



The Virtues and Character Development Project

The One who calls you is faithful, and He will do it.

I Thessalonians 5:24

BOOK REVIEW

The Road to Character

David Brooks

In his book, *The Road to Character*, David Brooks discusses character formation by dividing virtues into *résumé virtues* (those that are added to your résumé) and *eulogy virtues* (those said at your funeral). *Résumé virtues* focus on the external, are utilitarian, and reinforce pride (called *Adam I*), whereas *Eulogy virtues* are internal, and lead to moral living by focusing on humility and serving others (called *Adam II*). The key is to understand that the message of one's life is the person, who one is, not what one accomplishes.

Brooks points out that there was a shift in the culture from a focus on humility, where the self was rarely emphasized, to a culture where the focus is on self. *Be true to yourself* became the guiding principle for many, even in the church. Before the middle of the 20th Century, life was focused on self-confrontation, the inner life. Here, it was recognized that character is not innate or automatic. It must be developed in community with others. *Character is built both through drama and through the everyday.*

Using a series of short biographies to form each chapter, Brooks describes a variety of paths that individuals used in their development of character across their lifetimes. In *The Summoned Self*, Frances Perkins and Viktor Frankl are shown to learn to live in response to the question, *what does life want from me? Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets up for the individual.* The character development in Ida Eisenhower and her son Dwight D. Eisenhower are the focus of *Self-Conquest*. Their lives illustrate self-control as a means to overcome the inward depravity of human nature. People are fallen, yet splendidly endowed in God's image. Character is built by struggling against one's internal sin. In *Struggle*, Dorothy Day is presented as someone born with a passionate, ideal nature who needed to live an ideal life, who needed spiritual heroism. She guarded against spiritual pride, feeling self-righteous, living to *serve others*. She demonstrated that suffering shatters the illusion of self-mastery and teaches you gratitude. *In proud moments, we refuse to feel indebted, but in humble moments, people know they don't deserve the affection and concern they receive.* Today's culture of a celebration of self. The counterculture must be a surrender of self. The ending of Catholic mass with *deo gratias* reflects this. George C. Marshall is the exemplar for *Self-Mastery*. The view is that, *to lead a good life, it is necessary to focus more on our exemplars than on ourselves, imitating their actions as much as possible* (Thomas Aquinas). The Victorian view was that *change happens from the outside in, or the act precedes the virtue*. This is the value of institutional culture with *life-shaping and life-defining commitments to the community, which transcends a single lifetime*. It is a covenantal relationship. In contrast, society today places great emphasis on personal happiness. A. Philip Randolph, in *Dignity*, demonstrated how to amass power while not being corrupted by power, by being public-spirited. His protégé, Bayard Rustin, showed that the path to inner virtue required suppressing personal anger and violent tendencies. In *Love*, Mary Anne Evans, usually known as George Eliot, is presented as one who learned that holiness is inspired by work, the daily tasks of doing a job well. St. Augustine, in *Ordered Love*, moved from a life of inner chaos to seeing a universe beyond his control. He recognized the perversion of one's desires due to original sin. To

him, pride is believing that you can arrive at fulfillment on your own, driven by your own individual efforts. In surrendering to God, he found that *our hearts are restless until we find rest in Thee*. Brooks used Samuel Johnson and Michel de Montaigne, in *Self-Examination*, to show prose could be used in different ways to bring order to chaos.

In the final chapter, *The Big Me*, Brooks chose Johnny Unitas to represent the former culture of self-effacement and self-defeat, and Joe Namath to represent the new culture of being bigger than the team (or community). He concluded by walking the reader through the cultural change that became evident in the 20th Century. He provided evidence that the tradition of moral realism (*crooked-timber school of humanity*) from biblical times was a focus on sin and human weakness within, with a solution outside the person (God, church, business institutions, customs). In the 18th Century, moral romanticism arose. Here, the problems are viewed as residing outside the person and the solution is within. As moral realism collapsed after World War II, culture placed more emphasis on pride, self-actualization, and self-esteem. Moral authority came to be found *in each person's unique original self, with a greater emphasis on personal feelings as a guide to what is right and wrong. Sin is not found in yourself; it is found in the external structures of society – in racism, inequality, and oppression. To improve yourself, you have to be taught to love yourself, to be true to yourself, not to doubt yourself and struggle against yourself.*

Brooks concluded that social media allows a more self-referential information environment, where everyone can be their own master. We spent more time, energy, and attention on Adam I and less on Adam II. Even the meaning of character changed **from** selflessness, generosity, and self-sacrifice, **to** self-control, grit, resilience, tenacity. The focus of the culture moved from the *Little Me* to the *Big Me*: be big about yourself, assert yourself, advertise yourself. *This tradition tells you **how** to do the things that will propel you to the top, but it doesn't encourage you to ask yourself **why** you are doing them.* Even love in child-rearing is conditional, with emphasis on praising and honing, which leads to more focus on Adam I. As a result, the culture leads us to be more materialistic, more individualistic, less empathetic, and less morally articulate. Even public language is demoralized – more about self and less about character.

To counter this, we must understand that Adam II is more important than Adam I. Brooks proposed a *Humility Code* with 15 propositions that are the essence of what is learned from the biographies: (1) We don't live for happiness; we live for holiness; (2) Proposition one defines the goal of life; (3) Although we are flawed creatures, we are also splendidly endowed – fearfully and wonderfully made; (4) In the struggles against our own weakness, humility is the greatest virtue; (5) Pride is the central vice; (6) Once the necessities for survival are satisfied, the struggle against sin and for virtue is the central drama of life; (7) Character is built in the course of your inner confrontation; (8) The things that lead us astray are short term – lust, fear, vanity, gluttony. Things we call character endure over the long term – courage, honesty, humility; (9) No person can achieve self-mastery on his or her own; (10) We are all ultimately saved by grace; (11) Defeating weakness often means quieting the self; (12) Wisdom starts with epistemological modesty; (13) No good life is possible unless it is organized around a vocation; (14) The best leader tried to lead along the grain of human nature rather than go against it; and (15) The person who successfully struggles against weakness and sin may or may not become rich and famous, but that person will become mature.

This book provides an understanding of how culture has shifted and how that impacts the need for character formation. Many insights are given to help the reader see more clearly why discussion of character formation is necessary today. Recognition of the interdependence with others, in a life filled with gratitude, reverence, and admiration, will be important in the journey.