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Exiting the Extraordinary: Returning to the Ordinary World after War, Prison, and Other Extraordinary Experiences

Frances V. Moulder

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This book is an exploratory study, in sociological perspective, of the process of returning to the ordinary world after extraordinary experiences. Some people have transformative experiences in life that are so extraordinary that they cannot be at all adequately explained to those who have not had such experiences. Experiences of this sort include: being in military combat; participating in great social movements, revolutions or terrorist activities; being incarcerated in concentration camps, the *Gulag*, and prisons; surviving collective disasters such as floods or hurricanes; serving in intelligence agencies and undercover roles; being a member of unusual religious groups; working as a journalist in war zones; carrying out aid work in impoverished or war-torn regions; and enduring slavery. The book discusses the commonalities among extraordinary experiences; why people are so profoundly changed by them; the typical challenges faced by returnees; and some typical strategies returnees have followed in order to deal with these challenges. A central theme of the book is that returnees are challenged not simply by experiencing extreme events, but by a great *cultural* divide between the extraordinary and the ordinary worlds. The struggles of returnees need to be seen as a social issue, rather than simply the private troubles of individuals. The book is based on personal accounts by returnees, interviews, and secondary sources, and contains many lively examples, both historical and contemporary, of the struggles and triumphs of those who go through extraordinary experiences and return to life in the ordinary world.

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