

CHAPTER FIVE

DIMA

Thus far we have seen two portraits of individuals who have experienced and cultivated themselves along life trajectories that are very familiar to most of those who are knowledgeable about the post-Soviet context. The significance of both religion and the market economy in contemporary Russia, and particularly in Moscow, is well known in the social scientific literature. What is less known is the influence of the drug and other alternative cultures on the personhoods of many post-Soviet persons. While many of these persons have met tragic fates because of these experiences – whether it be homelessness, poverty, crime and prison, illness and disease, and even death – many others have been able to live-though these experiences and come to live what many Russians would consider a normal life. In doing so, the personal experiences they had with drugs, sex, and the alternative cultures surrounding these practices have played just as significant a role in forming the moral personhoods of these individuals as Orthodoxy and the market have for Olya and Larisa. In this chapter we will meet one of these persons.

Dima is a thirty-four year old married, but childless, musician and Program Officer with an international AIDS prevention program. In the late-1980s during some of the worst years of perestroika, when store shelves were empty and the hapless economy could no longer be hidden, Dima finished high school and made a decision that would forever change his life. He would forgo the opportunity of attending a university and instead play guitar in a rock band. This decision was more about choosing to stand outside of a social system that he viewed as impeding any opportunity for personal choice in lifestyle and career than it was about choosing to play in a rock group. For Dima could have played music and been a student at the same time as many others of his and earlier generations had (Binyon 1983: 184–7; Friedman and Weiner 1999). In passing on this more conventional path, Dima exercised what he saw as his right to chose the lifestyle he preferred even if this meant finding himself on the margins of a social order that even in the years of official glasnost had very little tolerance for those who lived in these margins.

For the next five years Dima lived a life on the edge. His band had very little success and brought him no money to speak of. He didn't work any other job. Although Dima supposedly lived at home with his parents, he spent most of his nights out with friends or girlfriends sleeping wherever he found himself at the time. He had not yet begun to use heroin but was smoking a lot of marijuana and drinking heavily. Because he had no job and his parents were often reluctant to help him financially, Dima began to steal. This soon became a habit, not so much because he needed to steal, he once told me, but because he enjoyed it. Stealing became more of an addiction than the alcohol and marijuana. So too did his penchant for lying. Both of these gave Dima a rush of knowing that even if just a little, he was standing outside the expected ways of the world. When I met Dima in the fall of 2002 he told me that he had given up his habit of stealing by the mid -1990's but that he still lied pretty often. He assured me, however, that he never lied to me. One wonders what to make of such an assurance, but as of yet I have never caught him in a lie so I personally have never had any reason to distrust him.

In 1994 Dima was walking through central Moscow when he came across a group of Hari Krishnas singing and dancing on the street. Such encounters were not uncommon in the mid-1990s as the immediate post-Soviet years saw a wave of religious activity hit Russia. As I described above, not only did the Russian Orthodox Church experience a major revival in these years, but Russians were also introduced to a wide variety of Protestantisms, non-Western religions, such as the Hari Krishna, and other so-called spirituality cults (Borenstein 1999). Dima stopped and listened, and was immediately captured by the sounds of the Hari Krishna's music. Just as he had once told me that it was the sound of music and not the words that have taught him the most about how to live his life, so too it was in the presence of the sounds of the Hari Krishna that Dima once again chose to radically alter his life by joining this religious group.

It was not just the music, however, that attracted Dima to the Hari Krishna. As he put it to me once, when he first visited their center housed in a central Moscow apartment, he felt as if he was walking into a fairy tale. The colorful paintings that covered the walls, the burning incense and candles, and the sounds of the music all reminded him of the many fairy tales, mythologies, and epic tales that Dima had been reading voraciously since his childhood and still reads today. It also reminded him of his childhood. For Dima's mother used to often buy

incense and soy sauce at one of the very few Asian stores in Moscow. As he told me, he might have lived in the only family in the entire Soviet Union that knew what soy sauce was. In any case, when Dima walked into the Hari Krishna apartment he felt as if he had walked into a very familiar place.

In many ways the nearly two years between 1994 and 1996 that Dima belonged to the Hari Krishna helped him become the person he is today. It was with the Hari Krishna that Dima became a vegetarian, gave up his habit of stealing because he learned to de-emphasize material possessions, and perhaps most importantly today and as will be seen later in this chapter, Dima learned the importance of self-discipline for becoming the kind of person he wants to be. The institutional morality and ethical practices of the Hari Krishna, then, became significant aspects of his own embodied morality and ethical repertoire. Although he eventually left the Hari Krishna he claims to remain today an “essentially religious person,” which means for him someone who respects all life, believes that Good will conquer Evil, and works to better himself and those around him.

One of the reasons Dima left the Hari Krishna is because it required being very social. Dima is essentially a loner and still to this day prefers to spend most of his time alone. Another reason is that Dima began to use heroin. As he put it to me, “I did it backwards; most people do the heavy drugs and then join the Hari Krishna. I left them to start heroin.” This change, however, did not get in the way of some of the most important things he learned with them. Rather, he thinks it only added to what he had learned. In fact, Dima attributes many of his most personally cherished characteristics to this period of heavy drug use. But it was not the drugs, *per se*, that helped Dima see the world in a different way, but the drug culture in which he was getting more and more involved. It was in this drug culture of Moscow in the late-1990’s that Dima learned the importance of supporting those he loves and have the courage to be himself. It was this experience of being a member of one of the most marginalized groups in Russia (Malinowska-Sempruch, et.al. 2004), so he told me, that taught him how to be secure in who he is as a person and how to use the strength and courage this brought him to support those around him. It was at this point in his life while still an injecting drug user that Dima first learned about Doctors Without Borders and their work with drug users in Russia. Dima claims that using heroin may have been the best thing he ever did for himself. For if he didn’t use heroin he never would have come into contact with

Doctors Without Borders, nor would he have had the courage and self-confidence, so he claims, to join their organization as a volunteer.

It was this decision to volunteer for Doctors Without Borders that really led to a change in Dima's life. As a friend of his who he first met at Doctors Without Borders once told me, "when Dima started at Doctors Without Borders he was this skinny little boy riding a bike wearing a green t-shirt that was so big you could fit five Dimas in it, and now he wears a suit and leads these meetings with politicians and business men about the HIV crisis in Russia. This is not the little Dima that I remember!" Soon after joining this organization Dima quit heroin and started working full-time. He realized that he could help those users who were not as fortunate as himself to have the strength to fight the addiction. Eventually this job led Dima to UNAIDS where he worked himself through the ranks.

Since realizing that he was happiest working to help others who have had similar experiences as himself but weren't as lucky as he had been, Dima has worked hard to help fight the spread of HIV/AIDS in Russia by helping to organize needle exchange programs throughout the country, negotiating with the government, NGOs and private business for the legalization and funding of such programs, and recently saw the passing of legal reform that he helped to initiate, which legalized the possession of small amounts of marijuana. This reform led to the release of thousands of persons from Russian prisons who had been jailed for the possession of very small amounts of marijuana.

It is clear that Dima has been significantly influenced by all of these turns in his life and they have gone a long way in helping him cultivate his currently lived embodied morality. His rejection of the institutional and public discourses of late-Soviet morality, his attempts to live according to the institutional morality of Hari Krishna, his acceptance of the public discourse of morality of the post-Soviet drug culture, and the influence of the institutional morality of international HIV prevention programs have all played a significant role in how Dima has come to ethically work on himself in the cultivation of his moral personhood.

Transformations

The so-called transition years of late-Soviet/post-Soviet Russia have also been a personal transition for Dima. These years have been difficult for most Russians and Dima is no different. But he would never

trade them for a return to the Soviet days. For Dima these personal and social struggles and hardships have ultimately been worthwhile because they resulted in the end of the Soviet era, which Dima characterizes as boring and grey. In fact, Dima now tends to talk as if the last decade was not all that bad and in fact even better than Soviet times. This is seen in the following excerpt from an interview we had in February of 2003. I began the interview by asking Dima if he thought there was more violence in Russia today than, for example, twenty years ago. He responded:

DIMA - Of course a lot depends on what you define as violence, but in general, I guess the same level and maybe now it is even better than it used to be.

JARRETT - How would you say it is better than it used to be?

DIMA - The violence that we had in the Soviet Union was more related to the desperate conditions of life, like the low salaries and cheap alcohol and the way of life that was connected to it. Meaning that a lot of people didn't see any perspectives in life other than drinking and fighting. That was the kind of violence we used to have. And a lot of it still occurs today. And if you read the news you can read everyday that something like this happens and someone gets stabbed and even members of one family can kill another member, but it is more marginalized than it used to be. But of course this is just my personal opinion. I'm not trying to be objective or anything. On the other hand we have developed organized violence, which is more like youth extremism or something like that. A lot of right wing and left wing stuff going on, which, I would say, is pretty new, a new phenomenon.

JARRETT - Yet you say in general things are better than they were in the past. What has happened say in the last ten years that makes the situation better today?

DIMA - Generally speaking people have more choices than they used to have. Right now for a lot of people there is a way for them to live their life the way they want to and it is no longer determined by the state and the state no longer dictates what to do. You can ... you can get a decent education, a good job. There is no limit actually, you can do what you want, you can go live abroad if you want, you don't have to be confined to the one lifestyle that

is prevalent in Russia still. And I think that is positive. For a lot of people that is a real stimulating factor for them to change their way of life for the positive.

Unlike many who characterize the decade after 1991 as more violent, Dima does just the opposite. For him, the Soviet period was at least just as violent if not worse. But Dima's narrative may be better read as a telling of his own story through the rubric of Russian society in general. Before Dima begins to tell his narrative he had already made it clear to me that he thinks the Soviet period was much worse than Russia is today. This preunderstanding of Dima's position informs how I hear his words. Knowing this Dima's claim makes sense. So too does his choice of focusing on the Soviet problems of alcohol and low wages as the cause of violence during that period, for these were two of the very issues that Dima himself struggled with in the late-1980's. Not only did he drink heavily at the time, but his choice to play music in a rock band was in part motivated by his desire to remain outside of a labor market that promised low wages no matter one's education level (Caldwell 2004: 35). Dima's experience as a young adult in the late-Soviet period, then, was in fact characterized by the kinds of personal and structural violence he mentions here.

Dima does, however, return to a more general claim about Russian society when he shifts in mid-narrative by saying – "And a lot of it still occurs today." This is not only a shift back to society in general but also to the post-Soviet period. In making this shift to the continued violence of this period, Dima also shifts his narrative away from personal experience and in so doing continues to talk about his own experience through this distancing discourse. The same problems of alcohol and low wages still today lead to violence, but it is more marginalized and is only known through the newspapers. There are also the problems of organized crime, violence, and extreme politics. But again, these examples of violence in the post-Soviet years are sufficiently distanced from Dima's own life so as to render them, at least rhetorically, negligible in his own experiences.

It is in the next narrative utterance, however, that Dima really begins to talk about society as himself. For what has made post-Soviet society better than the Soviet period is the increase of options and choices for individuals. This is perhaps Dima's biggest complaint about the Soviet period – no personal choice. It should be noted, however, that Dima did in fact make a personal choice to play music rather than follow the socially sanctioned paths of life. In this way, Dima

showed that choice was possible if one had the courage to make it. And it should be noted that many more people did have that courage than Dima might be willing to acknowledge. Nevertheless, it is true that personal options have significantly increased for individuals in the post-Soviet period, although Dima is speaking a bit hyperbolically when he says that there are “no limits (*bespredel*)” of what one can do, for not all people in Russia today are in a position to take advantage of these new found options. For one’s economic and educational social position, for example, still significantly limits options for many if not most Russians today. Dima is right, however, that the freedom to make choices and have options has done much to stimulate individuals to make changes in their lives not only in terms of career but also in terms of personal practices, habits, and beliefs. This freedom of choice is clearly seen in the portraits of Olya and Larisa, and will be further evidenced in those of Anna and Aleksandra Vladimirovna below (see also: Nafus 2003).

Our interview continued and I began to push Dima on his perhaps overly positive description of the last decade.

JARRETT - But it seems like there is still a lot of people who are pretty restricted by lack of money and low paying jobs and really don’t have those kinds of options.

DIMA - Right and I guess that these are still the majority of the population. But it is hard for me to speak of these people because I don’t really communicate with them a lot and I think in the circle of people that I meet or the people that I communicate with, on a whole, are definitely a minority. My circle is somewhat younger people with more energy and motivation in life and they are quite different from some other, some marginalized people.

JARRETT - When I visited Ira’s family near Nizhni Novgorod it was like two different worlds comparing here to there.

DIMA - But actually I think that life is also changing in those places as well, but very slowly. There is a lot of money flowing into Moscow and maybe not so much into Nizhni Novgorod, but this is starting to happen. New work places are being created and all that. And I can still see a positive development.

JARRETT - It actually wasn’t Nizhni Novgorod, it was a small industrial city about an hour away, but even there they had an internet café and it was packed with young kids.

DIMA - This is what I am saying, you are no longer confined to one life style. It used to be like that. The Communist Party or the state would tell you what to do and you basically had no choice. What choices did you have? I had a choice to either become a worker and work in construction or a factory and develop in that direction or I had a choice to enter a university and then study and then get a job. But then there were no prospects. There was a ceiling for both of these and the ceiling was kind of close, so if you got a good education there was no guarantee that you would go beyond this level – you know, small salaries, a lousy life. Maybe you had better, not better but more educated people to communicate with, that was something maybe, but apart from that ... I think also if people were allowed to make more money or making some money underground, they couldn't spend that money because the police were always out there watching you. Sometimes I think a lot of people who are complaining about how life is now have quickly forgotten what life was about 20 years ago. I wouldn't say it was all terrible and a horrible nightmare, but it was bad, it was boring, I would say, I would put it like that.

JARRETT - It seems that it is a lot of the older generation who complain about today and think about the old times.

DIMA - I think that they just want to stick to something. You have to have something that you own in this life, something that you can keep to yourself. Because if you have nothing ... of course whatever I'm saying now I wouldn't like to be in their shoes, you know, because I think what the state did to them is a totally wrong thing. What they are doing in China is much better in a sense. It may be worse in terms of freedom of speech and everything, but it has more guarantees for long term development than what is going on in Russia. We just let it go without any kind of control and everything fell apart. I think this was wrong. And I strongly believe that China learned a lot from the collapse of the Soviet Union and didn't wish to repeat this. But we had ten years and we could have looked at the Chinese model, either way, I'm not saying that what is going on in China is good but some things are definitely better than what we have here. At least, I mean nothing brings down the morale of people as much as lack of care for older people or for children or the army and stuff like that. And this is what we see. We see all these begging soldiers on the street, old people who

are picking garbage. I think this is very demoralizing for people and this is absolutely wrong. So I understand them.

When I challenge Dima on the conditions of contemporary Russia he acknowledges that the picture he had so far painted was a bit over optimistic. For the majority of Russians still cannot exercise the options that he referenced that make life better today. But this majority is a minority in his life. He has very little contact with these people. Most of his friends are motivated and energetic and it is these people and himself, so it seems, that he was talking about when he characterized post-Soviet Russia as better and less violent than the Soviet years. Indeed, not only in his narrative but also in his own life the majority of the Russian population is “marginalized people.”

Interestingly, then, through Dima’s own personal transformation he has shifted himself both socially and narratively from one who once lived in the margins of society as an underground musician, drug user, and Hari Krishna member, to one who can comfortably gloss over and marginalize others through his narrative. However, even though he acknowledges that most cannot live the kind of life that he has been able to, he jumps on the first opportunity to return to the kind of narrative he had been telling. For when I tell him of the internet café filled with kids in a small industrial city near Nizhni Novgorod, who were in fact all playing video games and not using the internet for communication, information gathering, and entertainment the way Dima uses it, he quickly grasps onto this in order to reassert his position that life is better today.

This assertion is again made through contrasting the present with the past. But as earlier, Dima talks about the Soviet past through his own perspective. In response to his own rhetorical question of what choices people had for a career in the late-Soviet period, Dima replies by telling me about his own choices. He could have either worked construction or in a factory or attended university. These were his only choices, so he claims. But this strict dichotomy between the world of physical labor and the intelligentsia, while having some legitimacy, is too easily exploited for the purposes of his own story. For if Dima constructs this scenario as his only options in late-Soviet life, then it becomes easier not only to justify his own past, which it should be remembered did not follow either of these two paths and thus suggests the presence of options, but more importantly to justify his characterization of contemporary Russia as a place unquestionably better than

the past. Just as Dima suggests that some people in Russia today have “forgotten” the past so as to justify their complaints of the present, so too does Dima construct a certain narrative of the past that best explains his present day satisfaction with his own state of affairs.

Just as Dima was able to slip back into this narrative of progress, so too he easily returns to a critique of contemporary Russia when I mention the concerns of the older generation. This seems to touch off something; and it is understandable. For perhaps the older generation more than anyone else in Russia has suffered the most in the post-Soviet years. They have seen a lifetime of work and savings lost to the devaluation of currency. Their pensions are barely enough on which to survive, and as of January 2005 have become even lower through monetization reforms and many depend on their extended families for support (Caldwell 2004: 83–4). Because of this, it is not uncommon to see pensioners prostrated in the middle of the sidewalk, head to the ground with their arms stretched forward, palms up, begging for money and mumbling barely audible prayers. Dima is right, this is demoralizing not only for the pensioner but for anyone who sees it. Most Russians, I suspect, understand that with a slightly different turn of luck, that could have been their own grandmother kneeling prostrate on the cold, damp Moscow ground. It is such visions, perhaps, that allow Dima to so quickly turn to a critique of the post-Soviet transition. So much so, in fact, that he suggests that the policies of China may have been a better strategy for change than the shock therapy of Russia. It is interesting that Dima would make such a claim even though China’s policies lack many of the personal freedoms that Dima so cherishes.

It is in a narrative moment like this, when images of impoverished grandparents or crippled veterans flash through the conversation, that Dima is able to be more realistic about the post-Soviet transition. It should also be noted, however, that Dima is not quite as naive as this narrative might suggest, for he too lived through personal struggles and hardships of poverty, marginalization, and instability throughout the 1990s. Additionally, his eventual choice of work to help injecting drug users, sex workers, and others who are high risk for the contraction of HIV/AIDS suggests that Dima is extremely sensitive to the hardships experienced by many in contemporary Russia. But what this narrative makes clear is that Dima is able to narratively construct a Soviet past and a post-Soviet transition that best fits his own experience of these times. There is of course nothing unique about this, for

all life-historical narratives can also be read as narratives about a particular social world. Still, Dima, the person who constantly trumpets a very individualistic ideal of social progress and moral expectations, more than anyone else with whom I spoke constructed an account of the past that most closely fit his own experiences. In this sense, then, Dima has provided an account of the so-called transition that is also an account of himself. That is, a story of decreasing violence and increasing stability.

Work on the self

Like many other Russians in their thirties Dima came of age in a time of chaos. This was a time ranging from perestroika through the economic crisis of 1998 when the absurdities, illusions, and contradictions of late-Soviet/transitional Russia were open for all to see and shaped the lives of an entire generation (Kotkin 2001). The first time I met Dima he revealed how he enjoys what he calls “the present chaotic state” of Russia. I asked him what he meant by this. “It was not a comfort feeling [the Soviet illusion of future perfection and the present’s necessary path to it], it was not a good feeling. It was boring and grey and – life is still grey in many ways but it is not as grey as it used to be. I don’t think chaos is that good. If it goes on for too long it will be counter-productive in the end. We will be totally disoriented and we will lose each and every positive thing we have gained, so that is dangerous. Chaotic times may be good for a while, but not ...”

For some reason at this point Dima just stopped talking. I pressed Dima a bit more but he had little more to say on the subject. This is what Dima does. He can talk and talk for what seems like hours straight, but when he decides there is nothing left to say on a subject he just stops. But as I came to know Dima more, I have come to think that perhaps he stopped speaking here because he realized that what he was saying was self-evident, that the story of his own life made this point clear. For in a way, Dima’s own life is a story of the gradual movement from chaos to order.

The way Dima spoke in our many conversations and interviews reflects this movement in his life. For although he continually repeats that we should all be free to do anything we want as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else, at the same time he maintains that there are certain definite ways that we should treat others and work on ourselves to

be better. This latter position can be seen in the way Dima spoke about his experience of watching the movie *Lord of the Rings*.

DIMA - Just two days ago I went to see *Lord of the Rings*, because I had two or three hours and I just wanted to see that movie. And I had tears in my eyes, you know. And I was just sitting there crying like a baby. I look at it this way, if I was really a grown up man I would be cynical about all this ... it is a great movie, but not great like a David Lynch movie is great. It is great but in a different sense. It's like Good versus Evil. It is difficult to explain, but the way I see it there is a line that goes through the film and, I don't know what happened, but to me it was magic. There were people sitting around me, actually a lot of people were impressed, I could see that. I mean they stopped their usual blabbering and were sitting there looking at the screen. Of course some of the views were breathtaking, some of the landscapes and all that. But I didn't see a lot of the usual, the way people usually behave when they go to the movies. I don't know, maybe it was my impression.

JARRETT - Do you remember what in particular brought tears to your eyes?

DIMA - There was a scene with the old king and he was possessed. That was the strongest part of the whole film to me, the way Gandalf appeared and he was wearing all white and all that, and he just freed this king. To me that symbolized the power of God, the way that God can liberate people, just very easily, the way that Good defeats Evil. So to me it was a very Christian film, or maybe even bigger than that a totally religious film. Without all the unnecesarries ... I used to be a huge fan of Tolkien when I was a kid, so maybe that is it. But it clearly showed the line between Good and Evil in a beautiful way, and it showed courage and devotion in a very pure way.

Dima is moved by the notion that in the end good conquers evil. So much so in fact that he was moved to tears. Dima, the man who describes himself as very cynical - and I can attest that he is - cried "like a baby" at the sight of good conquering evil. Is it Dima's hope that good will conquer evil that brought him to work for HIV/AIDS prevention institutions and to help intravenous drug users organize into unions to protect and educate themselves and to receive clean needles?

At some level whatever drew the tears out of Dima's eyes that evening in the movie theater must also play a role in what he has chosen to do with his life and future. But it must also say something about his past. Dima would never describe what he did in the past as evil, but he would describe his present life in better terms than his past. In this sense, then, Dima recognizes a progression in his own life toward the better. Thus, while Dima was not the only one of his generation who spoke to me about the freedom of chaos, he is the only one who spoke of it who believes that he can help make his future and the future of Russia a better time.

Several months later in an interview Dima was telling me about how the drug culture in which he took part during the mid-1990's had a strong influence on him in terms of critiquing mainstream society and coming to understand who he is as a person. It was his experience with this culture, so Dima claims, that solidified his current moral world. Most importantly Dima learned that it is important to have a goal or idea of who one wants to become. For only with this idea can one begin to work on oneself.

DIMA - I left the Hari Krishnas when I started using drugs. The other way around is what happens to most people. And this was very strong in terms of physical emotions and feelings and the reassessment of the world and my place in it. I don't mean just the drugs but the drug culture itself, being different and alternative from the main stream culture and the main stream relationships and ways of dealing with people. Of course I very soon grew disappointed but in the beginning it was very strong.

JARRETT - It does get old after a while but at first it is very refreshing because it gives you a chance to step outside.

DIMA - Right, and to be yourself also. What I remember clearly was that it was probably not the first time in my life, but I felt very strongly that I had an opportunity to be myself and to express myself. Which is not the same as, I don't know, maybe because drugs are so marginalized in our society, I don't know, but it seems like people who are doing drugs have the courage that other people do not have. The courage and openness and everything that comes with it. And I think that is really true for a lot of people when they first start but when you start on that path it will lead you to who knows where, it all depends on the person. You can

use it and then throw it out or else it can throw you out. Drugs are probably one of the most dangerous things, similar to sex, in that it can make you forget about yourself. It can really turn you into a totally, into, I don't know what the word would be. Not that drugs in themselves are bad, but drugs and sex are two very powerful drives that can really drive you and if you let them drive you, you can really end up in trouble.

JARRETT - I understand how drugs can do this, but how does sex do it?

DIMA - There a lot of people who are crazy about sex and when they loose track of it it just kind of ruins their life, they become slaves to it. I don't think, yeah I understand that there are a lot of things connected to our instincts, and if you are unable to control yourself, it doesn't happen to everyone, not everyone has very strong sexual desires, but many people do and when they do it can take them over, but sex as it is is not dangerous at all. But it can be connected to other things that you might not want to do otherwise but you do because of that. A lot of things people do because of sex, and that is what is dangerous about sex. Not sex as it is, of course, because it is beautiful the way it is.

JARRETT - Because it can cause you to forget about other things that are more important to you?

DIMA - Right, and instead of being a serious person you would just end up being a junky, sort of a sex junky. In the way that a lot of people, I mean, to think of it this is an exaggeration because it is not sex as it is, not in itself, but also connected to many other things. It can happen to you if you, I mean there are other sorts of things, not just drugs and sex. Anything.

Dima seems to be weaving two stories throughout the first part of this narrative. First, he is expressing an admiration for the people he met in the drug culture and the kinds of personal characteristics he thinks distinguishes them from mainstream society. Dima found such characteristics as courage and openness among those who participated in the drug culture of the mid-1990s, and attributes them to the marginalization of this culture in the greater Russian society. This courage and openness is not only related to the potential dangers of being marginal, but also about expressing oneself. This is the second story Dima is

telling. It was during these years participating in the drug culture that Dima claims that finally he had the opportunity to be himself and to express himself. Still today, even though he has not done heroin in over six years, Dima remains a member of this drug culture. Many of his friends are still users, counting some of them among his most trusted, and he continues to work with them in trying to establish needle exchange groups throughout the country.

Just as the drug culture allows for individuals to have the courage and openness to be themselves, so too the actual drugs can potentially lead to the forgetting of oneself. This risk, however, is not unique to drugs, but is true of nearly anything that causes one to forget about oneself. Dima mentions sex. Like drugs, sex can activate a powerful “drive” and cause one to do things that one might not do otherwise. Dima, at this point, seems to backtrack a bit. He does not want to over-emphasize the dangers of drugs and sex. As he says, this is an exaggeration and these dangers can ultimately be associated with anything. For Dima, then, the danger he expresses through drugs and sex is not about the substance and act itself, but about how individuals are able to handle it. The point that Dima seems to be making is that no matter what one does, it is important to remember oneself, remember what is important to oneself, and not to let other things get in the way of this. Our interview continued, and I asked if what he was saying is that it is important to maintain some kind of control over himself.

DIMA - It is not that I think about it all the time or I devote a large part of my life to it, but I try not to forget myself in a way, you know. It is sometimes, it doesn't happen, sometimes I just make desperate attempts, and sometimes it does happen and then I am happy because it proves in principle you can do it. But controlling yourself for the sake of controlling yourself is also a stupid thing. You have to have an idea. I believe that you have to have an idea about the things you do, not all the things, but at least the major things, like why you do one thing or the other.

JARRETT - Do you mean some kind of plan for your life?

DIMA - Kind of like a purpose, however stupid that sounds. I don't want to judge anyone or anything, but some people just live like animals. They get carried away by instincts and then they forget about everything. And this is what I learned from the Hari Krishna people, and I think this is a valuable observation that they

make. Because, a lot of things we are doing are not worth it. You can either develop yourself or you can stay in the same situation and you can, you know, just float. This is what I don't want for myself. I don't mind other people doing it, it is fine, as long as they like it. I don't care, if someone says to me, oh there is no god, or I am the only person in this universe for myself. Fine, everyone believes in their own god and if you want to believe in yourself, then believe in yourself. I believe in myself too, up to a certain point. I am not so fatalistic to say that I cannot change anything. Just some things that you don't need to try, they are useless. For instance, life as it is is kind of boring if you happen to work then it is work and no fun, absolutely, then you have to start making things up for yourself. Like joining a movement, say you want to legalize drugs, something interesting something good, for instance. But then if you think about it, it doesn't do anything, because if you change that there will be other problems and it will go on and on and on. This isn't to say that we shouldn't do anything. It is just to say that none of these things are that important that you should devote your life totally to it. I don't think it is worth it. I used to be like that. I used to, and even now I really fall for many things, but I am starting to have more control over it. So at one point I can just think to myself. Like I told you about my job [he was recently offered a raise to stay at his current work place at the time]. At first I was opposed to it. But then I was driving along the coast [in California] and I was thinking to myself, and I just thought, ok, I can leave this job, I'm always complaining, I don't like the UN, I don't want to be part of its structure. But if I quit this job, what am I going to do. I won't be able to spend my holidays the way I want to. I mean there is nothing new about these thoughts, I'm sure millions of people have had similar thoughts, that is why people get bought so easily. Maybe in that sense I have grown up, I don't know. A few years ago I would have just quit without giving it a second thought.

For Dima this notion of an idea of who one wants to become has a dual aspect. On the one hand, it is an idea of self. Dima begins this utterance by denying that he spends too much time working on himself, but it is important not to forget himself. The project of working on oneself need not be all consuming, but it is a matter of being oneself. That is, being the self one hopes to be. This, however, is not always possible.

Dima makes mistakes. He fails. He does not always remember himself. But this is expected and Dima seems to recognize this when he slips into a meta-critique of his own words by telling me that controlling oneself simply for the sake of control is stupid. For the important thing is that one has “to have an idea.”

This reveals the second aspect of the notion of having an idea about oneself. One can only be the person he hopes to be, he can only remember who he is, through the things he does. As Dima has already said, this cannot be done all the time, and so a central part of working on oneself is deciding in which particular moments and contexts this idea can be successfully accomplished. Similar, then, to how many Mongolians pick and choose between various exemplars depending on the situation at hand in order to work on themselves (Humphrey 1997: 35), or how women in an Islamic piety movement in Egypt focus on working on particular virtues, such as humility, in their everyday lives and daily practices (Mahmood 2005), so too Dima singles out particular instances that seem most appropriate for working on himself. Part of making such decisions is having a purpose.

Like having an idea, having a purpose gives Dima a reason to do certain things and not to do others. He contrasts this notion of having a purpose with living like animals according to instinct. When one lives according to instinct, and in another conversation Dima told me at times everyone does this, even himself, one forgets about the purpose, about oneself, about everything. Unlike Olya who associates animals with a moral ideal, Dima says that those who live like animals “just float (*plyt'*).” They are unable to develop themselves into the kind of person they want to be, into a person who has a purpose. This is not what Dima wants for himself.

Here, then, we see a clear distinction between the moral worlds of Olya and Dima. While for Olya animals may symbolize the purity of God's morality uninhibited by human ambition and social life, and therefore a moral goal worth striving for, animals for Dima are a metaphor for those individuals who do not consciously ethically work on themselves to morally improve. Both moral conceptions have a notion of development that is central to it, but the ways in which it is represented, the roles played by society, personhood, and definitions of humanness, and the moral aims are quite different. This is something that will be discussed at greater length in the conclusion.

An attribute of having a purpose is considering the consequences of one's actions. Here Dima's cynicism begins to show. While it is

important to break up the monotony of life by participating in some kind of movement or activity – he gives as an example his own participation in the movement to legalize marijuana in Russia – and in so doing give your life and actions a purpose, ultimately such activities don't do much social good. Another problem will arise. But here Dima seems to be confusing his desire to give a purpose to his own life by joining such a movement, with the social results of the movement. While indeed the ultimate goal of the movement is to legalize marijuana, at least one of the reasons Dima joined the group was to give himself a purpose, something to believe in, and activities with which to develop himself. Thus, even if the goal of the movement is not realized, at least part of the reason Dima joined the movement is indeed fulfilled even if he does not recognize this as so.

His concern for consequences also shows itself in relation to his job. He had recently told me that he wanted to quit his job at the UN. Then he and his wife went on vacation to California. It was while driving up the coast line that he realized that in quitting his job he could not take such vacations. As he said, "a few years ago [he] would have just quit without giving it a second thought," but now Dima has developed into another person. He considers the consequences of his actions and how they are related to the purposes he has set for himself. It is, then, in such mundane moments that major decisions are made over everyday concerns that help Dima maintain and develop himself into the kind of person he has an idea of becoming.

Our interview continued and having picked up on Dima's shift in his narrative to a concern for consequences, I asked him if he considers consequences more than he used to.

DIMA - I think sometimes people can make up an excuse, because in the back of their minds they want to be secure about things. For example, if someone really wants to cheat on their wife, they will do it. These people usually do it. Really that surprises me. Very often people don't think at all and they just do, and then afterwards they start regretting what they did. I'm very happy, I wouldn't like to live without the ability to look at myself from a distance, to be able to look at what I am doing. Sometimes it is the only thing that helps. People get these kinds of ideas pretty often. Like I have decided for myself, ok, what if I do that and then I catch something. What am I going to do? I don't want that. And however stupid that sounds, it really works for me. I mean

every time I think of something like that, I just, somehow it just pops into my mind, and I'm like, oh, that is really serious. I'm working in the AIDS field, you know ... no I'm not really scared of AIDS, I'm more scared of the smaller sexually transmitted diseases that are quite common here in Russia. If you catch something like that and then you pass it on to your wife, then you can imagine what will happen. On the other hand, I also don't want to cheat on her because I want her to trust me and I wouldn't be able to trust myself if I do that.

JARRETT - So it's not just about consequences but also about being the kind of person you want to be like being trusted by your wife?

DIMA - I think we should always try to look from a longer perspective, this really makes a difference. You have to at least either like what you are doing or train yourself to like it, you know. I don't know, but I think it makes sense to have a habit of analyzing the things you do. Of course you can really become paranoid if you always analyze what you do, but sometimes it doesn't hurt if you do a little of it.

Above Dima suggested that he has to choose particular situations and contexts in which he will work on himself. Here Dima gives an example of the kind of situation in which he chooses to work on himself – that of cheating on his wife. In this example it is possible to see how Dima combines the notion of working on himself or developing himself with that of looking toward consequences. Not only is he concerned about what diseases he may catch and pass on to his wife by cheating, but so too is he concerned about her not trusting him. Therefore, it is more than the knowledge of the possible diseases he can contract, a knowledge that comes predominantly through his job, but also his desire to cultivate a trusting and lasting relationship with his wife. Thus, in Dima's consideration of the consequences of adultery, there are multiple factors that go into his decision.

This way of developing himself by means of considering various consequences is what Dima calls looking “from a longer perspective” or “at myself from a distance (*izdali*).” These two expressions of distancing himself from himself reveal Dima's conception of self-analysis and self-development. Thus, just as Pesmen has claimed it is central for many Russians to engage in these practices of analysis and development to

maintain a healthy *dusha* (soul) (Pesman 2000b: 54fn), for Dima the rhetorical distancing of self-analysis allows him to work on himself to become the kind of person he wants to be. By performing this distance, Dima is able to consider not only the situation and the dilemma it may entail, but more importantly for him, it allows Dima to consider himself, it allows him not to forget himself, and the things that are truly important to him. Because he is able to perform this distance, Dima can realize that for himself it is more important to maintain a trusting relationship with his wife and remain disease free than it is to be driven by his sexual instinct. As he put it, he may not like this decision, but in order to be the kind of person Dima wants to be, he must “train (*gotovit'sya*) [himself] to like it.”

This notion of working on himself, or training himself, to be the kind of person he wants to be was common to many of the conversations and interviews that Dima and I had. It is almost an ideal type of what I have been calling ethics. That is, ethical process as situational self-reflection and training through particular techniques. Dima's emphasis on working on himself (*rabota nad soboi*) is also, ironically considering his open disdain for all things Soviet, reminiscent of the Soviet discourse of creating the New Soviet Man by means of individual self-disciplining, and the post-Soviet discursive regimes that are the heirs of this tradition that I discussed above. Therefore, regardless of Dima's rhetorical attempts to distance himself not only from institutional and public discourses of Soviet morality, but also from many of what he calls his “mainstream” contemporaries, his emphasis on working on and developing himself has much in common with past and present moral discourse in Russia.

This emphasis came out, for example, in the interview when Dima was telling me that he thinks the Chinese model of transition is a less demoralizing model than the shock therapy model used by Russia. He had just told me that he thinks it is “absolutely wrong” that there are begging soldiers and elderly people in the streets, and I asked him how it was that he recognizes such things as wrong.

DIMA - It is difficult to say, because in principle I have strong beliefs about some things, but these don't correspond with life. Because I also believe that life can be different and some people don't realize that. An example is that, you know the Orthodox Church is very strong here, and for example they don't like gay people. And they have a lot of things against gay people and what

they are trying to do is persecute them using the Russian government. I mean these attempts are still few and small but I can see a clear tendency that they are very intolerant. And I understand the reason for that, for instance, they think that what gay people are doing is immoral and wrong. But I also believe that they have failed to take into consideration that this is a different state of mind that people have today and that we are living in a different place and a different time. I mean this is no longer Tsarist Russia in the 19th century. So this is just an example of where things can go wrong when people start thinking in terms of moral versus immoral. I think that as long as something does not physically hurt someone, it should be ok, whatever it is, being sexual life or political views or anything of that sort. I don't know. This is probably naive but this is my criterion for me and the way I see things.

For me there are many things in the outside world that I do not like because I'm essentially a religious person, right. And I don't know how it happens ... but I don't like modern pop culture, I don't like television, I don't like what they show in the movies. I mean, in no way am I going to attack those people or say anything, I just prefer not to watch it whenever it is possible. That is the end of the story for me. I don't actually want to impose my beliefs on other people, right. But I still have some strong views on these things and I consider them religious in a way. Because they somehow conform to some religious standards in a way.

JARRETT - But you don't necessarily go around judging someone or ...

DIMA - No, no, I definitely judge them for myself, of course. And I prefer to touch some things and not other things. But I would definitely not take part in a protest against a gay club or Russian television or something like that. In fact, I just mentioned the gay club not because I'm against it, actually this particular thing of different sexual preferences I don't have any opinion about. I have a lot of friends who are straight and I have some great friends who are gay and I don't actually see any difference contrary to what many people believe, like gay people have different mentalities, it's all bullshit. It just depends on what kind of person you are. So about this I don't have any kind of opinion. I might have some

opinions about other things, like when people start exploiting this in a commercial way, and I don't like it, but this is something different. And I would still not try to protest against it. That is not for me. I would just try to close my ears and eyes to it. It would be safer (little laugh).

What begins to become clear here and what I came to realize after several other interviews and discussions with Dima is that he prefers not to think in terms of morality. For Dima the notion of morality is connected to institutions of power such as the Church, and in another casual conversation he spoke to me about the imposition of morality by the government. These institutions use the notion of morality as a way to impose their own view onto society and, so it would seem, not take into account changes that have occurred within society. Thus, the Church, according to Dima, is still thinking in terms of the nineteenth-century. For Dima, then, "things can go wrong when people start thinking in terms of moral versus immoral." Such thinking can potentially lead to persecution due to the intolerance seemingly inherent to the very idea of morality.

Instead of thinking in terms of moral and immoral Dima prefers to think in terms of the kind of person he himself would like to be and the kinds of activities and practices in which he wants to participate. Others can do what they like as long as it doesn't physically hurt others. Dima acknowledges that perhaps in what he calls mainstream society or in the eyes of certain institutions such a conception may appear naive, "but this is [his] criterion for [himself] and the way [he] sees things." It is, then, Dima's personal public discourse of morality.

Such a morality entails understanding the kinds of activities and practices he prefers to avoid. This includes a good deal of what Dima calls modern culture. His morality of self-interest is informed by what he calls religious standards. Although he claims he is influenced by religion, he does not associate with any Church institution. This further maintains Dima's distinction between the moralization of institutions and his own personal morality. Even though Dima claims not to subscribe to any particular institutional or public discourse of morality, this does not stop him from judging others with whom he does not agree. The difference is that while Dima may judge others, he does not attempt to change their minds or stop them from doing something with which he does not agree. As he put it, "I would just try to close my

ears and eyes to it.” This, however, is not entirely true. For Dima did play a significant role in the recent changing of a Russian law concerning the minimum amount of marijuana a person is legally allowed to possess, the result of which led to the release of thousands of people from prison. Thus, Dima does not always close his ears and eyes to things with which he does not agree. But while this example is connected to his work and other drug-related movements, Dima here seems to be speaking more about his personal relation to what he calls modern culture and others’ relations to it, whether these relations be protests or the commercial exploitation of it. Others can do what they want, and Dima too will do his own thing.

Moral breakdowns

Dima, however, is not always able to live up to his own standards. This was revealed as our interview continued.

JARRETT - So if you judge others, do you also judge yourself? For example, if you realize that you have done something that goes against your own standards what do you do?

DIMA - First of all I try to, its really hard, because people are driven by instincts a lot and I don't like it. I understand that this is how we are built, but still I'm sure there are ways to deal with it. You can teach yourself to do some things and not to do other things, in principle, what ever you choose to be right or wrong for yourself. This is what I mean. So if I do something wrong from my own point of view or from my inner self point of view, first of all, I don't know, its really painful. Its really painful. And sometimes it gets me really depressed. But I'm kind of helpless about many things. I just do something and then I regret it and then maybe I do it again and then I regret it again and it continues like this until the moment when I can stop doing it. But then maybe something else will come up.

JARRETT - Do you think there is something that you can do to train yourself not to do these things?

DIMA - I believe that some people can do that, but not me, not me. I guess that I always wait until the moment that I am conscious about it and then it is usually very easy for me to stop doing

something. Like taking drugs or drinking alcohol or a lot of things I used to do in my life that I don't do anymore.

JARRETT - You said that a lot of people act on instinct, what do you mean by that?

DIMA - I guess that we all tend to act on instinct, I don't know. It is hard to say, but I can give you an example. You know that I have a wife, but I also work in an environment where there are a lot of different girls working in my office. And usually it is ok. But just a few days ago one of them put on a different kind of dress. Usually everyone at this office dresses in a proper way because they have to uphold certain standards. But this time her dress was sort of revealing, a lot, and I caught myself thinking about that for several hours. Really, you know. There is nothing that I could do about it. And I wouldn't go and say that it was wrong and that it is horrible but it is just that I remember that I couldn't help but think about it. So somehow I got aroused by it and that is one of the inexplicable things to me, how things like that happen. And that I believe is proof that we very often get caught by instincts. Although if you start thinking rationally you could of course pretend that everything is alright and that it doesn't exist and that I have a wife and I'm not going to do anything about this anyway. I'm not going to go flirting with girls in my office. But it just sticks somewhere in the back of my mind.

In response to my question Dima wants to begin by telling about the pain he feels when he transgresses. This desire, which is indicated by his parallel use of the phrase "first of all" to frame both the beginning of his narrative, as well as the beginning of his particular utterance on pain, is interrupted by his setting of the background against which suffering should be understood. As in another interview discussed above, Dima again uses the rhetoric of instincts to characterize individuals who are unable to "choose (*vybirat'*)" to act in the way that is "right" for themselves. As he puts it, he understands that "we are built" with instincts and that if we don't try to overcome them they will control us, but he is "sure there are ways to deal with it." He suggests that one is able to "teach (*uchit'*)" oneself to do certain things and not others. Once again, Dima is emphasizing the necessity for people to work on themselves to become the kind of person they want to be, even, as he put it in another interview, if they don't like it.

Dima's attempt to do just that is seen in the example he gives of how instincts can sometimes take over. Dima cannot take his eye or thoughts off of the scantily dressed woman in his office. He doesn't understand why he would do such a thing, it is not what he wants. And yet, he looks, he thinks, he desires. These are not wrong, he reassures me. He is not judging himself against some moral standard of what is right and what is wrong. Rather, this is troubling because he "couldn't help but think about it." Dima is troubled by this situation because he is unable to control his thoughts about this woman and *that* is what goes against his own moral standards. He is unable to be the kind of person he wants to be. He has lost control of himself.

The danger, then, is that these uncontrollable thoughts could potentially lead to an act that he definitely does not want to do. Most likely, though, this will not happen. Dima is quite disciplined about this. But he just cannot control his thoughts. He suggests the way, however, that he tries to ethically work on himself in order to control them. If "you start thinking rationally you could of course pretend that everything is alright and that it doesn't exist and that I have a wife and I'm not going to do anything about this anyway." By thinking "rationally" Dima suggests he can try to control his unwanted thoughts, his instincts. This rationality, however, leads to delusion. For in thinking rationally he is only pretending that he doesn't have such thoughts. It is through what we might call rational imagination, then, that Dima is able to ethically control his thoughts and not actually physically act out his transgression. Still, this unwanted thought "sticks somewhere in the back of [his] mind." In some cases, then, try as he may, Dima cannot entirely be the kind of person he wants.

What I have called rational imagination is not the only way Dima ethically works on himself. For before he gives the example of his reaction to the woman in his office, he talks about the moral suffering he feels when he makes a transgression. Thus, after having established a background understanding for why moral suffering is an appropriate response to transgression, Dima returns to his first words to frame his utterance on suffering. "First of all, I don't know, it's really painful. It's really painful." By laying down this background understanding, Dima suggests that his moral suffering is, at least in part, a result of having acted by "instinct" rather than according to what he chooses to be right for himself. This echoes what he said in an earlier interview about the importance of not forgetting oneself and is shown in the example of his reaction to the woman in his office. When Dima transgresses his own

moral expectations, he would say that he has forgotten himself and acted instead according to instinct. The realization of having done so makes Dima “really depressed.”

This depression leads Dima to a kind of repetitive state of suffering and a feeling of helplessness that in Dima’s case makes it difficult for him to change. “I’m kind of helpless about many things. I just do something and then I regret it and then maybe I do it again and then I regret it again and it continues like this until the moment when I can stop doing it.” Dima claims to continue to transgress and in this way repeats and prolongs his own suffering. His inability to change and his claim to be “helpless” seem to articulate his inability to break out of his “instinctual” being and to remember himself and the way he wants to be. Thus, Dima is unable to stop thinking about the woman in his office and even after he attempts to rid himself of such thoughts, they linger in the back of his mind. Dima is helpless in the presence of these instinctual thoughts. His suffering and instinctual behavior continues until he is finally “conscious” of it. At this point, Dima realizes that this is not what he would choose to do and can stop acting that way fairly “easy.”

Dima emphasizes the repetitive nature of his moral suffering in his narrative description. This is seen in the last sentence of his initial utterance on suffering. “But then maybe something else will come up.” In this way Dima further emphasizes the repetitive nature of suffering not only in particular cases of transgression, but also in terms of the never-ending repetition of transgression itself. Because according to Dima humans are a combination of instinct and self-discipline, slip-page into instinct as transgression is always possible, and thus so too is moral suffering. Indeed, it may even be necessary if moral suffering, as Pesmen has claimed, is considered an integral aspect to working on oneself (Pesman 2000b: 54–9; see also Ries 1997: 159–60).

How does this repetitive moral suffering help Dima work on himself? When I asked him if he thought there was something he could do to train himself not to transgress, he rejected this notion with some force. This is just the way he rejected my question about having a plan for life in another interview. Dima considered a plan to be too structured for the contingencies of human life, so too is the notion of training oneself. Instead, Dima waits “until the moment that [he] is conscious” about his suffering and behavior and it is at that point, so he claims, that he can pretty easily change. This suggests that for Dima moral suffering plays a significant role in his ability to become

conscious of his transgressive behavior. If it was not for his suffering and depression, then of what could he become conscious? Dima, then, articulates suffering as the subjectively felt experience of his transgressions. As such, it is his becoming conscious of this suffering experience that leads him to remember himself and how it is that he wants to be, and thus, to be able to stop transgressing against himself and, as he put it, not to do it “anymore.” In this way, moral suffering helps Dima to ethically work on himself to become the kind of person he hopes to be because it is a subjective indication of a moral breakdown that shifts Dima’s awareness to the need to perform ethics.

Ethics as a quest to live sanely

For Dima ethically working on himself is a tactic to maintain his own embodied morality rather than a strategy for living according to an institutional morality as Olya or, as we will see, Aleksandra Vladimirovna might see it. Not only does Dima reject the very idea of this latter kind of morality, he also rejects the idea that his own morality is in some way, as he put it, virtuous. As the following excerpt from an interview indicates, Dima is not concerned with being virtuous, good, or perfect. Instead, his moral goal has to do more with participating in the kinds of practices that he enjoys. It is, then, a very self-interested morality that focuses more on a kind of lifestyle, rather than the rightness or wrongness of particular acts.

In February of 2005 Dima invited me to his apartment for dinner and afterwards we sat over tea for an interview. One of the things I wanted to ask him was to say more about his notion of having a purpose in life, or what he had called a challenge in a conversation we had the week before.

JARRETT - You have talked about the importance of having a purpose or a challenge in life. What do you mean by this? Do you consider this a way to better yourself?

DIMA - Yes, it is important. It’s definitely very important.

JARRETT - Can you give an example?

DIMA - We were talking about being a vegetarian for instance. For me it is also about making things comfortable, not easy, but comfortable. I wouldn’t be a vegetarian if I wasn’t comfortable. It isn’t

really mainstream here, and probably not in any other country except for India. But for me it was a challenge. I like pleasant challenges, I don't like unpleasant challenges like challenging a group of racists or something. I wouldn't like this kind of challenge. [laughing]

JARRETT - When you choose a challenge, do you think of this as trying to better your self in some way?

DIMA - Yes, definitely.

JARRETT - How?

DIMA - Well in a way that makes me more flexible and able to discover new things for myself and making myself better and learning more things about myself and the outside world?

JARRETT - What have you learned about yourself in trying to be a vegetarian?

DIMA - Not about myself maybe, but about animals for instance. I've become more interested in animals. It is interesting not to do something that most people do. This itself is a challenge. Of course we have a circle of friends who are also vegetarians or who don't ask us about it. But as soon as we get around people who don't know us then they start asking ... So you know, I've done lots of little challenges for myself, like stop smoking, becoming a vegetarian, exercising more, this is also a challenge. I think this is all pretty common.

JARRETT - What do you mean?

DIMA - Well there are all kinds of challenges. You could be a Muslim and go fight in Iraq for instance, this is a challenge. This is not a common challenge, but leading a healthier way of life is pretty stereotypical, this is what they always tell you to do.

JARRETT - Does that take away from it?

DIMA - No, not at all.

JARRETT - Have you always been this way, wanting to challenge yourself?

DIMA - No.

JARRETT - Why did you start?

DIMA - I can't remember, it was a long time ago. But I think becoming a vegetarian has helped me in a lot of ways.

JARRETT - When did you become one?

DIMA - I think 1987. But I had a lot of breaks in the meantime, unfortunately. I really value this, but I don't think it is that important in the overall scheme of things. I don't think it's virtuous or anything.

JARRETT - What do you mean not virtuous?

DIMA - Well I don't know. Sometimes people think that, well we all have this illusion that if we do this or that then we will be better or we will deserve a better fate, but this isn't so. You know sometimes people say, oh Christ why did this happen to me I don't deserve this. But this is the way life is, no one deserves anything. It either comes your way or it doesn't. Who knows why this happens. What I'm trying to say is that if you try to be a better person by being a vegetarian or a philanthropist or something it really doesn't bring you anywhere. You really don't get anything from this. It doesn't save you.

JARRETT - So why do you do it?

DIMA - Well I guess the sane thing is to do things for yourself. To learn more and improve your understanding of the world. But it isn't very easy because we, people in general tend to have this delusion that if I do this now then things will be better tomorrow, but it doesn't work this way. Who knows, maybe there is this connection, but maybe there is not. Maybe by becoming a more honest person you improve your karma and it gives you a better fate, but maybe it doesn't.

When Dima speaks about working on himself it does not always have to do with overcoming certain transgressions, such as thinking about his female co-worker. It is also about living the kind of life that he wants for himself. Thus, when I asked him about having a purpose in his life he shifted the emphasis to taking on challenges. This shift, while minor, indicates that Dima prefers to think about his development in terms of working on specific practices, rather than his life as a whole. By focusing on the challenges of vegetarianism or not smoking Dima can gradually and with a compartmentalized focus develop into the kind of person he wants to become. In articulating these particular

challenges, Dima reveals the minute, practical, and lifestyle oriented nature of his development.

Not only are these challenges practice and lifestyle oriented, they are also, for the most part, what Dima calls stereotypical. They are “what they always tell you to do.” In this sense, then, although Dima tends to reject institutional and “mainstream” morality, he takes on the kinds of personal and ethical developmental projects that are socially sanctioned (Rivkin-Fish 2001; Fitzpatrick 2005). Even vegetarianism, which is very unusual in Russia, fits into the greater social focus on living a healthy lifestyle. Therefore, while Dima often prides himself on living on the margins of society, increasingly Dima is becoming more attuned with social expectations and behavior. If anything, Dima has gone from living on the margin of society as a nearly homeless musician who injected heroin, to a person that many would recognize as the picture of a socially successful person: a person who earns a very good, western salary, who has worked himself up the ladder of various international developmental and relief organizations, and now lives a comfortable life with his wife in a good neighborhood in Moscow. In some ways, then, Dima’s own image of himself no longer matches with the person he has become.

Still, despite his successes and the ability to ethically work on himself in a way that allows him to live the kind of life he wants, Dima does not think of himself as a “virtuous” person. He does not live under the illusion that by doing certain things or living a certain lifestyle he will become a better person or deserve, as he put it, a better fate. Rather, he performs certain challenges and works on himself in certain ways so as to be “sane.” Similar to how Susan Wolf speaks of moral agency as the attempt to live a sane or acceptable life, so too Dima only hopes to live a life that he can find acceptable for himself (Wolf 1987). He only hopes to live a life, as he put it with vegetarianism, with which he is comfortable. Dima, then, has no hopes of living a virtuous life that is recognized by others as morally expected or even exemplary.

Rather, for Dima the purpose of his life seems to be to live as much as he can according to certain lifestyle and behavioral standards that he has thoughtfully and informatively set up for himself. As he put it to me the following week in a conversation we had in a coffee shop, working on himself “makes my life interesting and actually worth living because I can see a goal. I improve myself, think about it, improve myself, think about it, improve myself, think about it. Otherwise, life has absolutely no meaning. And Russians are especially interested in

this question of the meaning of life. It is in their literature and so on. I think it is because deep inside they are very religious and moralistic. And since I was brought up in this culture obviously it is quite an important goal for me.” Here it becomes clear that the quest Dima has undertaken to work on himself and live in certain ways is for the purpose of giving meaning to his life. To live sanely, then, is to have meaning. Thus, while Dima may attribute this quest for meaning to his cultural upbringing, the meanings themselves accomplished through the various challenges he undertakes are established by Dima himself. For in choosing which challenges, purposes, and ways of living best suit him, Dima is at one and the same time living the life he desires and imputing meaning to that life.

Ethically negotiating difference

Although Dima claims that his quest for living sanely by finding meaning comes from being brought up in Russian culture, Dima is actually ethnically Armenian. Nevertheless, Dima was born and raised in Moscow and his family has lived there for three generations as members of the Communist Party. Still his status as a non-ethnic Russian has led him to have a great sensitivity to racist attitudes and behavior in Russia. He is often quick to accuse someone, usually a politician or some other public figure, of being a racist, and as far as I can tell it is the mark by which he judges the quickest and most harshly. Several times in our conversations and interviews Dima spoke about the moral dilemma he has felt about interacting with racists in his own life or how racism is one of Russia’s most wide spread and dangerous moral concerns.

One such example happened when we were casually hanging out in his apartment in January of 2005. Dima was telling me about all the traveling he had been doing recently for his job and how he was looking forward to it ending soon so he could relax at home for awhile. He then told me that two weeks earlier he had been in St. Petersburg and that he liked the city very much, but whenever he goes there he always gets lost walking around. I half joked that this is probably because everything looks the same in Petersburg, referring to the planned European-style architecture of the city. He smiled and said, “yes that could be, and everyone is racist there too.” This is what it is like to have a conversation with Dima; topics shift and conversations change in

mid-sentence all of the time. I never know if I should take Dima literally when he speaks or to read into these shifts more so than in most conversations. It is possible that Dima meant that he always gets “lost” in a metaphoric sense of not feeling at home among the palpable racism of Petersburg. If this is what he meant, it was not exactly clear at the moment.

Because I was unsure how to read his comment, I simply asked if he thought that there was more racism in Petersburg than in Moscow. He replied, “I don’t know, but it is the only place in Russia that an anti-racist activist and scholar has been killed.” This is in reference to the recent murder of Nikolai Mikhailovich Girenko by a local racist group in St. Petersburg. “They even posted it on their website beforehand. Now they have posted another death sentence for the Governor.” The first time I met Dima two years earlier he had told me that he thought there was a real possibility that the far right nationalists, with the support of local racist groups, could take control of the government. I asked him if he still thought this was true. “If things get bad, if something happens to upset this small amount of stability we have now, it could definitely happen,” he replied.

Fortunately it did not happen. Putin’s regime was marked by increasing socio-economic stability that to a large degree stemmed any possibility of an extreme right revolution in Russia. But the tempering of the extreme right in the early 2000s was not simply about socio-economic stability and increased prosperity due to oil revenue; for there were also significant attempts by the Putin government to bring certain “tolerable” right-wing nationalists into the fold. As Shenfield points out, Putin’s candidacy for President in 2000 was supported by several right-wing parties and the split in the proto-fascist Russian National Unity Party may have indicated that certain factions within the Party were aligned with the Putin regime (Shenfield 2001: 264–6). Additionally, in the early days of his administration Putin met with and included in meetings several openly racist and right-wing nationalist politicians and journalists (Shenfield 2001: 263–4). The eventual formation of the nationalist-leaning United Russia party, which was essentially headed by Putin, and the *Nashi* youth group are further suggestions of an at least tacit alliance between the Putin administration and some of the less extreme right-wingers.

I asked Dima what he thought about Putin’s move to the right and his alliance with the United Russia party. He responded with a whimsical smile, “I hate Putin. Now I can understand how some Americans

feel about Bush. There is something really scary about this guy [Putin], you don't know what he can do." He paused for a few seconds and continued, "But there are good things about him, for example, he speaks very good Russian. This is a big step for our leaders."

This last comment can be read in different ways. On the one hand it could be meant as an actual compliment to Putin, who is considered by most to be an intelligent and capable leader despite possible differences of political opinion. Or it could be read as an ironic statement, since compliments on the ability of one to speak proper Russian is often a mark of nationalist discourse. Or it simply could have been an amusing reference to the provincial speech for which Gorbachev was so often mocked or the drunken slurs of Yeltsin. However one reads Dima's words, though, this exchange, which was at this moment interrupted by someone else in the room and so the topic changed entirely, says something about Dima's personal way of being in post-Soviet Russia, as well as the way he so often depicts the world around him through his own experiences and interpretations. For despite, or perhaps because of being an acculturated Armenian living in Moscow, Dima remains very sensitive to the abundance of nationalist and racist discourse and practice in Russia today. This sensitivity is undoubtedly one of the central prisms through which Dima interprets and understands the world in which he lives. And as this killing in Petersburg, and many others before and since, suggests, there is certainly much for Dima to be sensitive about in contemporary Russia.

When we met again in February of 2005 I had in mind this conversation about racism in Petersburg and Russia when I asked Dima if he had ever had any experiences with skinheads. He replied:

DIMA - Well probably every ethnic minority in Russia has experienced this at some point in their life. But at a more general level, I think it is a very negative thing for a country to have, it is an obstacle to growth. But also I think it is inevitable to a point when there is a change in countries from a more rural and traditional life to a more urban and modern and diverse future. You cannot enter this future all at once. There will be clashes. Still it is a very ugly phenomenon. I understand the rationale behind it, though. It is the same as if I live in a small town or village and I see one day that a bus comes in carrying 100 people from out of town who do things differently from myself. They talk loud and do things

differently then I do. And Russia is such a big country and there is always this perception that Russia has such a rich culture that a lot of the neighboring cultures do not have, so it always seems like they are inferior. Which is not true of course. Some of these countries, like Tajikistan and Armenia, existed 1000 and 2000 years ago.

JARRETT - So there is nothing in particular that has happened to you that really sticks out?

Dima - No it has already, of course, of course. Since I was a kid it has happened on a number of occasions. But I think a number of non-ethnic Russians would tell you they had to live with this. No matter how hard you try to fit in to this society it is impossible because they will always remind you about how you are different. It is the same as seeing a black person everyday, but still people are curious. How is it that we are white and he is black? In this country it doesn't change for whatever reason. Or people will keep blaming Jews for whatever happens, you know, as they did 100 years ago, 200 years ago, 300 years ago, this is a very traditional psychology. But I wouldn't say that it is very bad, I haven't encountered it very many times, but on a number of occasions of course I have. Not as bad as Chechens. For them it is much more difficult. I have been called names and attacked a few times by skin heads.

JARRETT - Recently?

DIMA - No not recently, the last time was probably 3 years ago. Two years ago, in 2002. I was standing at a bus stop and I got attacked by 6 or 7 teenagers. I didn't want to ... also the more you experience it the more you don't even want to fight with them because then you will have to deal with the cops, so you just do what you can to prevent it from happening.

JARRETT - What did you do?

DIMA - There was a music shop right there, so I just ran in and I closed the door just in time because they were running after me. And they immediately found someone else, immediately. I looked outside in two minutes and they were beating someone else just outside. And I wanted to call the cops, but somehow I didn't do it.

JARRETT - Why?

DIMA - I had a cell phone and I thought I should call the cops and tell them what was happening and then I thought, no.

JARRETT - Why?

DIMA - Just being lazy probably. It wasn't because I was afraid to deal with the police or anything, it's that they wouldn't be able to do anything anyway. They would be looking and finding nothing. Because they just looked like regular teenagers. I didn't think they were skinheads at first from the way they looked. But I could see that as a group they had this group dynamic that regular people don't have, like they were looking around for a target and then they saw me. Because this was at the time when they started being smarter and not dressing like skinheads with the boots and everything. They just looked like football fans.

JARRETT - So you just went home?

DIMA - Yeah, and it hasn't happened since.

JARRETT - What happened to the person that got beat up?

DIMA - I don't know, I looked outside and saw it happen, and I walked back into the store and talked to the guy who worked there and he said maybe we should call the cops and then I walked outside and no one was there anymore, not even this guy, so I thought, probably I should just go, so I left.

JARRETT - You know, when I was here before [during the main part of my fieldwork in 2002-3] I met some Chinese students at MGU and they were always very scared about these skinheads and racists and never went anywhere alone.

DIMA - That was definitely not an exaggeration. I was talking with this one skinhead once and he was telling me that we had a lot of fun with these students, we really got a lot of physical exercise. We would go there every night and just wait in this underpass in the corner and they would enter and not notice us and we would just jump them.

JARRETT - When were you talking with skinheads?

DIMA - With my older job, and I had some friends among them before that, but I kind of know how these people are. And there

are some nice people among them. Well educated, intelligent. It is not like they are all drunk with a low IQ. Absolutely not.

Dima, like most other non-ethnic Russians, has experienced the palpable racism of Russia. He has learned to accept it and even understand it. It is for this reason, and not only his possible laziness, that led Dima not to call the police during this incident. As he put it, the police could not, and very possibly would not, do anything. Indeed, it is not uncommon that some police support the activities of racists and skinheads. In early February 2005 the chief of the Moscow police stated during a news conference that there are no skinheads in Moscow. This is, of course, an absurd statement and has been interpreted as indicating an official proclamation of turning the focus of the police away from right-wing groups in Russia to the increasingly active left-wing groups (Schreck 2005). Thus, Dima's apparent indifference to this situation can be understood as a combination of an acceptance of a racist culture, understanding of institutional apathy for the problem, and a personal desire to find safety as quickly as possible.

What is surprising about Dima, however, is that despite his experiences with racism and his disdain for this attitude, he does have some friends who are open racists. This is made clear at the end of his narrative when he says that he has been friends with some skinheads and that some of them are quite intelligent, educated, and even nice. It is this seeming contradiction that I would like to explore further; for although Dima is an avid anti-racist, he is still able to have some friends who are in fact racists.

When Dima first told me this in 2002, the very year in which he was last attacked, I found this a bit surprising. How could a person who was so adamant about his anti-racist position and his concern for a right-wing, nationalist coup also have friends who were openly racist? In answering this question it is possible to better understand the moral world of Dima. For the answer shows how Dima's moral world is not centered on solidified positions of right and wrong or good and bad. Rather, Dima chooses to act in ways and live a life that best suits his desires, even if some of these choices contradict one of his strongest held moral stances. One of his desires is to have friends who are very creative, intelligent, and interesting. It is this desire that in one particular case came to override his anti-racism. Part of this desire is Dima's love for *obshchenie*, which for Dima consists of the kinds of one-on-one, intimate relations he can have in the context of

good conversation, rather than the kind of large group sociability that led him to leave the Hari Krishna. In fact, Dima once admitted to me that he enjoys doing interviews with me because he considers them a kind of *obshchenie*, an open conversation in which he can learn about himself and others and in so doing face the world in a different way.

It is important to understand the subtle meaning of *obshchenie* because it is an important concept in the narrative articulations of several of my interlocutors. *Obshchenie* can simply be translated as communication or association or even social intercourse, but in everyday usage it tends to have a stronger and intimate meaning than any of these suggest. Unlike a simple conversation or *razgovor*, *obshchenie* is an intimate and dialogical sociality during which participants each come away in some sense as different persons. Anna Wierzbicka has argued that this process of *obshchenie*, or what she translates as communing talk, allows individuals to mutually develop each other and themselves, in effect creating each other anew in the process (Wierzbicka 2003: 425–8).

This is so because *obshchenie*, which is closely related to *obshchestvo* or society or company (as in a company of friends), as well as other “*obshch-*” words indicating sharing, commonality, and being together with, is more than the exchange of words, but is instead a kind of dialogical being-together-with that results in the creation of new, even if ever so subtle, persons. Indeed, oftentimes what is simply translated into English as dialogue or dialogical in Bakhtin’s work is in fact in the original Russian dialogical (*dialogicheskoe*) *obshchenie* (Wierzbicka 2003: 425). Bakhtin recognized that this kind of dialogical *obshchenie* is necessary for the self-development not only of the characters within Dostoevsky’s novels, but in social life as well (Bakhtin 1986). As will become clear in the following narrative, this desire for having *obshchenie* with a creative and interesting person trumped Dima’s anti-racism.

One brisk October evening in 2002 I met Dima in the square in front of the Bol’shoi Theater. After sitting and talking for a bit at one of the benches, we bought a couple of beers from a kiosk and strolled the old streets behind the theater. Similar to many ancient European cities, these streets are a hodgepodge of 18th and 19th century buildings, Soviet and modern architecture and memorial, and post-Soviet constructs of excessive post-modern design. These streets and their buildings’ architecture tell the history of Russia as well as any book written on the subject. Eventually we went into one of the many cafés now found throughout central Moscow to sit and talk.

There had been a recent newspaper report of the increase of racial and ethnic violence in Moscow and I asked Dima if he had heard about this. He had but was not surprised. "This is a big problem in Russia and has been for a long time," Dima said. I asked him if he knows anyone who is prejudice against non-Russians and how he reacts to them.

DIMA - I always ... one thing I haven't decided yet is how to treat people with different views. Like, for instance, several months ago I met a really brilliant guy – he is a writer and a poet and a really good one. And he is an interesting person to talk to and we were sitting there smoking pot and talking and he told me – you know he is a Russian guy who has been through a lot and has seen a lot, he has been in jail, drugs, etc, etc. – and he said to me I'm a racist. The way he put it was that he used to really hate niggers to the point where I would jump them on the metro, but now if I was in the same car with a nigger I would just leave. So do you think that is wrong?, he said to me. He said to me, you are telling me that in other countries people treat them like they are normal? Maybe there is something wrong with me, I don't know. But the way he put it to me was that it was like a natural feeling, I can't help it. And I started thinking, what should I do about this, maybe I should tell this guy that I wouldn't want to listen to that. On the other hand, everyone is like that. The idea of being politically correct about something, even if deep inside you are a racist about some things, you should at least be able to conceal it if you are a civilized person. I believe, I don't know. Especially when you are talking with someone that you don't know really that well. I just thought that most everyone is like that, so what can I do.

JARRETT- So what did you tell him?

DIMA - I didn't tell him anything. What I said to him was, something like, you know this is true in many other countries people don't really see it the way you see it. And he said, yeah that is what I am saying. But I don't know, maybe I will grow to like them.

In this example Dima is confronted by an individual who on the one hand he respects because of his intelligence and writing abilities, but on the other hand finds extremely troubling because of his racist views. This creates a dilemma, or a moral breakdown, for Dima since he

clearly would like to cultivate a relationship with the poet, but feels troubled by their differences on this crucial topic. This dilemma is played out in Dima's ambivalence about how to react to the man's confession that he is a racist. While Dima's initial reaction is that he should tell the man that he does not want to hear about such things, Dima immediately begins to create excuses for why he should engage with the poet about the topic. Dima reports to have gone through an internal debate about how to handle the dilemma. While "everyone is like that" Dima tells himself, still the poet should be able to control what he says around someone he doesn't know that well. Dima, then, is unsure if he should engage this man at the level of the "everyone," which would seem to be an acknowledgment that all people make mistakes or have faults and therefore should be given an opportunity to rectify these faults, which, in fact, the poet seems to be trying to do. Or, on the other hand, engage him at the level of one who is unable to control his words in front of others, which as an "uncivilized" trait marks the poet as someone with which Dima is unwilling to associate.

Ultimately, Dima chooses the former position and attempts to engage with the man as someone who could be potentially rectified. In doing so, Dima continues to talk with the poet about the topic and reinforces the latter's suspicions that his racist attitude and acts are not acceptable by most people around the world. This example of *obshchenie*, or opening up to the other in conversation, shows how everyday encounters in mundane situations can suddenly present an opportunity for ethical engagement with others that can have real moral results for both interlocutors. That is, *obshchenie* can be an ethical practice that helps cultivate new embodied moralities.

Our interview continued:

JARRETT - Is this how you usually handle these kinds of difficult situations?

DIMA - It depends on who that person is. If it is a close friend or someone I care for, then I will probably say something about it. But if it is someone I don't really care for or just a casual acquaintance, I wouldn't say anything.

JARRETT - What would you say to a friend?

DIMA - Well, consider saying something else or doing something else. Or just give them an example of what I would do ... I don't

know, usually people don't like this kind of thing. Especially with me. I'm not a natural leader so it is not easy for me to interact (*obshchenie*) with people who aren't 100% like me. Not that people have to think like me or something but at least some basic things should be ... really I wouldn't communicate with an open racist. I might consider an intelligent or an interesting guy, but I wouldn't communicate with him because it is offending to me. This is what happens to me and basically I don't communicate with people. If something like this happens with a person I am dealing with I probably wouldn't continue dealing with that person.

Notice that after just telling me about the way he engaged the racist poet in a form of *obshchenie* to try to get the poet to understand that his racist views were not acceptable to Dima, he now says that he wouldn't do so with a racist. Dima does seem to acknowledge this exception, however, when he says "I might consider an intelligent or an interesting guy." But for the most part Dima is saying that for him *obshchenie* can only be done with someone with whom he is already close or with whom he shares a common worldview. Dima, then, seems to place this restriction on himself. "I'm not a natural leader so it is not easy for me to interact with people who aren't 100% like me." As has been seen throughout this chapter, Dima firmly believes that individuals must make themselves into the kinds of moral persons they want to be. For this reason, perhaps, Dima takes the restrictive burden of *obshchenie* onto himself. As our interview continued it became clear that Dima not only restricts his interactions to those with whom he shares certain beliefs but also that this, in fact, is a way for him to work on himself to become the kind of person he wants to become.

JARRETT - But if it was someone close to you, you would in some-way try to explain to them and get them to understand ...

DIMA - At one point I had a girlfriend who was very good to me. But she was always complaining about the Caucasians buying apartments in Moscow and living and coming here with their families. And after several remarks of this kind I really got very angry about it and that is actually why we began to split. At first I thought it was a result of her upbringing and that her mother thinks that way, that her father thinks that way – they are quiet people sitting there on the sofa talking about that kind of thing.

It is not my type of person, I wouldn't want to deal with that kind of person. It is very small but if people like talking about this all the time, bringing up these kinds of issues, it means that this is not my kind of person. Not my kind of person.

JARRETT - What is your kind of person? What do you expect of them and what do they expect of you?

DIMA - It will probably sound egotistical, but people with whom I communicate must have some interest in communicating with me. That is basically the first thing. Interests meaning not material interests but what I can offer them. Otherwise we wouldn't deal with each other. I don't know.

JARRETT - You mentioned communicating (*obshchenie*) with people a couple of times. What do you mean by this?

DIMA - This is an interesting question because recently I have been thinking more and more about my role in the outside world. And what I have been figuring more and more is that I don't want to be part of anything. I just want to be myself. And if that means being alone at times or not having a lot of friends that is absolutely fine with me. Because I have lots of things to do and ... and that makes it difficult to estimate what others might be looking for in a relationship.

JARRETT - How did this come about?

DIMA - I guess the biggest reason is that when you develop certain views or beliefs it means you are physically cutting off some parts of the outside world. Like when you become a vegetarian, when you stop doing drugs, when you stop smoking, when you stop having casual sex, you know. Or when you become religious, seriously religious. I'm not seriously religious the way I should be, I don't know. That leads you to sort of alter yourself. And I think many people are afraid of that. I don't want to say that that is wrong, but everyone should be able to experience it in their lifetime, what it means being alone, to yourself. Because in fact it is a very positive thing because it is the only time you can actually improve or change yourself. If that is necessary. If you want to improve yourself. I mean you can spend your entire life doing regular things. But I'm not interested in doing that anymore. I mean I still do a lot of stupid things that I would like to stop doing, but there is more and more direction in my life.

In a way this last part of the interview is a repeat of the first part. Interestingly, though, this time his experience with a racist, his girlfriend, leads to a break-up of their relationship. It is likely that there were other factors involved in this break-up, but since Dima attributes this difference to “why we began to split” it stands as an example of Dima’s increasingly narrowing circle of those with whom he will interact. For Dima though, this narrowing is a process of making himself the kind of person he hopes to be. By increasingly focusing on the beliefs and practices he personally finds important and for the most part only engaging in *obshchenie* with other persons who also share these beliefs and practices, Dima is working on himself and cultivating an embodied morality with which he can live in the world comfortably.

There are of course exceptions, like the one he made for the racist poet. But this only indicates that Dima realizes that the world is not as simply and narrowly divided into people one hundred percent like him and those who are not. In these situations Dima is faced with a dilemma whether or not to ethically engage the other in a way that can potentially lead to friendship. These are the moments of ethical dilemma, then, that make *obshchenie* a powerful and necessary process of ethical engagement between Dima and others.

When I returned to Moscow in the winter of 2005 I was interested to know whether or not Dima was still friends with the racist poet. I asked him about it when we met one evening in his apartment.

JARRETT - When we spoke before you were telling me about this poet who was a real racist, do you remember telling me about him?

DIMA - Yes, he is our (Dima and his wife’s) friend actually. He is not a violent racist, but he has some real racist views. I thought about this hard, but I came to realize that you cannot change people. And by not communicating with these people because they are racist doesn’t really change anything. You might feel better about yourself, but it doesn’t change anything. He is a nice guy, he was probably just brought up this way or something. He is a good poet. Actually he just read his poems last week. He is a very good poet.

JARRETT - So it doesn’t really stop him from being friends ...

DIMA - He hates a lot of different behaviors of different people. He hates gay people, blacks, jews.

JARRETT - But that fact doesn't stop you from being his friend?

DIMA - Well when I say friend he is not really a friend (*drug*), he is not someone I see everyday. But I recognize his talent. And as I told you, it doesn't really make a difference if you don't communicate with these people. It doesn't make you feel any better. It doesn't make you any better. It is the same thing as being a vegetarian. You don't just talk with vegetarians. It doesn't make any sense to me. You can find a lot of interesting people out there and he is a very interesting person. Sometimes I see him once in a while. We have a lot of things to talk about besides these sensitive topics, like modern culture or modern Russian poets or politics. He has a lot to say about this stuff. There is a wide spread perception in Russia that you have to be like everyone else. So if you are gay, and you are a closet gay, then that is ok. But if you show it to everyone, that makes you an indecent person. Or if you come from another country and you are a loyal citizen that kind of makes you an alright person. But if you steal or do drugs or something like this then that automatically puts you, well that is natural, but even if you are a business person people will automatically presume that you are a criminal because you are not Russian. Some people go as far as saying that Russians should not be punished for anything because Russians own this country so they can do anything they want. But that is what we call zoological racism. I think many countries are moving in this direction. It is difficult with so many immigrants and the world is becoming a more global place and this is difficult for a lot of people. Especially because the opinion of these people is never taken into account, and this probably won't help. So if you call someone a Nazi and say, oh, I don't want to talk with you, this person will not disappear. They will still be there, but will just be with each other and maybe become violent because of it. There are certain groups that don't have access to the media, and for all the right reasons, for example, when people deny the holocaust, of course they have no real evidence, but they are convinced that these camps never existed. If you say to them, oh you are just a bunch of crazy Nazis, this doesn't help. You know? Society needs to find a way to deal with it.

JARRETT - I think some people might say to you that you are right about what you just said, but by being acquainted with them somehow you are doing something wrong.

DIMA - Well this really depends, if you support them, that is one thing. But if you don't. You can always tell them, well I disagree with you on this one point, I don't support you, but overall you are a nice guy. Plus, if they can't talk with people who don't hold your view, then they can never change, they will never have access to these different views. If you do, then they will have some potential to change. It also has to do with the individual. Some people are intelligent and talented, and others are just totally stupid. So I communicate with the poet when I see him at a party or concert, not because I want to change him, but because I like him as a person and we can talk about different things and I recognize a lot of talent there. I consider that if he was a real racist he probably wouldn't go to these places, or write the kind of poetry that he does, or even talk to me. He would talk about Hitler all the time and things like that. I know some people who are like that.

JARRETT - So you are going to judge him and people on who they are as individuals?

DIMA - Yeah, if I see that a person hasn't really produced anything interesting and just breeds this hate, like some of these Nazi leaders who are clearly out of their minds, to me these people aren't worth anything. But if you see someone who is talented or has a great sense of humor, then you recognize that he probably hasn't lost it. I think the important thing is the percentage of what makes up a person. If he is 100% racist, then there is no way to communicate with this person. If he is 99% something and 1% racist, then there is an opportunity to talk with this person. Because people are brought up this way and live in this society. Most people are like this, they have some prejudice. I remember I was watching this television show for children and they would take some important topic and discuss it for an hour. And they invited guests and all that. And one of the guests was this African girl who was a student here in Moscow and there was this Russian woman who was an actress who said I'm definitely not a racist but I wouldn't want my son to marry this girl or to bring home a black girl. And she said this to the audience and said I'm not a racist! This reflects how a lot of people are [laughing].

A little over two years later Dima had in fact cultivated a relationship with the poet. As he says, they are not friends, but would instead

best be described as a *znakomyi* (acquaintance). Still Dima enjoys his company and does not shy away from him when they do meet. Ultimately, Dima has come to realize that he is able to have good conversation, enjoy *obshchenie* with him, and listen to good poetry with this poet. Thus, for Dima the personal benefits of spending time with the poet are more important than avoiding him because of a preconceived and general standard of not associating with open racists. In this way, then, Dima is able to ethically work on himself in order to negotiate between his moral world that is strongly anti-racist and at the same time enjoy the company of an open racist.

But this decision did not come easy for Dima. As he put it, "I thought about this hard." This may in fact reference back to the interview reported above that I had with Dima a couple of years earlier where Dima described this internal conflict. In the end, Dima decided that he "cannot change people." At first Dima says that "you might feel better about yourself" if you don't talk with racists anymore, but then two utterances later he says "it doesn't make you feel any better. It doesn't make you any better." Whether one feels better or not, Dima recognizes that he is not a better person just because he doesn't associate with a racist. For Dima there is no standard against which to make this judgment other than his own interests. And Dima would much rather enjoy good artistic and political conversation with the poet than avoid him for "moral" reasons. What good would come of this? That is, what good would come of this for Dima? None. Additionally, Dima recognizes that no good would come of this for the poet either. Avoiding him will not change him. And while Dima has no intentions of trying to change the poet, the fact that Dima does spend time with him might result in the racist poet actually changing his attitude. After all, it is precisely this intersubjective ethical negotiation and moral development that is one way of describing the very process of *obshchenie*.

This example of Dima's relation with the racist poet exemplifies Dima's moral world. Dima does not maintain an unshakable moral position on any subject, even those that are dearest to him such as his anti-racism. Nor does Dima strictly adhere to any particular institutional or public discourse of morality, although as we have seen he is clearly influenced by some even if he does not recognize this himself. Dima does not talk about right and wrong, rather he talks about what is right and wrong for himself. Dima's goal is not to be a virtuous person, but to develop himself as he himself deems appropriate. Whether this comes in the

form of being a vegetarian, fantasizing about his female co-worker, or maintaining a friendship with an open racist, Dima in each instance claims to take it upon himself to choose what is right for him. This does not mean, however, that Dima just does whatever he wants. Far from it. As he once put, sometimes he has to work on himself even if he doesn't like it. Dima, then, recognizes a distinction between what he desires in the moment and the kind of person he wants to be in the end. The calculus of deciding how to make these two match or in what instances desire can override the purpose, however, is not always as straightforward as one might hope. Negotiating this ethical calculus, though, is just one more challenge that Dima takes on for himself in his never ending journey toward finding meaning in his life.

What is clearest in Dima's moral portrait, though, is the way in which personal identity or personhood is intimately connected with one's moral world. As I have been trying to make clear in all three of the moral portraits so far, and as I will continue to argue in the following two, persons' embodied morality, the way they narratively articulate this morality, and the kinds of ethics they perform in order to cultivate this morality, are not only influenced by the various institutional and public discourses of moralities within one's society, but perhaps more importantly largely a result of the life trajectory of individuals within a societal context. Thus, as Dima's narrative made explicit, but as was also clearly seen in the narratives of Olya and Larisa, personhood and morality cannot be separated.