To leave home, truly and finally, has haunted me all of my adult life. Often the issue lay dormant and I strained to depart unaware. At particular times I struggled in a vividly conscious way. Approximately three years ago I took deliberate action with respect to my family of origin which prompted a clearer understanding of the issue. In spirit I walk with Kierkegaard in attempting to rigorously, reflectively illuminate that phenomenon.

My psychological method is quickened by his anthropological-epistemological-hermeneutical principle: “Unum noris omnes (if you know one, you know all)” (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 79); “all understanding is self-understanding” (Nordentoff, 1978, p. 2). He has persuaded me that I, as psychological observer, should cultivate the courage and pride to ground my interrogation of the circumambient universe in a passionately engaged and rigorously disciplined self-observation (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 29). Simultaneously he has convinced me that I should infuse my observations with “poetic originality” (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 55).

I have searched myself and I believe that I have grasped the scope and limits of my personal field, and therefore that I might use that field as a springboard to uncover structural meanings beyond it. This essay aims to integrate psychological observation and personal creation in order to present radically co-constituted, synthesized results. Stated somewhat differently, I am attempting to orchestrate a symphony about the meaning of leaving home.
COMING TO AN ACQUAINTANCE WITH THE PHENOMENON

During the past fifteen years I have been participant witness, with privilege and responsibility, to the life stories and family dramas of people of all ages. Within the psychotherapeutic situation repeatedly I have heard adolescents harp about leaving home, hoping to but worried about successfully accomplishing the feat, and I have listened to adults bemoan their failed or incomplete efforts to leave. Inevitably, either in the living present or in imaginative flashbacks, I faced with them the critical issue. Something required confrontation if the individual was to turn the corner in order to progress from going to gone. Over and over again I witnessed the person pause in anxious hesitation at the apparent existential crossroads, at the moment of no looking back, or of no return. With care I wondered both silently and aloud about the resounding tone heard after the decision: either the music of fulfillment and serenity, or the discordance of disappointment and discontent. The therapist in me yearned to know how to help the other always to pluck the melodic, harmonious chords. Equally truly, I wanted to clear the dissonance in my own life’s song.

Not surprisingly I hypothesized that dealing with the meaning of leave-taking was a component of every depth therapy relationship, at least with people inundated with North American mores. An allied hypothesis was that to execute the departure is a key developmental task, a turning point, centrally significant to the life journey of North Americans. And, as the Chinese characters which spell the word “crisis” signify, it is a time equally for opportunity or danger. Specifically, the phenomenon of leaving home seemed pivotal in co-constituting our transition to adulthood, not bequeathed to us by age, role or position, but earned by personal struggle. To elaborate, our peculiar handling of leave-taking facilitates, blocks, sabotages or mangles our potential growth into intimacy, generativity and integrity (Erikson, 1959).

At the theoretical level I grasped that leaving home was not only a temporally dated chronological event, but also a developmental achievement which denotes the quality of our life journey. The process of human development seemed most adequately depicted by the image of a spiral.

We face certain life issues repeatedly; rarely do we deal with them once and for all. We return to certain meanings again and again in a spiral fashion. Optimistically we return with experience under our belt which we have parlayed into accumulated wisdom. Optimistically we come to a familiar situation with the liberating distance of a retrospective perspective. But often we stumble, as Freud’s concept of repetition compulsion indicates (Alapack, 1976, p. 3–4).