bloodstained gloves he was wearing the night he was assassinated. As it turned out, the hat, which a private group bought for millions and gave to the museum, was the wrong size. Although some backed up the board member who bought the hat with "nobody's perfect" arguments, she did lose her job.

Lincoln's hat hadn't been there when my public grade school class visited the museum, but we didn't need to see it to feel inspired and even a little bit proud of where we were from. The man's philosophy was true to the values most of us had learned in our families, schools, and churches. His faith led him to say, "my greatest concern is to be on God's side." His life of service was guided by his belief that "you cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today."

. . .

IN OUR PRECISE PLACE, BLOOMINGTON, ILLINOIS, OUR FAMILY HAD THE KIND of stable and secure life everyone wants. My parents, Rus and Betty Jo Kinzinger, raised me and my brother and sister, Nathan and Chelise,

mostly by their example, to be the kind of people Lincoln would have liked. As a third-grade public schoolteacher, my mother was devoted to the kids she taught and used every bit of her intelligence and creativity to help the increasingly diverse population she served to both learn in the moment and develop a lifelong love of learning. She taught a unit on immigration every year that culminated in a party in which the kids dressed in their forebears' dress. They would then do a reenactment of an Atlantic crossing in shadowy steerage, which included a scuttling "rat" that was actually a well-tossed stuffed animal.

My father worked in business, the state welfare department, the American Heart Association, and then as an executive officer with a faith-based organization that provided a range of help for the homeless. He put this private agency on a more solid footing financially and then came up with a creative idea to raise more revenue while boosting the feeling of self-sufficiency in people who had been coming to the organization for clothing. Instead of giving everything away, the agency opened shops, which looked like ordinary retail shops and were staffed by actual workers, not volunteers, who did everything to make these outlets look and feel like regular retail stores. Customers paid small amounts for the clothes they selected, and those who couldn't pay could still get things. Over the years this strategy helped countless people feel more dignified and raised money for more services.

The stores were typical of how my dad found ways to solve problems with a combination of intelligence, business savvy, and faith. Faith was a big part of our lives. The Bible was our guide and inspiration, and we attended church, on average, twice a week. Wherever we lived we looked for churches led by pastors who focused on Christian values and beliefs that they held as ideals.

What I recall from childhood experience is a mosaic of play and school and family that gave me the kind of secure and happy life that represents a midwestern ideal. In summers, a small gang of kids my age played the usual sports, but also epic summer games of hide-and-seek that lasted into the dark of the evening. I missed a game whenever I was hit by a nagging health issue—susceptibility to bronchitis and asthma—that would knock me out of action every now and then. Sometime after my first birthday I

became extremely sick when I developed pneumonia, which might have killed me but for expert care. This time the treatment included many days inside a plastic bubble, which protected me from germs. It's possible my experiences with illness made me more understanding of social needs. Compared with today's archconservatives, I have always been more open to the idea that some people get a raw deal and deserve some assistance.

In our subdivision, no one worried about being safe in the neighborhood because we really were safe. Similarly, no one I knew was afraid of a neighbor's political or religious ideals. I'm sure our family friends all held different points of view, but since politics and religion had yet to become grounds for measuring others, I never knew anything about those parts of their lives. I recall very clearly a pair of brothers named Steven and Craig whose house became a sort of mecca because it seemed like they had all the toys and sports equipment in the world, and when home computers and computer games became a thing, they had them first. In our house gifts were generally exchanged on Christmas Eve day, and birthdays were celebrated, but modestly. Christmas and Thanksgiving were shared with our relatives, and there were a lot of them. Overall, we lived in a time and place before large numbers of conservative Christians embraced a radical and rageful politics.

My parents' memories of me include, naturally, some quirky things. They say that I had a well-developed conscience from a young age, but also an independent streak that meant I didn't just accept what others said. For a few years I had a habit of dealing with things I didn't understand by taking walks around the brick border of our driveway, thinking as I made laps until I thought I had settled the issue in my mind. They called it "walking the bricks," and while it was a bit odd, they knew I'd grow out of it, which I did. They also recall me as a child who, when faced with a tough choice, sought their advice and then almost always chose my own path. I might have taken in their point of view, but in general I was more independent than dependent, and since they had raised me to think for myself, I did. Maybe those walks helped me develop this ability to think for myself, and their love made me feel it was safe to act only on what I concluded on my own.