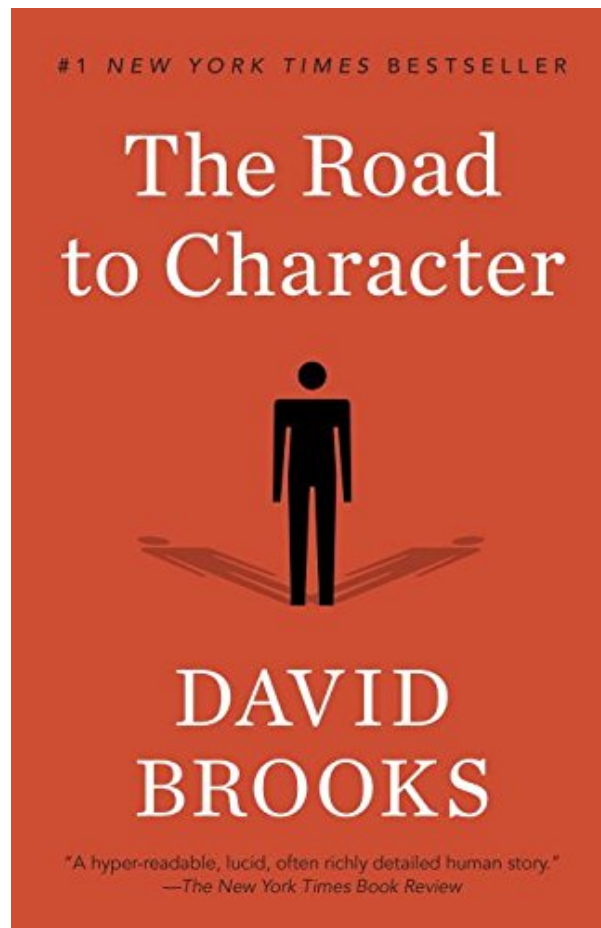


THE ROAD TO CHARACTER BY DAVID BROOKS



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*"A hyper-readable, lucid, often richly detailed human story."
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Review

“David Brooks’s gift—as he might put it in his swift, engaging way—is for making obscure but potent social studies research accessible and even startling. . . . [The Road to Character is] a hyper-readable, lucid, often richly detailed human story. . . . In the age of the selfie, Brooks wishes to exhort us back to a semiclassical sense of self-restraint, self-erasure, and self-suspicion.”—Pico Iyer, *The New York Times Book Review*

“David Brooks—the New York Times columnist and PBS commentator whose measured calm gives punditry a good name—offers the building blocks of a meaningful life.”—*Washingtonian*

“This profound and eloquent book is written with moral urgency and philosophical elegance.”—Andrew Solomon, author of *Far from the Tree* and *The Noonday Demon*

“[Brooks] emerges as a countercultural leader. . . . The literary achievement of *The Road to Character* is inseparable from the virtues of its author. As the reader, you not only want to know about Frances Perkins or Saint Augustine. You also want to know what Brooks makes of Frances Perkins or Saint Augustine. The voice of the book is calm, fair and humane. The highlight of the material is the quality of the author’s moral and spiritual judgments.”—Michael Gerson, *The Washington Post*

“A powerful, haunting book that works its way beneath your skin.”—*The Guardian* (U.K.)

“This learned and engaging book brims with pleasures.”—*Newsday*

“Original and eye-opening . . . At his best, Brooks is a normative version of Malcolm Gladwell, culling from a wide array of scientists and thinkers to weave an idea bigger than the sum of its parts.”—*USA Today*

“David Brooks breaks the columnist’s fourth wall. . . . There is something affecting in the diligence with which Brooks seeks a cure for his self-diagnosed shallowness by plumbing the depths of others. . . . Brooks’s instinct that there is wisdom to be found in literature that cannot be found in the pages of the latest social science journals is well-advised, and the possibility that his book may bring the likes of Eliot or Samuel Johnson—another literary figure about whom he writes with engaging sympathy—to a wider general readership is a heartening thought.”—Rebecca Mead, *The New Yorker*

“If you want to be reassured that you are special, you will hate this book. But if you like thoughtful polemics, it is worth logging off Facebook to read it.”—The Economist

“Brooks uses the powerful stories of people such as Augustine, George Eliot and Dwight Eisenhower to inspire.”—The Times (U.K.)

“Elegant and lucid . . . a pitch-perfect clarion call, issued not with preachy hubris but from a deep place of humility, for awakening to the greatest rewards of living . . . The Road to Character is an essential read in its entirety—Anne Lamott with a harder edge of moral philosophy, Seneca with a softer edge of spiritual sensitivity, E. F. Schumacher for perplexed moderns.”—Maria Popova, Brain Pickings

“Brooks, author of *The Social Animal*, offers biographies of a cross section of individuals who struggled against their own weaknesses and limitations and developed strong moral fiber. . . . [He] offers a humility code that cautions against living only for happiness and that recognizes we are ultimately saved by grace.”—Booklist

“The road to exceptional character may be unpaved and a bit rocky, yet it is still worth the struggle. This is the basic thesis of Brooks’s engrossing treatise on personal morality in today’s materialistic, proud world. . . . [His] poignant and at times quite humorous commentary on the importance of humility and virtue makes for a vital, uplifting read.”—Publishers Weekly

About the Author

David Brooks is one of the nation’s leading writers and commentators. He is an op-ed columnist for *The New York Times* and appears regularly on *PBS NewsHour* and *Meet the Press*. He is the bestselling author of *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement*; *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*; and *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always Have) in the Future Tense*.

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Chapter 1

The Shift

On Sunday evenings my local NPR station rebroadcasts old radio programs. A few years ago I was driving home and heard a program called *Command Performance*, which was a variety show that went out to the troops during World War II. The episode I happened to hear was broadcast the day after V--J Day, on August 15, 1945.

The episode featured some of the era’s biggest celebrities: Frank Sinatra, Marlene Dietrich, Cary Grant, Bette Davis, and many others. But the most striking feature of the show was its tone of self--effacement and humility. The Allies had just completed one of the noblest military victories in human history. And yet there was no chest beating. Nobody was erecting triumphal arches.

“Well, it looks like this is it,” the host, Bing Crosby, opened. “What can you say at a time like this? You can’t throw your skimmer in the air. That’s for run--of--the mill holidays. I guess all anybody can do is thank God it’s over.” The mezzo--soprano Risë Stevens came on and sang a solemn version of “Ave Maria,” and then Crosby came back on to summarize the mood: “Today, though, our deep--down feeling is one of humility.”

That sentiment was repeated throughout the broadcast. The actor Burgess Meredith read a passage written by Ernie Pyle, the war correspondent. Pyle had been killed just a few months before, but he had written an article anticipating what victory would mean: “We won this war because our men are brave and because of

many other things—?-because of Russia, England, and China and the passage of time and the gift of nature's materials. We did not win it because destiny created us better than all other people. I hope that in victory we are more grateful than proud.”

The show mirrored the reaction of the nation at large. There were rapturous celebrations, certainly. Sailors in San Francisco commandeered cable cars and looted liquor stores. The streets of New York's garment district were five inches deep in confetti.¹ But the mood was divided. Joy gave way to solemnity and self--doubt.

This was in part because the war had been such an epochal event, and had produced such rivers of blood, that individuals felt small in comparison. There was also the manner in which the war in the -Pacific had ended—with the atomic bomb. People around the world had just seen the savagery human beings are capable of. Now here was a weapon that could make that savagery apocalyptic. “The knowledge of victory was as charged with sorrow and doubt as with joy and gratitude,” James Agee wrote in an editorial that week for Time magazine.

But the modest tone of Command Performance wasn't just a matter of mood or style. The people on that broadcast had been part of one of the most historic victories ever known. But they didn't go around telling themselves how great they were. They didn't print up bumper stickers commemorating their own awesomeness. Their first instinct was to remind themselves they were not morally superior to anyone else. Their collective impulse was to warn themselves against pride and self--glorification. They intuitively resisted the natural human tendency toward excessive self--love.

I arrived home before the program was over and listened to that radio show in my driveway for a time. Then I went inside and turned on a football game. A quarterback threw a short pass to a wide receiver, who was tackled almost immediately for a two--yard gain. The defensive player did what all professional athletes do these days in moments of personal accomplishment. He did a self--puffing victory dance, as the camera lingered.

It occurred to me that I had just watched more self--celebration after a two--yard gain than I had heard after the United States won World War II.

This little contrast set off a chain of thoughts in my mind. It occurred to me that this shift might symbolize a shift in culture, a shift from a culture of self--effacement that says “Nobody's better than me, but I'm no better than anyone else” to a culture of self--promotion that says “Recognize my accomplishments, I'm pretty special.” That contrast, while nothing much in itself, was like a doorway into the different ways it is possible to live in this world.

Little Me

In the years following that Command Performance episode, I went back and studied that time and the people who were prominent then. The research reminded me first of all that none of us should ever wish to go back to the culture of the mid--twentieth century. It was a more racist, sexist, and anti--Semitic culture. Most of us would not have had the opportunities we enjoy if we had lived back then. It was also a more boring culture, with bland food and homogeneous living arrangements. It was an emotionally cold culture. Fathers, in particular, frequently were unable to express their love for their own children. Husbands were unable to see the depth in their own wives. In so many ways, life is better now than it was then.

But it did occur to me that there was perhaps a strain of humility that was more common then than now, that there was a moral ecology, stretching back centuries but less prominent now, encouraging people to be more

skeptical of their desires, more aware of their own weaknesses, more intent on combatting the flaws in their own natures and turning weakness into strength. People in this tradition, I thought, are less likely to feel that every thought, feeling, and achievement should be immediately shared with the world at large.

The popular culture seemed more reticent in the era of Command Performance. There were no message T-shirts back then, no exclamation points on the typewriter keyboards, no sympathy ribbons for various diseases, no vanity license plates, no bumper stickers with personal or moral declarations. People didn't brag about their college affiliations or their vacation spots with little stickers on the rear windows of their cars. There was stronger social sanction against (as they would have put it) blowing your own trumpet, getting above yourself, being too big for your britches.

The social code was embodied in the self-effacing style of actors like Gregory Peck or Gary Cooper, or the character Joe Friday on *Dragnet*. When Franklin Roosevelt's aide Harry Hopkins lost a son in World War II, the military brass wanted to put his other sons out of harm's way. Hopkins rejected this idea, writing, with the understatement more common in that era, that his other sons shouldn't be given safe assignments just because their brother "had some bad luck in the Pacific."²

Of the twenty-three men and women who served in Dwight Eisenhower's cabinets, only one, the secretary of agriculture, published a memoir afterward, and it was so discreet as to be soporific. By the time the Reagan administration rolled around, twelve of his thirty cabinet members published memoirs, almost all of them self-advertising.³

When the elder George Bush, who was raised in that era, was running for president, he, having inculcated the values of his childhood, resisted speaking about himself. If a speechwriter put the word "I" in one of his speeches, he'd instinctively cross it out. The staff would beg him: You're running for president. You've got to talk about yourself. Eventually they'd cow him into doing so. But the next day he'd get a call from his mother. "George, you're talking about yourself again," she'd say. And Bush would revert to form. No more I's in the speeches. No more self-promotion.

The Big Me

Over the next few years I collected data to suggest that we have seen a broad shift from a culture of humility to the culture of what you might call the Big Me, from a culture that encouraged people to think humbly of themselves to a culture that encouraged people to see themselves as the center of the universe.

It wasn't hard to find such data. For example, in 1950, the Gallup Organization asked high school seniors if they considered themselves to be a very important person. At that point, 12 percent said yes. The same question was asked in 2005, and this time it wasn't 12 percent who considered themselves very important, it was 80 percent.

Psychologists have a thing called the narcissism test. They read people statements and ask if the statements apply to them. Statements such as "I like to be the center of attention .??. I show off if I get the chance because I am extraordinary .??. Somebody should write a -biography about me." The median narcissism score has risen 30 percent in the last two decades. Ninety-three percent of young people score higher than the middle score just twenty years ago.⁴ The largest gains have been in the number of people who agree with the statements "I am an extraordinary person" and "I like to look at my body."

Along with this apparent rise in self-esteem, there has been a tremendous increase in the desire for fame. Fame used to rank low as a life's ambition for most people. In a 1976 survey that asked people to list their

life goals, fame ranked fifteenth out of sixteen. By 2007, 51 percent of young people reported that being famous was one of their top personal goals.⁵ In one study, middle school girls were asked who they would most like to have dinner with. Jennifer Lopez came in first, Jesus Christ came in second, and Paris Hilton third. The girls were then asked which of the following jobs they would like to have. Nearly twice as many said they'd rather be a celebrity's personal assistant—for example, Justin Bieber's—than president of Harvard. (Though, to be fair, I'm pretty sure the president of Harvard would also rather be Justin Bieber's personal assistant.)

As I looked around the popular culture I kept finding the same messages everywhere: You are special. Trust yourself. Be true to yourself. Movies from Pixar and Disney are constantly telling children how wonderful they are. Commencement speeches are larded with the same clichés: Follow your passion. Don't accept limits. Chart your own course. You have a responsibility to do great things because you are so great. This is the gospel of self--trust.

As Ellen DeGeneres put it in a 2009 commencement address, “My advice to you is to be true to yourself and everything will be fine.” Celebrity chef Mario Batali advised graduates to follow “your own truth, expressed consistently by you.” Anna Quindlen urged another audience to have the courage to “honor your character, your intellect, your inclinations, and, yes, your soul by listening to its clean clear voice instead of following the muddled messages of a timid world.”

In her mega--selling book *Eat, Pray, Love* (I am the only man ever to finish this book), Elizabeth Gilbert wrote that God manifests himself through “my own voice from within my own self.???. God dwells within you as you yourself, exactly the way you are.”⁶

I began looking at the way we raise our children and found signs of this moral shift. For example, the early Girl Scout handbooks preached an ethic of self--sacrifice and self--effacement. The chief obstacle to happiness, the handbook exhorted, comes from the overeager desire to have people think about you.

By 1980, as James Davison Hunter has pointed out, the tone was very different. *You Make the Difference: The Handbook for Cadette and -Senior Girl Scouts* was telling girls to pay more attention to themselves: “How can you get more in touch with you? What are you feeling???. Every option available to you through Senior Scouting can, in some way, help you to a better understanding of yourself.???. Put yourself in the ‘center stage’ of your thoughts to gain perspective on your own ways of feeling, thinking and acting.”⁷

The shift can even be seen in the words that flow from the pulpit. Joel Osteen, one of the most popular megachurch leaders today, writes from Houston, Texas. “God didn't create you to be average,” Osteen says in his book *Become a Better You*. “You were made to excel. You were made to leave a mark on this generation.???. Start [believing] ‘I've been chosen, set apart, destined to live in victory.’”⁸

The Humble Path

As years went by and work on this book continued, my thoughts returned to that episode of *Command Performance*. I was haunted by the quality of humility I heard in those voices.

There was something aesthetically beautiful about the self--effacement the people on that program displayed. The self--effacing person is soothing and gracious, while the self--promoting person is fragile and jarring. Humility is freedom from the need to prove you are superior all the time, but egotism is a ravenous hunger in a small space—self--concerned, competitive, and distinction--hungry. Humility is infused with lovely emotions like admiration, companionship, and gratitude. “Thankfulness,” the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, said, “is a soil in which pride does not easily grow.”⁹

There is something intellectually impressive about that sort of humility, too. We have, the psychologist Daniel Kahneman writes, an “almost unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance.”¹⁰ Humility is the awareness that there’s a lot you don’t know and that a lot of what you think you know is distorted or wrong.

This is the way humility leads to wisdom. Montaigne once wrote, “We can be knowledgeable with other men’s knowledge, but we can’t be wise with other men’s wisdom.” That’s because wisdom isn’t a body of information. It’s the moral quality of knowing what you don’t know and figuring out a way to handle your ignorance, uncertainty, and limitation.

The people we think are wise have, to some degree, overcome the biases and overconfident tendencies that are infused in our nature. In its most complete meaning, intellectual humility is accurate self--awareness from a distance. It is moving over the course of one’s life from the adolescent’s close--up view of yourself, in which you fill the whole canvas, to a landscape view in which you see, from a wider perspective, your strengths and weaknesses, your connections and dependencies, and the role you play in a larger story.

Finally, there is something morally impressive about humility. Every epoch has its own preferred methods of self--cultivation, its own ways to build character and depth. The people on that Command Performance broadcast were guarding themselves against some of their least attractive tendencies, to be prideful, self--congratulatory, hubristic.

Today, many of us see our life through the metaphor of a -journey—?a journey through the external world and up the ladder of -success. When we think about making a difference or leading a life with purpose, we often think of achieving something external—performing some service that will have an impact on the world, creating a successful company, or doing something for the community.

Truly humble people also use that journey metaphor to describe their own lives. But they also use, alongside that, a different metaphor, which has more to do with the internal life. This is the metaphor of self--confrontation. They are more likely to assume that we are all deeply divided selves, both splendidly endowed and deeply flawed—that we each have certain talents but also certain weaknesses. And if we habitually fall for those temptations and do not struggle against the weaknesses in ourselves, then we will gradually spoil some core piece of ourselves. We will not be as good, internally, as we want to be. We will fail in some profound way.

For people of this sort, the external drama up the ladder of success is important, but the inner struggle against one’s own weaknesses is the central drama of life. As the popular minister Harry Emerson Fosdick put it in his 1943 book *On Being a Real Person*, “The beginning of worth--while living is thus the confrontation with ourselves.”¹¹

Truly humble people are engaged in a great effort to magnify what is best in themselves and defeat what is worst, to become strong in the weak places. They start with an acute awareness of the bugs in their own nature. Our basic problem is that we are self--centered, a plight beautifully captured in the famous commencement address David Foster Wallace gave at Kenyon College in 2005:

Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe; the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self--centeredness because it’s so socially repulsive. But it’s pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default setting, hard--wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on. Other people’s thoughts and

feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real.

This self--centeredness leads in several unfortunate directions. It leads to selfishness, the desire to use other people as means to get things for yourself. It also leads to pride, the desire to see yourself as superior to everybody else. It leads to a capacity to ignore and rationalize your own imperfections and inflate your virtues. As we go through life, most of us are constantly comparing and constantly finding ourselves slightly better than other people—more virtuous, with better judgment, with better taste. We're constantly seeking recognition, and painfully sensitive to any snub or insult to the status we believe we have earned for ourselves.

Some perversity in our nature leads us to put lower loves above higher ones. We all love and desire a multitude of things: friendship, family, popularity, country, money, and so on. And we all have a sense that some loves are higher or more important than other loves. I suspect we all rank those loves in pretty much the same way. We all know that the love you feel for your children or parents should be higher than the love you have for money. We all know the love you have for the truth should be higher than the love you have for popularity. Even in this age of relativism and pluralism, the moral hierarchy of the heart is one thing we generally share, at least most of the time.

But we often put our loves out of order. If someone tells you something in confidence and then you blab it as good gossip at a dinner party, you are putting your love of popularity above your love of friendship. If you talk more at a meeting than you listen, you may be putting your ardor to outshine above learning and companionship. We do this all the time.

People who are humble about their own nature are moral realists. Moral realists are aware that we are all built from "crooked timber"—from Immanuel Kant's famous line, "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." People in this "crooked--timber" school of humanity have an acute awareness of their own flaws and believe that character is built in the struggle against their own weaknesses. As Thomas Merton wrote, "Souls are like athletes that need opponents worthy of them, if they are to be tried and extended and pushed to the full use of their powers."¹²

You can see evidence of the inner struggle in such people's journals. They are exultant on days when they win some small victory over selfishness and hard--heartedness. They are despondent on days when they let themselves down, when they avoid some charitable task because they were lazy or tired, or fail to attend to a person who wanted to be heard. They are more likely see their life as a moral adventure story. As the British writer Henry Fairlie put it, "If we acknowledge that our inclination to sin is part of our natures, and that we will never wholly eradicate it, there is at least something for us to do in our lives that will not in the end seem just futile and absurd."

I have a friend who spends a few moments in bed at night reviewing the mistakes of his day. His central sin, from which many of his other sins branch out, is a certain hardness of heart. He's a busy guy with many people making demands on his time. Sometimes he is not fully present for people who are asking his advice or revealing some vulnerability. Sometimes he is more interested in making a good -impression than in listening to other people in depth. Maybe he spent more time at a meeting thinking about how he might seem impressive than about what others were actually saying. Maybe he flattered people too unctuously.

Each night, he catalogs the errors. He tallies his recurring core sins and the other mistakes that might have branched off from them. Then he develops strategies for how he might do better tomorrow. Tomorrow he'll try to look differently at people, pause more before people. He'll put care above prestige, the higher thing above the lower thing. We all have a moral responsibility to be more moral every day, and he will struggle to

inch ahead each day in this most important sphere.

People who live this way believe that character is not innate or automatic. You have to build it with effort and artistry. You can't be the good person you want to be unless you wage this campaign. You won't even achieve enduring external success unless you build a solid moral core. If you don't have some inner integrity, eventually your Watergate, your scandal, your betrayal, will happen. Adam I ultimately depends upon Adam II.

Now, I have used the word "struggle" and "fight" in the previous passages. But it's a mistake to think that the moral struggle against internal weakness is a struggle the way a war is a struggle or the way a boxing match is a struggle—filled with clash of arms and violence and aggression. Moral realists sometimes do hard things, like standing firm against evil and imposing intense self-discipline on their desires. But character is built not only through austerity and hardship. It is also built sweetly through love and pleasure. When you have deep friendships with good people, you copy and then absorb some of their best traits. When you love a person deeply, you want to serve them and earn their regard. When you experience great art, you widen your repertoire of emotions. Through devotion to some cause, you elevate your desires and organize your energies.

Moreover, the struggle against the weaknesses in yourself is never a solitary struggle. No person can achieve self-mastery on his or her own. Individual will, reason, compassion, and character are not strong enough to consistently defeat selfishness, pride, greed, and self-deception. Everybody needs redemptive assistance from -outside—from family, friends, ancestors, rules, traditions, institutions, exemplars, and, for believers, God. We all need people to tell us when we are wrong, to advise us on how to do right, and to encourage, support, arouse, cooperate, and inspire us along the way.

There's something democratic about life viewed in this way. It doesn't matter if you work on Wall Street or at a charity distributing medicine to the poor. It doesn't matter if you are at the top of the income scale or at the bottom. There are heroes and schmucks in all worlds. The most important thing is whether you are willing to engage in moral struggle against yourself. The most important thing is whether you are willing to engage this struggle well—joyfully and compassionately. Fairlie writes, "At least if we recognize that we sin, know that we are individually at war, we may go to war as warriors do, with something of valor and zest and even mirth."¹³ Adam I achieves success by winning victories over others. But Adam II builds character by winning victories over the weaknesses in himself.

The U--Curve

The people in this book led diverse lives. Each one of them exemplifies one of the activities that lead to character. But there is one pattern that recurs: They had to go down to go up. They had to descend into the valley of humility to climb to the heights of character.

The road to character often involves moments of moral crisis, confrontation, and recovery. When they were in a crucible moment, they suddenly had a greater ability to see their own nature. The everyday self-deceptions and illusions of self-mastery were shattered. They had to humble themselves in self-awareness if they had any hope of rising up transformed. Alice had to be small to enter Wonderland. Or, as Kierkegaard put it, "Only the one who descends into the underworld rescues the beloved."

But then the beauty began. In the valley of humility they learned to quiet the self. Only by quieting the self could they see the world clearly. Only by quieting the self could they understand other people and accept what they are offering.

When they had quieted themselves, they had opened up space for grace to flood in. They found themselves helped by people they did not expect would help them. They found themselves understood and cared for by others in ways they did not imagine beforehand. They found themselves loved in ways they did not deserve. They didn't have to flail about, because hands were holding them up.

Before long, people who have entered the valley of humility feel themselves back in the uplands of joy and commitment. They've thrown themselves into work, made new friends, and cultivated new loves. They realize, with a shock, that they've traveled a long way since the first days of their crucible. They turn around and see how much ground they have left behind. Such people don't come out healed; they come out different. They find a vocation or calling. They commit themselves to some long obedience and dedicate themselves to some desperate lark that gives life purpose.

Each phase of this experience has left a residue on such a person's soul. The experience has reshaped their inner core and given it great coherence, solidity, and weight. People with character may be loud or quiet, but they do tend to have a certain level of self-respect. Self-respect is not the same as self-confidence or self-esteem. Self-respect is not based on IQ or any of the mental or physical gifts that help get you into a competitive college. It is not comparative. It is not earned by being better than other people at something. It is earned by being better than you used to be, by being dependable in times of testing, straight in times of temptation. It emerges in one who is morally dependable. Self-respect is produced by inner triumphs, not external ones. It can only be earned by a person who has endured some internal temptation, who has confronted their own weaknesses and who knows, "Well, if worse comes to worst, I can endure that. I can overcome that."

The sort of process I've just described can happen in big ways. In every life there are huge crucible moments, altering ordeals, that either make you or break you. But this process can also happen in daily, gradual ways. Every day it's possible to recognize small flaws, to reach out to others, to try to correct errors. Character is built both through drama and through the everyday.

What was on display in *Command Performance* was more than just an aesthetic or a style. The more I looked into that period, the more I realized I was looking into a different moral country. I began to see a different view of human nature, a different attitude about what is important in life, a different formula for how to live a life of character and depth. I don't know how many people in those days hewed to this different moral ecology, but some people did, and I found that I admired them immensely.

My general belief is that we've accidentally left this moral tradition behind. Over the last several decades, we've lost this language, this way of organizing life. We're not bad. But we are morally inarticulate. We're not more selfish or venal than people in other times, but we've lost the understanding of how character is built. The "crooked timber" moral tradition—based on the awareness of sin and the confrontation with sin—was an inheritance passed down from generation to generation. It gave people a clearer sense of how to cultivate the eulogy virtues, how to develop the Adam II side of their nature. Without it, there is a certain superficiality to modern culture, especially in the moral sphere.

The central fallacy of modern life is the belief that accomplishments of the Adam I realm can produce deep satisfaction. That's false. Adam I's desires are infinite and always leap out ahead of whatever has just been achieved. Only Adam II can experience deep satisfaction. Adam I aims for happiness, but Adam II knows that happiness is insufficient. The ultimate joys are moral joys. In the pages ahead, I will try to offer some real-life examples of how this sort of life was lived. We can't and shouldn't want to return to the past. But we can rediscover this moral tradition, relearn this vocabulary of character, and incorporate it into our own lives.

You can't build Adam II out of a recipe book. There is no seven--point program. But we can immerse ourselves in the lives of outstanding people and try to understand the wisdom of the way they lived. I'm hoping you'll be able to pick out a few lessons that are important to you in the pages ahead, even if they are not the same ones that seem important to me. I'm hoping you and I will both emerge from the next nine chapters slightly different and slightly better.

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THE ROAD TO CHARACTER BY DAVID BROOKS PDF

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY THE ECONOMIST • “I wrote this book not sure I could follow the road to character, but I wanted at least to know what the road looks like and how other people have trodden it.”—David Brooks

With the wisdom, humor, curiosity, and sharp insights that have brought millions of readers to his New York Times column and his previous bestsellers, David Brooks has consistently illuminated our daily lives in surprising and original ways. In *The Social Animal*, he explored the neuroscience of human connection and how we can flourish together. Now, in *The Road to Character*, he focuses on the deeper values that should inform our lives. Responding to what he calls the culture of the Big Me, which emphasizes external success, Brooks challenges us, and himself, to rebalance the scales between our “résumé virtues”—achieving wealth, fame, and status—and our “eulogy virtues,” those that exist at the core of our being: kindness, bravery, honesty, or faithfulness, focusing on what kind of relationships we have formed.

Looking to some of the world’s greatest thinkers and inspiring leaders, Brooks explores how, through internal struggle and a sense of their own limitations, they have built a strong inner character. Labor activist Frances Perkins understood the need to suppress parts of herself so that she could be an instrument in a larger cause. Dwight Eisenhower organized his life not around impulsive self-expression but considered self-restraint. Dorothy Day, a devout Catholic convert and champion of the poor, learned as a young woman the vocabulary of simplicity and surrender. Civil rights pioneers A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin learned reticence and the logic of self-discipline, the need to distrust oneself even while waging a noble crusade.

Blending psychology, politics, spirituality, and confessional, *The Road to Character* provides an opportunity for us to rethink our priorities, and strive to build rich inner lives marked by humility and moral depth.

“Joy,” David Brooks writes, “is a byproduct experienced by people who are aiming for something else. But it comes.”

Praise for *The Road to Character*

“A hyper-readable, lucid, often richly detailed human story.”—The New York Times Book Review

“David Brooks—the New York Times columnist and PBS commentator whose measured calm gives punditry a good name—offers the building blocks of a meaningful life.”—Washingtonian

“This profound and eloquent book is written with moral urgency and philosophical elegance.”—Andrew Solomon, author of *Far from the Tree* and *The Noonday Demon*

“The voice of the book is calm, fair and humane. The highlight of the material is the quality of the author’s moral and spiritual judgments.”—The Washington Post

“A powerful, haunting book that works its way beneath your skin.”—The Guardian (U.K.)

“This learned and engaging book brims with pleasures.”—Newsday

“Original and eye-opening . . . At his best, Brooks is a normative version of Malcolm Gladwell, culling from a wide array of scientists and thinkers to weave an idea bigger than the sum of its parts.”—USA Today

“There is something affecting in the diligence with which Brooks seeks a cure for his self-diagnosed shallowness by plumbing the depths of others.”—Rebecca Mead, *The New Yorker*

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Review

“David Brooks’s gift—as he might put it in his swift, engaging way—is for making obscure but potent social studies research accessible and even startling. . . . [The Road to Character is] a hyper-readable, lucid, often richly detailed human story. . . . In the age of the selfie, Brooks wishes to exhort us back to a semiclassical sense of self-restraint, self-erasure, and self-suspicion.”—Pico Iyer, *The New York Times Book Review*

“David Brooks—the New York Times columnist and PBS commentator whose measured calm gives punditry a good name—offers the building blocks of a meaningful life.”—*Washingtonian*

“This profound and eloquent book is written with moral urgency and philosophical elegance.”—Andrew Solomon, author of *Far from the Tree* and *The Noonday Demon*

“[Brooks] emerges as a countercultural leader. . . . The literary achievement of *The Road to Character* is inseparable from the virtues of its author. As the reader, you not only want to know about Frances Perkins or Saint Augustine. You also want to know what Brooks makes of Frances Perkins or Saint Augustine. The voice of the book is calm, fair and humane. The highlight of the material is the quality of the author’s moral and spiritual judgments.”—Michael Gerson, *The Washington Post*

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“David Brooks breaks the columnist’s fourth wall. . . . There is something affecting in the diligence with which Brooks seeks a cure for his self-diagnosed shallowness by plumbing the depths of others. . . . Brooks’s instinct that there is wisdom to be found in literature that cannot be found in the pages of the latest social science journals is well-advised, and the possibility that his book may bring the likes of Eliot or Samuel Johnson—another literary figure about whom he writes with engaging sympathy—to a wider general

readership is a heartening thought.”—Rebecca Mead, *The New Yorker*

“If you want to be reassured that you are special, you will hate this book. But if you like thoughtful polemics, it is worth logging off Facebook to read it.”—*The Economist*

“Brooks uses the powerful stories of people such as Augustine, George Eliot and Dwight Eisenhower to inspire.”—*The Times* (U.K.)

“Elegant and lucid . . . a pitch-perfect clarion call, issued not with preachy hubris but from a deep place of humility, for awakening to the greatest rewards of living . . . *The Road to Character* is an essential read in its entirety—Anne Lamott with a harder edge of moral philosophy, Seneca with a softer edge of spiritual sensitivity, E. F. Schumacher for perplexed moderns.”—Maria Popova, *Brain Pickings*

“Brooks, author of *The Social Animal*, offers biographies of a cross section of individuals who struggled against their own weaknesses and limitations and developed strong moral fiber. . . . [He] offers a humility code that cautions against living only for happiness and that recognizes we are ultimately saved by grace.”—*Booklist*

“The road to exceptional character may be unpaved and a bit rocky, yet it is still worth the struggle. This is the basic thesis of Brooks’s engrossing treatise on personal morality in today’s materialistic, proud world. . . . [His] poignant and at times quite humorous commentary on the importance of humility and virtue makes for a vital, uplifting read.”—*Publishers Weekly*

About the Author

David Brooks is one of the nation’s leading writers and commentators. He is an op-ed columnist for *The New York Times* and appears regularly on *PBS NewsHour* and *Meet the Press*. He is the bestselling author of *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement*; *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*; and *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always Have) in the Future Tense*.

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Chapter 1

The Shift

On Sunday evenings my local NPR station rebroadcasts old radio programs. A few years ago I was driving home and heard a program called *Command Performance*, which was a variety show that went out to the troops during World War II. The episode I happened to hear was broadcast the day after V--J Day, on August 15, 1945.

The episode featured some of the era’s biggest celebrities: Frank Sinatra, Marlene Dietrich, Cary Grant, Bette Davis, and many others. But the most striking feature of the show was its tone of self--effacement and humility. The Allies had just completed one of the noblest military victories in human history. And yet there was no chest beating. Nobody was erecting triumphal arches.

“Well, it looks like this is it,” the host, Bing Crosby, opened. “What can you say at a time like this? You can’t throw your skimmer in the air. That’s for run--of--the mill holidays. I guess all anybody can do is thank God it’s over.” The mezzo--soprano Risë Stevens came on and sang a solemn version of “Ave Maria,” and then Crosby came back on to summarize the mood: “Today, though, our deep--down feeling is one of humility.”

That sentiment was repeated throughout the broadcast. The actor Burgess Meredith read a passage written by

Ernie Pyle, the war correspondent. Pyle had been killed just a few months before, but he had written an article anticipating what victory would mean: “We won this war because our men are brave and because of many other things—?—because of Russia, England, and China and the passage of time and the gift of nature’s materials. We did not win it because destiny created us better than all other people. I hope that in victory we are more grateful than proud.”

The show mirrored the reaction of the nation at large. There were rapturous celebrations, certainly. Sailors in San Francisco commandeered cable cars and looted liquor stores. The streets of New York’s garment district were five inches deep in confetti.¹ But the mood was divided. Joy gave way to solemnity and self--doubt.

This was in part because the war had been such an epochal event, and had produced such rivers of blood, that individuals felt small in comparison. There was also the manner in which the war in the -Pacific had ended—with the atomic bomb. People around the world had just seen the savagery human beings are capable of. Now here was a weapon that could make that savagery apocalyptic. “The knowledge of victory was as charged with sorrow and doubt as with joy and gratitude,” James Agee wrote in an editorial that week for Time magazine.

But the modest tone of Command Performance wasn’t just a matter of mood or style. The people on that broadcast had been part of one of the most historic victories ever known. But they didn’t go around telling themselves how great they were. They didn’t print up bumper stickers commemorating their own awesomeness. Their first instinct was to remind themselves they were not morally superior to anyone else. Their collective impulse was to warn themselves against pride and self--glorification. They intuitively resisted the natural human tendency toward excessive self--love.

I arrived home before the program was over and listened to that radio show in my driveway for a time. Then I went inside and turned on a football game. A quarterback threw a short pass to a wide receiver, who was tackled almost immediately for a two--yard gain. The defensive player did what all professional athletes do these days in moments of personal accomplishment. He did a self--puffing victory dance, as the camera lingered.

It occurred to me that I had just watched more self--celebration after a two--yard gain than I had heard after the United States won World War II.

This little contrast set off a chain of thoughts in my mind. It occurred to me that this shift might symbolize a shift in culture, a shift from a culture of self--effacement that says “Nobody’s better than me, but I’m no better than anyone else” to a culture of self--promotion that says “Recognize my accomplishments, I’m pretty special.” That contrast, while nothing much in itself, was like a doorway into the different ways it is possible to live in this world.

Little Me

In the years following that Command Performance episode, I went back and studied that time and the people who were prominent then. The research reminded me first of all that none of us should ever wish to go back to the culture of the mid--twentieth century. It was a more racist, sexist, and anti--Semitic culture. Most of us would not have had the opportunities we enjoy if we had lived back then. It was also a more boring culture, with bland food and homogeneous living arrangements. It was an emotionally cold culture. Fathers, in particular, frequently were unable to express their love for their own children. Husbands were unable to see the depth in their own wives. In so many ways, life is better now than it was then.

But it did occur to me that there was perhaps a strain of humility that was more common then than now, that there was a moral ecology, stretching back centuries but less prominent now, encouraging people to be more skeptical of their desires, more aware of their own weaknesses, more intent on combatting the flaws in their own natures and turning weakness into strength. People in this tradition, I thought, are less likely to feel that every thought, feeling, and achievement should be immediately shared with the world at large.

The popular culture seemed more reticent in the era of Command Performance. There were no message T-shirts back then, no exclamation points on the typewriter keyboards, no sympathy ribbons for various diseases, no vanity license plates, no bumper stickers with personal or moral declarations. People didn't brag about their college affiliations or their vacation spots with little stickers on the rear windows of their cars. There was stronger social sanction against (as they would have put it) blowing your own trumpet, getting above yourself, being too big for your britches.

The social code was embodied in the self-effacing style of actors like Gregory Peck or Gary Cooper, or the character Joe Friday on *Dragnet*. When Franklin Roosevelt's aide Harry Hopkins lost a son in World War II, the military brass wanted to put his other sons out of harm's way. Hopkins rejected this idea, writing, with the understatement more common in that era, that his other sons shouldn't be given safe assignments just because their brother "had some bad luck in the Pacific."²

Of the twenty-three men and women who served in Dwight Eisenhower's cabinets, only one, the secretary of agriculture, published a memoir afterward, and it was so discreet as to be soporific. By the time the Reagan administration rolled around, twelve of his thirty cabinet members published memoirs, almost all of them self-advertising.³

When the elder George Bush, who was raised in that era, was running for president, he, having inculcated the values of his childhood, resisted speaking about himself. If a speechwriter put the word "I" in one of his speeches, he'd instinctively cross it out. The staff would beg him: You're running for president. You've got to talk about yourself. Eventually they'd cow him into doing so. But the next day he'd get a call from his mother. "George, you're talking about yourself again," she'd say. And Bush would revert to form. No more I's in the speeches. No more self-promotion.

The Big Me

Over the next few years I collected data to suggest that we have seen a broad shift from a culture of humility to the culture of what you might call the Big Me, from a culture that encouraged people to think humbly of themselves to a culture that encouraged people to see themselves as the center of the universe.

It wasn't hard to find such data. For example, in 1950, the Gallup Organization asked high school seniors if they considered themselves to be a very important person. At that point, 12 percent said yes. The same question was asked in 2005, and this time it wasn't 12 percent who considered themselves very important, it was 80 percent.

Psychologists have a thing called the narcissism test. They read people statements and ask if the statements apply to them. Statements such as "I like to be the center of attention .??. I show off if I get the chance because I am extraordinary .??. Somebody should write a -biography about me." The median narcissism score has risen 30 percent in the last two decades. Ninety-three percent of young people score higher than the middle score just twenty years ago.⁴ The largest gains have been in the number of people who agree with the statements "I am an extraordinary person" and "I like to look at my body."

Along with this apparent rise in self-esteem, there has been a tremendous increase in the desire for fame. Fame used to rank low as a life's ambition for most people. In a 1976 survey that asked people to list their life goals, fame ranked fifteenth out of sixteen. By 2007, 51 percent of young people reported that being famous was one of their top personal goals.⁵ In one study, middle school girls were asked who they would most like to have dinner with. Jennifer Lopez came in first, Jesus Christ came in second, and Paris Hilton third. The girls were then asked which of the following jobs they would like to have. Nearly twice as many said they'd rather be a celebrity's personal assistant—for example, Justin Bieber's—than president of Harvard. (Though, to be fair, I'm pretty sure the president of Harvard would also rather be Justin Bieber's personal assistant.)

As I looked around the popular culture I kept finding the same messages everywhere: You are special. Trust yourself. Be true to yourself. Movies from Pixar and Disney are constantly telling children how wonderful they are. Commencement speeches are larded with the same clichés: Follow your passion. Don't accept limits. Chart your own course. You have a responsibility to do great things because you are so great. This is the gospel of self-trust.

As Ellen DeGeneres put it in a 2009 commencement address, "My advice to you is to be true to yourself and everything will be fine." Celebrity chef Mario Batali advised graduates to follow "your own truth, expressed consistently by you." Anna Quindlen urged another audience to have the courage to "honor your character, your intellect, your inclinations, and, yes, your soul by listening to its clean clear voice instead of following the muddled messages of a timid world."

In her mega-selling book *Eat, Pray, Love* (I am the only man ever to finish this book), Elizabeth Gilbert wrote that God manifests himself through "my own voice from within my own self. . . . God dwells within you as you yourself, exactly the way you are."⁶

I began looking at the way we raise our children and found signs of this moral shift. For example, the early Girl Scout handbooks preached an ethic of self-sacrifice and self-effacement. The chief obstacle to happiness, the handbook exhorted, comes from the overeager desire to have people think about you.

By 1980, as James Davison Hunter has pointed out, the tone was very different. *You Make the Difference: The Handbook for Cadette and -Senior Girl Scouts* was telling girls to pay more attention to themselves: "How can you get more in touch with you? What are you feeling. . . . Every option available to you through Senior Scouting can, in some way, help you to a better understanding of yourself. . . . Put yourself in the 'center stage' of your thoughts to gain perspective on your own ways of feeling, thinking and acting."⁷

The shift can even be seen in the words that flow from the pulpit. Joel Osteen, one of the most popular megachurch leaders today, writes from Houston, Texas. "God didn't create you to be average," Osteen says in his book *Become a Better You*. "You were made to excel. You were made to leave a mark on this generation. . . . Start [believing] 'I've been chosen, set apart, destined to live in victory.'"⁸

The Humble Path

As years went by and work on this book continued, my thoughts returned to that episode of *Command Performance*. I was haunted by the quality of humility I heard in those voices.

There was something aesthetically beautiful about the self-effacement the people on that program displayed. The self-effacing person is soothing and gracious, while the self-promoting person is fragile and jarring. Humility is freedom from the need to prove you are superior all the time, but egotism is a ravenous hunger in a small space—self-concerned, competitive, and distinction-hungry. Humility is infused with lovely emotions like admiration, companionship, and gratitude. "Thankfulness," the Archbishop of Canterbury,

Michael Ramsey, said, “is a soil in which pride does not easily grow.”⁹

There is something intellectually impressive about that sort of humility, too. We have, the psychologist Daniel Kahneman writes, an “almost unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance.”¹⁰ Humility is the awareness that there’s a lot you don’t know and that a lot of what you think you know is distorted or wrong.

This is the way humility leads to wisdom. Montaigne once wrote, “We can be knowledgeable with other men’s knowledge, but we can’t be wise with other men’s wisdom.” That’s because wisdom isn’t a body of information. It’s the moral quality of knowing what you don’t know and figuring out a way to handle your ignorance, uncertainty, and limitation.

The people we think are wise have, to some degree, overcome the biases and overconfident tendencies that are infused in our nature. In its most complete meaning, intellectual humility is accurate self-awareness from a distance. It is moving over the course of one’s life from the adolescent’s close-up view of yourself, in which you fill the whole canvas, to a landscape view in which you see, from a wider perspective, your strengths and weaknesses, your connections and dependencies, and the role you play in a larger story.

Finally, there is something morally impressive about humility. Every epoch has its own preferred methods of self-cultivation, its own ways to build character and depth. The people on that Command Performance broadcast were guarding themselves against some of their least attractive tendencies, to be prideful, self-congratulatory, hubristic.

Today, many of us see our life through the metaphor of a -journey—?a journey through the external world and up the ladder of -success. When we think about making a difference or leading a life with purpose, we often think of achieving something external—performing some service that will have an impact on the world, creating a successful company, or doing something for the community.

Truly humble people also use that journey metaphor to describe their own lives. But they also use, alongside that, a different metaphor, which has more to do with the internal life. This is the metaphor of self-confrontation. They are more likely to assume that we are all deeply divided selves, both splendidly endowed and deeply flawed—that we each have certain talents but also certain weaknesses. And if we habitually fall for those temptations and do not struggle against the weaknesses in ourselves, then we will gradually spoil some core piece of ourselves. We will not be as good, internally, as we want to be. We will fail in some profound way.

For people of this sort, the external drama up the ladder of success is important, but the inner struggle against one’s own weaknesses is the central drama of life. As the popular minister Harry Emerson Fosdick put it in his 1943 book *On Being a Real Person*, “The beginning of worth-while living is thus the confrontation with ourselves.”¹¹

Truly humble people are engaged in a great effort to magnify what is best in themselves and defeat what is worst, to become strong in the weak places. They start with an acute awareness of the bugs in their own nature. Our basic problem is that we are self-centered, a plight beautifully captured in the famous commencement address David Foster Wallace gave at Kenyon College in 2005:

Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe; the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness because it’s so socially repulsive. But it’s pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: there is no experience you have had that

you are not the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on. Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real.

This self--centeredness leads in several unfortunate directions. It leads to selfishness, the desire to use other people as means to get things for yourself. It also leads to pride, the desire to see yourself as superior to everybody else. It leads to a capacity to ignore and rationalize your own imperfections and inflate your virtues. As we go through life, most of us are constantly comparing and constantly finding ourselves slightly better than other people—more virtuous, with better judgment, with better taste. We're constantly seeking recognition, and painfully sensitive to any snub or insult to the status we believe we have earned for ourselves.

Some perversity in our nature leads us to put lower loves above higher ones. We all love and desire a multitude of things: friendship, family, popularity, country, money, and so on. And we all have a sense that some loves are higher or more important than other loves. I suspect we all rank those loves in pretty much the same way. We all know that the love you feel for your children or parents should be higher than the love you have for money. We all know the love you have for the truth should be higher than the love you have for popularity. Even in this age of relativism and pluralism, the moral hierarchy of the heart is one thing we generally share, at least most of the time.

But we often put our loves out of order. If someone tells you something in confidence and then you blab it as good gossip at a dinner party, you are putting your love of popularity above your love of friendship. If you talk more at a meeting than you listen, you may be putting your ardor to outshine above learning and companionship. We do this all the time.

People who are humble about their own nature are moral realists. Moral realists are aware that we are all built from "crooked timber"—from Immanuel Kant's famous line, "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." People in this "crooked--timber" school of humanity have an acute awareness of their own flaws and believe that character is built in the struggle against their own weaknesses. As Thomas Merton wrote, "Souls are like athletes that need opponents worthy of them, if they are to be tried and extended and pushed to the full use of their powers."¹²

You can see evidence of the inner struggle in such people's journals. They are exultant on days when they win some small victory over selfishness and hard--heartedness. They are despondent on days when they let themselves down, when they avoid some charitable task because they were lazy or tired, or fail to attend to a person who wanted to be heard. They are more likely see their life as a moral adventure story. As the British writer Henry Fairlie put it, "If we acknowledge that our inclination to sin is part of our natures, and that we will never wholly eradicate it, there is at least something for us to do in our lives that will not in the end seem just futile and absurd."

I have a friend who spends a few moments in bed at night reviewing the mistakes of his day. His central sin, from which many of his other sins branch out, is a certain hardness of heart. He's a busy guy with many people making demands on his time. Sometimes he is not fully present for people who are asking his advice or revealing some vulnerability. Sometimes he is more interested in making a good -impression than in listening to other people in depth. Maybe he spent more time at a meeting thinking about how he might seem impressive than about what others were actually saying. Maybe he flattered people too unctuously.

Each night, he catalogs the errors. He tallies his recurring core sins and the other mistakes that might have branched off from them. Then he develops strategies for how he might do better tomorrow. Tomorrow he'll

try to look differently at people, pause more before people. He'll put care above prestige, the higher thing above the lower thing. We all have a moral responsibility to be more moral every day, and he will struggle to inch ahead each day in this most important sphere.

People who live this way believe that character is not innate or automatic. You have to build it with effort and artistry. You can't be the good person you want to be unless you wage this campaign. You won't even achieve enduring external success unless you build a solid moral core. If you don't have some inner integrity, eventually your Watergate, your scandal, your betrayal, will happen. Adam I ultimately depends upon Adam II.

Now, I have used the word "struggle" and "fight" in the previous passages. But it's a mistake to think that the moral struggle against internal weakness is a struggle the way a war is a struggle or the way a boxing match is a struggle—filled with clash of arms and violence and aggression. Moral realists sometimes do hard things, like standing firm against evil and imposing intense self-discipline on their desires. But character is built not only through austerity and hardship. It is also built sweetly through love and pleasure. When you have deep friendships with good people, you copy and then absorb some of their best traits. When you love a person deeply, you want to serve them and earn their regard. When you experience great art, you widen your repertoire of emotions. Through devotion to some cause, you elevate your desires and organize your energies.

Moreover, the struggle against the weaknesses in yourself is never a solitary struggle. No person can achieve self-mastery on his or her own. Individual will, reason, compassion, and character are not strong enough to consistently defeat selfishness, pride, greed, and self-deception. Everybody needs redemptive assistance from -outside—from family, friends, ancestors, rules, traditions, institutions, exemplars, and, for believers, God. We all need people to tell us when we are wrong, to advise us on how to do right, and to encourage, support, arouse, cooperate, and inspire us along the way.

There's something democratic about life viewed in this way. It doesn't matter if you work on Wall Street or at a charity distributing medicine to the poor. It doesn't matter if you are at the top of the income scale or at the bottom. There are heroes and schmucks in all worlds. The most important thing is whether you are willing to engage in moral struggle against yourself. The most important thing is whether you are willing to engage this struggle well—joyfully and compassionately. Fairlie writes, "At least if we recognize that we sin, know that we are individually at war, we may go to war as warriors do, with something of valor and zest and even mirth."¹³ Adam I achieves success by winning victories over others. But Adam II builds character by winning victories over the weaknesses in himself.

The U--Curve

The people in this book led diverse lives. Each one of them exemplifies one of the activities that lead to character. But there is one pattern that recurs: They had to go down to go up. They had to descend into the valley of humility to climb to the heights of character.

The road to character often involves moments of moral crisis, confrontation, and recovery. When they were in a crucible moment, they suddenly had a greater ability to see their own nature. The everyday self-deceptions and illusions of self-mastery were shattered. They had to humble themselves in self-awareness if they had any hope of rising up transformed. Alice had to be small to enter Wonderland. Or, as Kierkegaard put it, "Only the one who descends into the underworld rescues the beloved."

But then the beauty began. In the valley of humility they learned to quiet the self. Only by quieting the self

could they see the world clearly. Only by quieting the self could they understand other people and accept what they are offering.

When they had quieted themselves, they had opened up space for grace to flood in. They found themselves helped by people they did not expect would help them. They found themselves understood and cared for by others in ways they did not imagine beforehand. They found themselves loved in ways they did not deserve. They didn't have to flail about, because hands were holding them up.

Before long, people who have entered the valley of humility feel themselves back in the uplands of joy and commitment. They've thrown themselves into work, made new friends, and cultivated new loves. They realize, with a shock, that they've traveled a long way since the first days of their crucible. They turn around and see how much ground they have left behind. Such people don't come out healed; they come out different. They find a vocation or calling. They commit themselves to some long obedience and dedicate themselves to some desperate lark that gives life purpose.

Each phase of this experience has left a residue on such a person's soul. The experience has reshaped their inner core and given it great coherence, solidity, and weight. People with character may be loud or quiet, but they do tend to have a certain level of self-respect. Self-respect is not the same as self-confidence or self-esteem. Self-respect is not based on IQ or any of the mental or physical gifts that help get you into a competitive college. It is not comparative. It is not earned by being better than other people at something. It is earned by being better than you used to be, by being dependable in times of testing, straight in times of temptation. It emerges in one who is morally dependable. Self-respect is produced by inner triumphs, not external ones. It can only be earned by a person who has endured some internal temptation, who has confronted their own weaknesses and who knows, "Well, if worse comes to worst, I can endure that. I can overcome that."

The sort of process I've just described can happen in big ways. In every life there are huge crucible moments, altering ordeals, that either make you or break you. But this process can also happen in daily, gradual ways. Every day it's possible to recognize small flaws, to reach out to others, to try to correct errors. Character is built both through drama and through the everyday.

What was on display in *Command Performance* was more than just an aesthetic or a style. The more I looked into that period, the more I realized I was looking into a different moral country. I began to see a different view of human nature, a different attitude about what is important in life, a different formula for how to live a life of character and depth. I don't know how many people in those days hewed to this different moral ecology, but some people did, and I found that I admired them immensely.

My general belief is that we've accidentally left this moral tradition behind. Over the last several decades, we've lost this language, this way of organizing life. We're not bad. But we are morally inarticulate. We're not more selfish or venal than people in other times, but we've lost the understanding of how character is built. The "crooked timber" moral tradition—based on the awareness of sin and the confrontation with sin—was an inheritance passed down from generation to generation. It gave people a clearer sense of how to cultivate the eulogy virtues, how to develop the Adam II side of their nature. Without it, there is a certain superficiality to modern culture, especially in the moral sphere.

The central fallacy of modern life is the belief that accomplishments of the Adam I realm can produce deep satisfaction. That's false. Adam I's desires are infinite and always leap out ahead of whatever has just been achieved. Only Adam II can experience deep satisfaction. Adam I aims for happiness, but Adam II knows that happiness is insufficient. The ultimate joys are moral joys. In the pages ahead, I will try to offer some real-life examples of how this sort of life was lived. We can't and shouldn't want to return to the past. But

we can rediscover this moral tradition, relearn this vocabulary of character, and incorporate it into our own lives.

You can't build Adam II out of a recipe book. There is no seven--point program. But we can immerse ourselves in the lives of outstanding people and try to understand the wisdom of the way they lived. I'm hoping you'll be able to pick out a few lessons that are important to you in the pages ahead, even if they are not the same ones that seem important to me. I'm hoping you and I will both emerge from the next nine chapters slightly different and slightly better.

Most helpful customer reviews

273 of 294 people found the following review helpful.

Interesting but not compelling

By Freudian Slips

I have opted for a "3" rating, which may be a little harsh for this well-written book, but that's because I found myself vacillating between enjoying parts of this book while disliking others. The book opens well with an interesting comparison of resume virtues vs eulogy virtues. Resume virtues are the accomplishments and skills we put on our resumes; eulogy virtues are the characteristics that are at the core of your being. Brooks then describes this contrast as Adam I vs Adam II and goes on to cite various examples of how our society has been taken over by resume virtues and Adam I beliefs and actions. He compares a football player's over-enthusiastic response to a touchdown with the more humble reactions to the US victory in WWII.

I enjoyed this opening discussion as well as several of the examples of individuals who had found their "vocation" (rather than "career") often through a circumstance in their life which propelled them toward it. Many times, their calling found them. I liked the emphasis on humility and the importance of being a good person not just doing good deeds. I also enjoyed reading about the Triangle Factory Fire and other incidents which pointed certain individuals toward their ultimate destinies. I truly admire the values he promotes and was pleasantly reminded of my father's generation which lived many of those values through WWII and other historic events.

But as I continued to read the book, I started to get a sense of "back in the good old days" nostalgia that implies (or blatantly states) that somehow suffering is the key to nobility and a good person. Stories are told of individuals who survived deaths of close family or children, endured hazing or torture, and it all started to sound a little preachy, no matter how eloquently it was stated. I am not someone who holds much for the "good old days"-- they weren't so good for women, minorities, the poor, etc. And Brooks acknowledges that early on, but he seems to forget that, and after awhile I grew tired of reading the book. For every person who survives a hazing/torture event and thrives, there are others who are crushed and destroyed, and I'm not sure that's because they lack character. It's inspiring to read about those who triumph in dire circumstances, but I'm left with trying to figure out what that means-- should life be harder, the rules be harsher so we will have greater character? There's a tone of "life was harder then" and forged stronger people, and I'm not sure I agree.

Bottom line-- it's an interesting and well-written book and I truly recommend the first portion of it. But after that, I felt like I had gotten the point. It just wasn't as compelling to read after the first few chapters.

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Misleading Title

By BRYON BALINT

If you enjoy reading biographies or history, you will probably enjoy this book. It is generally well-researched and the some of the profiles appearing in chapters 2 through 9 are interesting. But the book does not present

a "road to character" at all. In chapter 1 Brooks laments the character traits that he feels are valued today, and in subsequent chapters he presents examples of people that exhibit virtuous character traits. (As some other reviewers have said, by about chapter 7 the "back in the good ol' days things were better" feel gets tiresome). He doesn't make an effort to tie yesterday's "character" to today's character at all. Chapter 10, which is supposed to present his prescriptions, appears to have been hastily written and amounts to a checklist that says "try to be more like the people in chapters 2 through 9".

This was my first time reading Brooks so maybe fans of his will feel differently, but I was very disappointed.

45 of 51 people found the following review helpful.

I've been hungering for this book and I didn't even know it

By Jane in Milwaukee

The other night on PBS I saw Charlie Rose interview David Brooks about this book. Almost before it was over, I raced to Amazon and clicked "order now." Boy am I glad I saw that program.

This book focuses on "résumé virtues" vs. "eulogy virtues." While we ask a stranger at a bar, "what do you do?"...Brooks would like us to ask ourselves "what is my character?" In indepth study, he zeroed in on Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's terms Adam I and Adam II as the allegory to describe the two conflicting parts of humans. Adam I is "externally oriented" being career driven and ambitious; Adam II is focused internally on his values and moral quality. Just as JFK said, "Ask not what your country can do for; ask what you can do for your country"; Brooks concludes that Adam I wants to conquer the world while Adam II wants to obey a calling to serve the world.

Through a great introduction and then a series of essays of great people, Mr. Brooks leads us through his journey toward developing his best character: moving toward love, humility, joy, a greater purpose, passion. The essays include the lives of Eisenhower (actually, his mother Ida), George Marshall, George Eliot, Augustine and Samuel Johnson--what a panoply of people! No mention of a pope or Mother Teresa, Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. But flowing through considerations that some of these greats wrestled with.

I kept reading a few pages and then setting the book down to contemplate it, quite unusual for me. I guess this book speaks to something deep inside that I didn't have a vocabulary for before. What is character? What are our morals and how did we develop them...or did they develop us? These profound questions are answered from different angles via a discussion of social history and these and other individuals' lives which often flew in the face of society.

For example, in the interview with Charlie Rose, Brooks floored him when he asked what Rose thought Eisenhower's greatest challenge was: his terrible temper. After a long discussion about Ike's courageous mother, Brooks explains in the book the line from the Bible she quoted probably set him on the course toward general and president: "He that conquereth his own soul is greater than he who taketh a city." George Marshall provides an interesting comparison to Eisenhower. When FDR was looking for the man to lead Operation Overlord, the retaking of France, his first choice was Marshall. When Marshall found himself summoned to the Oval Office, FDR offered him the job. Marshall desperately wanted the position but he hemmed and hawed and said whatever the President thought best. Marshall was passed over for Eisenhower. Marshall didn't put "self" first but whatever was seen as best for the country.

Brooks says that if people only realized our nature is steered toward love instead of power and material things, we'd be a lot happier. But reaching joy also means you have to be willing to confront your own flaws and sins and to work on them constantly. These are a few of his ultimate conclusions:

--We don't live for happiness...we live for holiness.

--We are famously flawed but also splendidly endowed.

--In the struggle against your own weakness, humility is your great virtue and pride is the greatest vice.

--Character is built from your constant inner confrontation.

--The vices that lead us astray--the 7 Deadly Sins--are temporary; the elements of our character are long-lived.

--We can't do it ourselves...we need redemption. Jesus said we're all sinners--who am I to argue?

This book doesn't lend itself well to superficial skimming. If you're going to get something out of it, take your time. You may not agree with all the assumptions and tenets but, by gum, it's going to get you thinking.

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THE ROAD TO CHARACTER BY DAVID BROOKS PDF

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Review

“David Brooks’s gift—as he might put it in his swift, engaging way—is for making obscure but potent social studies research accessible and even startling. . . . [The Road to Character is] a hyper-readable, lucid, often richly detailed human story. . . . In the age of the selfie, Brooks wishes to exhort us back to a semiclassical sense of self-restraint, self-erasure, and self-suspicion.”—Pico Iyer, *The New York Times Book Review*

“David Brooks—the New York Times columnist and PBS commentator whose measured calm gives punditry a good name—offers the building blocks of a meaningful life.”—*Washingtonian*

“This profound and eloquent book is written with moral urgency and philosophical elegance.”—Andrew Solomon, author of *Far from the Tree* and *The Noonday Demon*

“[Brooks] emerges as a countercultural leader. . . . The literary achievement of *The Road to Character* is inseparable from the virtues of its author. As the reader, you not only want to know about Frances Perkins or Saint Augustine. You also want to know what Brooks makes of Frances Perkins or Saint Augustine. The voice of the book is calm, fair and humane. The highlight of the material is the quality of the author’s moral and spiritual judgments.”—Michael Gerson, *The Washington Post*

“A powerful, haunting book that works its way beneath your skin.”—*The Guardian* (U.K.)

“This learned and engaging book brims with pleasures.”—*Newsday*

“Original and eye-opening . . . At his best, Brooks is a normative version of Malcolm Gladwell, culling from a wide array of scientists and thinkers to weave an idea bigger than the sum of its parts.”—*USA Today*

“David Brooks breaks the columnist’s fourth wall. . . . There is something affecting in the diligence with which Brooks seeks a cure for his self-diagnosed shallowness by plumbing the depths of others. . . . Brooks’s instinct that there is wisdom to be found in literature that cannot be found in the pages of the latest social science journals is well-advised, and the possibility that his book may bring the likes of Eliot or Samuel Johnson—another literary figure about whom he writes with engaging sympathy—to a wider general readership is a heartening thought.”—Rebecca Mead, *The New Yorker*

“If you want to be reassured that you are special, you will hate this book. But if you like thoughtful polemics, it is worth logging off Facebook to read it.”—*The Economist*

“Brooks uses the powerful stories of people such as Augustine, George Eliot and Dwight Eisenhower to inspire.”—The Times (U.K.)

“Elegant and lucid . . . a pitch-perfect clarion call, issued not with preachy hubris but from a deep place of humility, for awakening to the greatest rewards of living . . . The Road to Character is an essential read in its entirety—Anne Lamott with a harder edge of moral philosophy, Seneca with a softer edge of spiritual sensitivity, E. F. Schumacher for perplexed moderns.”—Maria Popova, Brain Pickings

“Brooks, author of *The Social Animal*, offers biographies of a cross section of individuals who struggled against their own weaknesses and limitations and developed strong moral fiber. . . . [He] offers a humility code that cautions against living only for happiness and that recognizes we are ultimately saved by grace.”—Booklist

“The road to exceptional character may be unpaved and a bit rocky, yet it is still worth the struggle. This is the basic thesis of Brooks’s engrossing treatise on personal morality in today’s materialistic, proud world. . . . [His] poignant and at times quite humorous commentary on the importance of humility and virtue makes for a vital, uplifting read.”—Publishers Weekly

About the Author

David Brooks is one of the nation’s leading writers and commentators. He is an op-ed columnist for *The New York Times* and appears regularly on PBS NewsHour and Meet the Press. He is the bestselling author of *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement*; *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*; and *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always Have) in the Future Tense*.

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Chapter 1

The Shift

On Sunday evenings my local NPR station rebroadcasts old radio programs. A few years ago I was driving home and heard a program called *Command Performance*, which was a variety show that went out to the troops during World War II. The episode I happened to hear was broadcast the day after V--J Day, on August 15, 1945.

The episode featured some of the era’s biggest celebrities: Frank Sinatra, Marlene Dietrich, Cary Grant, Bette Davis, and many others. But the most striking feature of the show was its tone of self--effacement and humility. The Allies had just completed one of the noblest military victories in human history. And yet there was no chest beating. Nobody was erecting triumphal arches.

“Well, it looks like this is it,” the host, Bing Crosby, opened. “What can you say at a time like this? You can’t throw your skimmer in the air. That’s for run--of--the mill holidays. I guess all anybody can do is thank God it’s over.” The mezzo--soprano Risë Stevens came on and sang a solemn version of “Ave Maria,” and then Crosby came back on to summarize the mood: “Today, though, our deep--down feeling is one of humility.”

That sentiment was repeated throughout the broadcast. The actor Burgess Meredith read a passage written by Ernie Pyle, the war correspondent. Pyle had been killed just a few months before, but he had written an article anticipating what victory would mean: “We won this war because our men are brave and because of many other things—?-because of Russia, England, and China and the passage of time and the gift of nature’s materials. We did not win it because destiny created us better than all other people. I hope that in victory we are more grateful than proud.”

The show mirrored the reaction of the nation at large. There were rapturous celebrations, certainly. Sailors in San Francisco commandeered cable cars and looted liquor stores. The streets of New York's garment district were five inches deep in confetti.¹ But the mood was divided. Joy gave way to solemnity and self-doubt.

This was in part because the war had been such an epochal event, and had produced such rivers of blood, that individuals felt small in comparison. There was also the manner in which the war in the Pacific had ended—with the atomic bomb. People around the world had just seen the savagery human beings are capable of. Now here was a weapon that could make that savagery apocalyptic. “The knowledge of victory was as charged with sorrow and doubt as with joy and gratitude,” James Agee wrote in an editorial that week for Time magazine.

But the modest tone of Command Performance wasn't just a matter of mood or style. The people on that broadcast had been part of one of the most historic victories ever known. But they didn't go around telling themselves how great they were. They didn't print up bumper stickers commemorating their own awesomeness. Their first instinct was to remind themselves they were not morally superior to anyone else. Their collective impulse was to warn themselves against pride and self-glorification. They intuitively resisted the natural human tendency toward excessive self-love.

I arrived home before the program was over and listened to that radio show in my driveway for a time. Then I went inside and turned on a football game. A quarterback threw a short pass to a wide receiver, who was tackled almost immediately for a two-yard gain. The defensive player did what all professional athletes do these days in moments of personal accomplishment. He did a self-puffing victory dance, as the camera lingered.

It occurred to me that I had just watched more self-celebration after a two-yard gain than I had heard after the United States won World War II.

This little contrast set off a chain of thoughts in my mind. It occurred to me that this shift might symbolize a shift in culture, a shift from a culture of self-effacement that says “Nobody's better than me, but I'm no better than anyone else” to a culture of self-promotion that says “Recognize my accomplishments, I'm pretty special.” That contrast, while nothing much in itself, was like a doorway into the different ways it is possible to live in this world.

Little Me

In the years following that Command Performance episode, I went back and studied that time and the people who were prominent then. The research reminded me first of all that none of us should ever wish to go back to the culture of the mid-twentieth century. It was a more racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic culture. Most of us would not have had the opportunities we enjoy if we had lived back then. It was also a more boring culture, with bland food and homogeneous living arrangements. It was an emotionally cold culture. Fathers, in particular, frequently were unable to express their love for their own children. Husbands were unable to see the depth in their own wives. In so many ways, life is better now than it was then.

But it did occur to me that there was perhaps a strain of humility that was more common then than now, that there was a moral ecology, stretching back centuries but less prominent now, encouraging people to be more skeptical of their desires, more aware of their own weaknesses, more intent on combatting the flaws in their own natures and turning weakness into strength. People in this tradition, I thought, are less likely to feel that every thought, feeling, and achievement should be immediately shared with the world at large.

The popular culture seemed more reticent in the era of Command Performance. There were no message T-shirts back then, no exclamation points on the typewriter keyboards, no sympathy ribbons for various diseases, no vanity license plates, no bumper stickers with personal or moral declarations. People didn't brag about their college affiliations or their vacation spots with little stickers on the rear windows of their cars. There was stronger social sanction against (as they would have put it) blowing your own trumpet, getting above yourself, being too big for your britches.

The social code was embodied in the self-effacing style of actors like Gregory Peck or Gary Cooper, or the character Joe Friday on *Dragnet*. When Franklin Roosevelt's aide Harry Hopkins lost a son in World War II, the military brass wanted to put his other sons out of harm's way. Hopkins rejected this idea, writing, with the understatement more common in that era, that his other sons shouldn't be given safe assignments just because their brother "had some bad luck in the Pacific."²

Of the twenty-three men and women who served in Dwight Eisenhower's cabinets, only one, the secretary of agriculture, published a memoir afterward, and it was so discreet as to be soporific. By the time the Reagan administration rolled around, twelve of his thirty cabinet members published memoirs, almost all of them self-advertising.³

When the elder George Bush, who was raised in that era, was running for president, he, having inculcated the values of his childhood, resisted speaking about himself. If a speechwriter put the word "I" in one of his speeches, he'd instinctively cross it out. The staff would beg him: You're running for president. You've got to talk about yourself. Eventually they'd cow him into doing so. But the next day he'd get a call from his mother. "George, you're talking about yourself again," she'd say. And Bush would revert to form. No more I's in the speeches. No more self-promotion.

The Big Me

Over the next few years I collected data to suggest that we have seen a broad shift from a culture of humility to the culture of what you might call the Big Me, from a culture that encouraged people to think humbly of themselves to a culture that encouraged people to see themselves as the center of the universe.

It wasn't hard to find such data. For example, in 1950, the Gallup Organization asked high school seniors if they considered themselves to be a very important person. At that point, 12 percent said yes. The same question was asked in 2005, and this time it wasn't 12 percent who considered themselves very important, it was 80 percent.

Psychologists have a thing called the narcissism test. They read people statements and ask if the statements apply to them. Statements such as "I like to be the center of attention .??. I show off if I get the chance because I am extraordinary .??. Somebody should write a -biography about me." The median narcissism score has risen 30 percent in the last two decades. Ninety-three percent of young people score higher than the middle score just twenty years ago.⁴ The largest gains have been in the number of people who agree with the statements "I am an extraordinary person" and "I like to look at my body."

Along with this apparent rise in self-esteem, there has been a tremendous increase in the desire for fame. Fame used to rank low as a life's ambition for most people. In a 1976 survey that asked people to list their life goals, fame ranked fifteenth out of sixteen. By 2007, 51 percent of young people reported that being famous was one of their top personal goals.⁵ In one study, middle school girls were asked who they would most like to have dinner with. Jennifer Lopez came in first, Jesus Christ came in second, and Paris Hilton third. The girls were then asked which of the following jobs they would like to have. Nearly twice as many

said they'd rather be a celebrity's personal assistant—for example, Justin Bieber's—than president of Harvard. (Though, to be fair, I'm pretty sure the president of Harvard would also rather be Justin Bieber's personal assistant.)

As I looked around the popular culture I kept finding the same messages everywhere: You are special. Trust yourself. Be true to yourself. Movies from Pixar and Disney are constantly telling children how wonderful they are. Commencement speeches are larded with the same clichés: Follow your passion. Don't accept limits. Chart your own course. You have a responsibility to do great things because you are so great. This is the gospel of self--trust.

As Ellen DeGeneres put it in a 2009 commencement address, "My advice to you is to be true to yourself and everything will be fine." Celebrity chef Mario Batali advised graduates to follow "your own truth, expressed consistently by you." Anna Quindlen urged another audience to have the courage to "honor your character, your intellect, your inclinations, and, yes, your soul by listening to its clean clear voice instead of following the muddled messages of a timid world."

In her mega--selling book *Eat, Pray, Love* (I am the only man ever to finish this book), Elizabeth Gilbert wrote that God manifests himself through "my own voice from within my own self.???. God dwells within you as you yourself, exactly the way you are."6

I began looking at the way we raise our children and found signs of this moral shift. For example, the early Girl Scout handbooks preached an ethic of self--sacrifice and self--effacement. The chief obstacle to happiness, the handbook exhorted, comes from the overeager desire to have people think about you.

By 1980, as James Davison Hunter has pointed out, the tone was very different. *You Make the Difference: The Handbook for Cadette and -Senior Girl Scouts* was telling girls to pay more attention to themselves: "How can you get more in touch with you? What are you feeling???. Every option available to you through Senior Scouting can, in some way, help you to a better understanding of yourself.???. Put yourself in the 'center stage' of your thoughts to gain perspective on your own ways of feeling, thinking and acting."7

The shift can even be seen in the words that flow from the pulpit. Joel Osteen, one of the most popular megachurch leaders today, writes from Houston, Texas. "God didn't create you to be average," Osteen says in his book *Become a Better You*. "You were made to excel. You were made to leave a mark on this generation.???. Start [believing] 'I've been chosen, set apart, destined to live in victory.'"8

The Humble Path

As years went by and work on this book continued, my thoughts returned to that episode of *Command Performance*. I was haunted by the quality of humility I heard in those voices.

There was something aesthetically beautiful about the self--effacement the people on that program displayed. The self--effacing person is soothing and gracious, while the self--promoting person is fragile and jarring. Humility is freedom from the need to prove you are superior all the time, but egotism is a ravenous hunger in a small space—self--concerned, competitive, and distinction--hungry. Humility is infused with lovely emotions like admiration, companionship, and gratitude. "Thankfulness," the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, said, "is a soil in which pride does not easily grow."9

There is something intellectually impressive about that sort of humility, too. We have, the psychologist Daniel Kahneman writes, an "almost unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance."10 Humility is the awareness that there's a lot you don't know and that a lot of what you think you know is distorted or wrong.

This is the way humility leads to wisdom. Montaigne once wrote, “We can be knowledgeable with other men’s knowledge, but we can’t be wise with other men’s wisdom.” That’s because wisdom isn’t a body of information. It’s the moral quality of knowing what you don’t know and figuring out a way to handle your ignorance, uncertainty, and limitation.

The people we think are wise have, to some degree, overcome the biases and overconfident tendencies that are infused in our nature. In its most complete meaning, intellectual humility is accurate self-awareness from a distance. It is moving over the course of one’s life from the adolescent’s close-up view of yourself, in which you fill the whole canvas, to a landscape view in which you see, from a wider perspective, your strengths and weaknesses, your connections and dependencies, and the role you play in a larger story.

Finally, there is something morally impressive about humility. Every epoch has its own preferred methods of self-cultivation, its own ways to build character and depth. The people on that Command Performance broadcast were guarding themselves against some of their least attractive tendencies, to be prideful, self-congratulatory, hubristic.

Today, many of us see our life through the metaphor of a -journey—?a journey through the external world and up the ladder of -success. When we think about making a difference or leading a life with purpose, we often think of achieving something external—performing some service that will have an impact on the world, creating a successful company, or doing something for the community.

Truly humble people also use that journey metaphor to describe their own lives. But they also use, alongside that, a different metaphor, which has more to do with the internal life. This is the metaphor of self-confrontation. They are more likely to assume that we are all deeply divided selves, both splendidly endowed and deeply flawed—that we each have certain talents but also certain weaknesses. And if we habitually fall for those temptations and do not struggle against the weaknesses in ourselves, then we will gradually spoil some core piece of ourselves. We will not be as good, internally, as we want to be. We will fail in some profound way.

For people of this sort, the external drama up the ladder of success is important, but the inner struggle against one’s own weaknesses is the central drama of life. As the popular minister Harry Emerson Fosdick put it in his 1943 book *On Being a Real Person*, “The beginning of worth--while living is thus the confrontation with ourselves.”¹¹

Truly humble people are engaged in a great effort to magnify what is best in themselves and defeat what is worst, to become strong in the weak places. They start with an acute awareness of the bugs in their own nature. Our basic problem is that we are self-centered, a plight beautifully captured in the famous commencement address David Foster Wallace gave at Kenyon College in 2005:

Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe; the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness because it’s so socially repulsive. But it’s pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on. Other people’s thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real.

This self-centeredness leads in several unfortunate directions. It leads to selfishness, the desire to use other people as means to get things for yourself. It also leads to pride, the desire to see yourself as superior to

everybody else. It leads to a capacity to ignore and rationalize your own imperfections and inflate your virtues. As we go through life, most of us are constantly comparing and constantly finding ourselves slightly better than other people—more virtuous, with better judgment, with better taste. We're constantly seeking recognition, and painfully sensitive to any snub or insult to the status we believe we have earned for ourselves.

Some perversity in our nature leads us to put lower loves above higher ones. We all love and desire a multitude of things: friendship, family, popularity, country, money, and so on. And we all have a sense that some loves are higher or more important than other loves. I suspect we all rank those loves in pretty much the same way. We all know that the love you feel for your children or parents should be higher than the love you have for money. We all know the love you have for the truth should be higher than the love you have for popularity. Even in this age of relativism and pluralism, the moral hierarchy of the heart is one thing we generally share, at least most of the time.

But we often put our loves out of order. If someone tells you something in confidence and then you blab it as good gossip at a dinner party, you are putting your love of popularity above your love of friendship. If you talk more at a meeting than you listen, you may be putting your ardor to outshine above learning and companionship. We do this all the time.

People who are humble about their own nature are moral realists. Moral realists are aware that we are all built from "crooked timber"—from Immanuel Kant's famous line, "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." People in this "crooked-timber" school of humanity have an acute awareness of their own flaws and believe that character is built in the struggle against their own weaknesses. As Thomas Merton wrote, "Souls are like athletes that need opponents worthy of them, if they are to be tried and extended and pushed to the full use of their powers."¹²

You can see evidence of the inner struggle in such people's journals. They are exultant on days when they win some small victory over selfishness and hard--heartedness. They are despondent on days when they let themselves down, when they avoid some charitable task because they were lazy or tired, or fail to attend to a person who wanted to be heard. They are more likely see their life as a moral adventure story. As the British writer Henry Fairlie put it, "If we acknowledge that our inclination to sin is part of our natures, and that we will never wholly eradicate it, there is at least something for us to do in our lives that will not in the end seem just futile and absurd."

I have a friend who spends a few moments in bed at night reviewing the mistakes of his day. His central sin, from which many of his other sins branch out, is a certain hardness of heart. He's a busy guy with many people making demands on his time. Sometimes he is not fully present for people who are asking his advice or revealing some vulnerability. Sometimes he is more interested in making a good -impression than in listening to other people in depth. Maybe he spent more time at a meeting thinking about how he might seem impressive than about what others were actually saying. Maybe he flattered people too unctuously.

Each night, he catalogs the errors. He tallies his recurring core sins and the other mistakes that might have branched off from them. Then he develops strategies for how he might do better tomorrow. Tomorrow he'll try to look differently at people, pause more before people. He'll put care above prestige, the higher thing above the lower thing. We all have a moral responsibility to be more moral every day, and he will struggle to inch ahead each day in this most important sphere.

People who live this way believe that character is not innate or automatic. You have to build it with effort and artistry. You can't be the good person you want to be unless you wage this campaign. You won't even

achieve enduring external success unless you build a solid moral core. If you don't have some inner integrity, eventually your Watergate, your scandal, your betrayal, will happen. Adam I ultimately depends upon Adam II.

Now, I have used the word "struggle" and "fight" in the previous passages. But it's a mistake to think that the moral struggle against internal weakness is a struggle the way a war is a struggle or the way a boxing match is a struggle—filled with clash of arms and violence and aggression. Moral realists sometimes do hard things, like standing firm against evil and imposing intense self-discipline on their desires. But character is built not only through austerity and hardship. It is also built sweetly through love and pleasure. When you have deep friendships with good people, you copy and then absorb some of their best traits. When you love a person deeply, you want to serve them and earn their regard. When you experience great art, you widen your repertoire of emotions. Through devotion to some cause, you elevate your desires and organize your energies.

Moreover, the struggle against the weaknesses in yourself is never a solitary struggle. No person can achieve self-mastery on his or her own. Individual will, reason, compassion, and character are not strong enough to consistently defeat selfishness, pride, greed, and self-deception. Everybody needs redemptive assistance from -outside—from family, friends, ancestors, rules, traditions, institutions, exemplars, and, for believers, God. We all need people to tell us when we are wrong, to advise us on how to do right, and to encourage, support, arouse, cooperate, and inspire us along the way.

There's something democratic about life viewed in this way. It doesn't matter if you work on Wall Street or at a charity distributing medicine to the poor. It doesn't matter if you are at the top of the income scale or at the bottom. There are heroes and schmucks in all worlds. The most important thing is whether you are willing to engage in moral struggle against yourself. The most important thing is whether you are willing to engage this struggle well—joyfully and compassionately. Fairlie writes, "At least if we recognize that we sin, know that we are individually at war, we may go to war as warriors do, with something of valor and zest and even mirth."¹³ Adam I achieves success by winning victories over others. But Adam II builds character by winning victories over the weaknesses in himself.

The U--Curve

The people in this book led diverse lives. Each one of them exemplifies one of the activities that lead to character. But there is one pattern that recurs: They had to go down to go up. They had to descend into the valley of humility to climb to the heights of character.

The road to character often involves moments of moral crisis, confrontation, and recovery. When they were in a crucible moment, they suddenly had a greater ability to see their own nature. The everyday self-deceptions and illusions of self-mastery were shattered. They had to humble themselves in self-awareness if they had any hope of rising up transformed. Alice had to be small to enter Wonderland. Or, as Kierkegaard put it, "Only the one who descends into the underworld rescues the beloved."

But then the beauty began. In the valley of humility they learned to quiet the self. Only by quieting the self could they see the world clearly. Only by quieting the self could they understand other people and accept what they are offering.

When they had quieted themselves, they had opened up space for grace to flood in. They found themselves helped by people they did not expect would help them. They found themselves understood and cared for by others in ways they did not imagine beforehand. They found themselves loved in ways they did not deserve.

They didn't have to flail about, because hands were holding them up.

Before long, people who have entered the valley of humility feel themselves back in the uplands of joy and commitment. They've thrown themselves into work, made new friends, and cultivated new loves. They realize, with a shock, that they've traveled a long way since the first days of their crucible. They turn around and see how much ground they have left behind. Such people don't come out healed; they come out different. They find a vocation or calling. They commit themselves to some long obedience and dedicate themselves to some desperate lark that gives life purpose.

Each phase of this experience has left a residue on such a person's soul. The experience has reshaped their inner core and given it great coherence, solidity, and weight. People with character may be loud or quiet, but they do tend to have a certain level of self-respect. Self-respect is not the same as self-confidence or self-esteem. Self-respect is not based on IQ or any of the mental or physical gifts that help get you into a competitive college. It is not comparative. It is not earned by being better than other people at something. It is earned by being better than you used to be, by being dependable in times of testing, straight in times of temptation. It emerges in one who is morally dependable. Self-respect is produced by inner triumphs, not external ones. It can only be earned by a person who has endured some internal temptation, who has confronted their own weaknesses and who knows, "Well, if worse comes to worst, I can endure that. I can overcome that."

The sort of process I've just described can happen in big ways. In every life there are huge crucible moments, altering ordeals, that either make you or break you. But this process can also happen in daily, gradual ways. Every day it's possible to recognize small flaws, to reach out to others, to try to correct errors. Character is built both through drama and through the everyday.

What was on display in *Command Performance* was more than just an aesthetic or a style. The more I looked into that period, the more I realized I was looking into a different moral country. I began to see a different view of human nature, a different attitude about what is important in life, a different formula for how to live a life of character and depth. I don't know how many people in those days hewed to this different moral ecology, but some people did, and I found that I admired them immensely.

My general belief is that we've accidentally left this moral tradition behind. Over the last several decades, we've lost this language, this way of organizing life. We're not bad. But we are morally inarticulate. We're not more selfish or venal than people in other times, but we've lost the understanding of how character is built. The "crooked timber" moral tradition—based on the awareness of sin and the confrontation with sin—was an inheritance passed down from generation to generation. It gave people a clearer sense of how to cultivate the eulogy virtues, how to develop the Adam II side of their nature. Without it, there is a certain superficiality to modern culture, especially in the moral sphere.

The central fallacy of modern life is the belief that accomplishments of the Adam I realm can produce deep satisfaction. That's false. Adam I's desires are infinite and always leap out ahead of whatever has just been achieved. Only Adam II can experience deep satisfaction. Adam I aims for happiness, but Adam II knows that happiness is insufficient. The ultimate joys are moral joys. In the pages ahead, I will try to offer some real-life examples of how this sort of life was lived. We can't and shouldn't want to return to the past. But we can rediscover this moral tradition, relearn this vocabulary of character, and incorporate it into our own lives.

You can't build Adam II out of a recipe book. There is no seven-point program. But we can immerse ourselves in the lives of outstanding people and try to understand the wisdom of the way they lived. I'm hoping you'll be able to pick out a few lessons that are important to you in the pages ahead, even if they are

not the same ones that seem important to me. I'm hoping you and I will both emerge from the next nine chapters slightly different and slightly better.

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