

NOTES FROM: *The Second Mountain*, by David Brooks

SUMMARY: What if you spent your whole life climbing the ladder to success, only to find that it was leaning against the wrong building?

In this spectacular and damn-near urgent book, political and cultural commentator David Brooks uses a different vertical metaphor - two mountains and a valley - to explore the devastating effects of our culture's unrestrained individualism, the dark night of the soul that's waiting for us when we discover that we've been sold a bill of goods, and what a full life of what he calls "moral joy" might look like.

The "first mountain" represents the relentless pursuit of success and achievement that's possessed the mind of the Western world for so long.

When you climb the first mountain, what you're really cultivating are the "résumé virtues" - the skills and talents you bring to the marketplace. On the second mountain, it's all about the "eulogy virtues" - what they talk about at your funeral.

The Second Mountain is an intensely personal book and one that will stop you cold in dozens of places as you pause to ponder the profundity of what others have discovered about the *true* aims of life. It *can't* just be all about the "self."

A real human life - a committed, *relational* life - is lived on the second mountain, with others. For others. Brooks explains how we got this all mixed up, and he also offers numerous practical and lofty ideas about how we can restore balance to our inner lives.

He's also fond of quoting George Eliot, author of *Middlemarch*, although my favorite quote of hers doesn't appear in *The Second Mountain*. It, however, nicely summarizes Brooks's central idea, and it goes something like this:

"What are we here for if not to make life a little less difficult for one another?"

"Life is not a solitary journey. It is building a home together. It is a process of being formed by attachments and then forming attachments in turn. It is a great chain of generations passing down gifts to one another."

"When a whole society is built around self-preoccupation, its members become separated from one another, divided and alienated. And that is what has happened to us. We are down in the valley. The rot we see in our politics is caused by a rot in our moral and cultural foundations - in the way we relate to one another, in the way we see ourselves as separable from one another, in the individualistic values that have become the water in which we swim."

“Happiness is the proper goal for people on their first mountain. And happiness is great. But we only get one life, so we might as well use it hunting for big game: to enjoy happiness, but to surpass happiness toward joy. Happiness tends to be individual; we measure it by asking, 'Are you happy?' Joy tends to be self-transcending. Happiness is something you pursue; joy is something that rises up unexpectedly and sweeps over you. Happiness comes from accomplishments; joy comes from offering gifts. Happiness fades; we get used to the things that used to make us happy. Joy doesn't fade. To live with joy is to live with wonder, gratitude, and hope. People who are on the second mountain have been transformed. They are deeply committed. The outpouring of love has become a steady force.”

“The valley is where we shed the old self so the new self can emerge. There are no shortcuts. There's just the same eternal three-step process that the poets have described from time eternal: from suffering to wisdom to service. Dying to the old self, cleansing in the emptiness, resurrecting in the new. From the agony of the valley, to the purgation in the desert, to the insight on the mountaintop.”

“Seasons of pain expose the falseness and vanity of most of our ambitions and illuminate the larger reality of living and dying, caring and being cared for. Pain helps us see the true size of our egotistical desires. Before they seemed gigantic and dominated the whole screen. After seasons of suffering, we see that the desires of the ego are very small desires, and certainly not the ones we should organize our lives around. Climbing out of the valley is not like recovering from a disease. Many people don't come out healed; they come out different.”

“Happiness is what we aim for on the first mountain. Joy is a by-product of living on the second mountain. We can help create happiness, but we are seized by joy. We are pleased by happiness, but we are transformed by joy. When we experience joy we often feel we have glimpsed into a deeper and truer layer of reality. A narcissist can be happy, but a narcissist can never be joyful, because the surrender of self is the precise thing a narcissist can't do. A narcissist can't even conceive of joy. That's one of the problems with being stuck on the first mountain: You can't even see what the second mountain offers. My core point is that happiness is good, but joy is better. Just as the second mountain is a fuller and richer phase of life after the first mountain, joy is a fuller and richer state beyond happiness. Moreover, while happiness tends to be fickle and fleeting, joy can be fundamental and enduring. The more you are living a committed life well, the more joy will be your steady state, the frame of mind you carry around with you and shine on others. You will become a joyful person. So throughout this book as in life, joy is our north star, our navigating point. If we steer toward joy, we will wind up at the right spot.”

“I now think good character is a by-product of giving yourself away. You love things that are worthy of love. You surrender to a community or cause, make promises to other people, build a thick jungle of loving attachments, lose yourself in the daily act of serving others as they lose themselves in the daily acts of serving you. Character is a good thing to have, and there's a lot to be learned on the road to character. But there's a better thing to have - moral joy. And that serenity arrives as you come closer to embodying perfect love.”

“It’s only then that they realize the truth that somebody nobody told them: Freedom sucks. Political freedom is great. But personal, social, and emotional freedom - when it becomes an ultimate end - absolutely sucks. It leads to a random, busy life with no discernable direction, no firm foundation, and in which, as Marx put it, all that’s solid melts to air. It turns out that freedom isn’t an ocean you want to spend your life in. Freedom is a river you want to get across so you can plant yourself on the other side - and fully commit to something.”

“People on the second mountain have made strong commitments to one or all of these four things: a vocation, a spouse and family, a philosophy or faith, and a community. A commitment is making a promise to something without expecting a reward. A commitment is falling in love with something and then building a structure of behavior around it for those moments when love falters.”

“At the beginning, it involves a choice - choosing this or that vocation. But 99.9 percent of the time it means choosing what one has already chosen. Just as all writing is really rewriting, all commitment is really recommitment. It’s saying yes to the thing you’ve already said yes to.”

“If you aren’t saying a permanent no to anything, giving anything up, then you probably aren’t diving into anything fully. A life of commitment means saying a thousand noes for the sake of a few precious yeses.”

“Some people say, Never settle: You had better feel insanely lucky to have this person. Others say, Be more realistic: You’re never going to find the perfect person, and it’s better to be in a decent relationship than alone. Jane Austen thought it was ‘wicked’ to settle, and I’m with her. If you marry without total admiration and rapture, you will not have enough passion to fuse you together in the early days, and you will split apart when times get hard. Moreover, settling is immoral because there is another person involved. The other person is not going to want to be the fourth best option in your life. Are you going into the relationship telling the person that you’re ‘settling’ in being with them? If you’re honest and tell him that, you’re introducing a fatal inequality into your relationship right away. If you don’t tell him that, you are lying to the person you are supposedly closest to in the whole world. Settling seems realistic, but only a love built on rapturous devotion is pragmatic in the end.”

“When you actually look around the world - parents looking after their kids, neighbors forming associations, colleagues helping one another, people meeting and encountering each other in coffee shops - you see that loving care is not on the fringe of society. It’s the foundation of society.”

“What you end up with is this grand sense of connection, the sense of metaphysical singleness. There is no such thing as an egoistic self that is separated from everyone and everything else.”

“The universe is alive and connected, these moments tell us. There are dimensions of existence you never could have imagined before. Quantum particles inexplicably flip together, even though they are separated by vast differences of time and space. Somehow the world is alive and communicating with itself. There is some interconnecting animating force, and we are awash in that force, which we with our paltry vocabulary call love.”

“The lesson is that the things we had thought were most important - achievement, affirmation, intelligence - are actually less important, and the things we had undervalued - heart and soul - are actually most important.”

“A life of deep commitments is possible. When we fall short, it will be because of our own limitations, not because we had an inadequate ideal.”

“When it comes to what we writers do, I like to apply an observation by D.T. Niles: We are like beggars who try to show other beggars where we found bread.”

“When I meet people leading lives of deep commitment, this fact hits me: Joy is real.”

Helen Keller: "There is joy in self-forgetfulness, so I try to make the light in others' eyes my sun, the music in others' ears my symphony, the smile on others' lips my happiness."

“Then, from the most structured and supervised childhood in human history, you get spit out after graduation into the least structured young adulthood in human history. Yesterday parents, teachers, coaches, and counselors were all marking your progress and cheering your precious self. Today the approval bath stops. The world doesn't know your name or care who you are. The person on the other side of the desk at every job interview has that distant Kanye attitude - there's a million of you; there's only one of me.”

“In the age of the smartphone, the friction costs involved in making or breaking any transaction or relationship approach zero. The internet is commanding you to click on and sample one thing after another. Living online often means living in a state of diversion. When you're living in diversion, you're not actually deeply interested in things; you're just bored at a more frenetic pace. Online life is saturated with decommitment devices. If you can't focus your attention for thirty seconds, how on earth are you going to commit for life? Such is life in the dizziness of freedom. Nobody quite knows where they stand with one another. Everybody is pretty sure that other people are doing life better. Comparison is the robber of joy.”

“What does it profit a man to sell his own soul if others are selling theirs and getting more for it?”

“Wealth and fame and accomplishment do not spare anybody from the valley.”

“Tribalism is community for lonely narcissists.”

“As the Sufi saying puts it, ‘I was a hidden treasure.’”

“Suffering that is not transformed is transmitted.”

Fyodor Dostoevsky: “When I look back on my past and think how much time I wasted on nothing, how much time has been lost in utilities, errors, laziness, incapacity to live; how little I appreciated it, how many times I sinned against my heart and soul - then my heart bleeds.”

Fyodor Dostoevsky: "Life is a gift. Life is happiness, every minute can be an eternity of happiness."

"The main activity of life is giving. Human beings at their best are givers of gifts."

"Moral formation is not individual; it is relational. Character is not something you build sitting in a room thinking about the difference between right and wrong and about your own willpower. Character emerges from our commitments. If you want to inculcate character in someone else, teach them how to form commitments - temporary ones in childhood, provisional ones in youth, permanent ones in adulthood. Commitments are the school for moral formation. When your life is defined by fervent commitments, you are on the second mountain."

"I've learned never to underestimate the power of a dinner table."

"If you wanted to generalize a bit, you could say there are six layers of desire:

Material pleasure: Having nice food, a nice car, a nice house.

Ego pleasure: Becoming well-known or rich and successful. Winning victories and recognition.

Intellectual pleasure: Learning about things. Understanding the world around us.

Generativity: The pleasure we get in giving back to others and serving our communities.

Fulfilled love: Receiving and giving love. The rapturous union of souls.

Transcendence: The feeling we get when living in accordance with some ideal."

"If the Nazis were trying to extinguish love from the world, she would stand as a force for it. As the world grew heartless, she felt called to enlarge her own heart."

Viktor Frankl: "It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life - daily and hourly. Our answer must consist not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which life constantly sets for each individual."

"Vocations invariably have testing periods - periods when the costs outweigh the benefits - which a person must go through to reach another level of intensity. At these moments, if you were driven by a career mentality you would quit. You're putting more into this thing than you are getting out. But a person who has found a vocation doesn't feel she has a choice. It would be a violation of her own nature. So she pushes through when it doesn't seem to make sense."

Anne Colby and William Damon in *Some Do Care*: "When an issue is less central to one's identity, it's possible to feel, for example, 'I really should do more to help those in need, but it's just too hard,' or 'I just can't find the time.' But when the issue lies at the very heart of who one is, it becomes unthinkable to turn away."

William Wordsworth: "What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how."

"A lot of what mentors do is to teach us what excellence looks like, day by day."

Alfred North Whitehead: "Moral education is impossible without the habitual vision of greatness."

Sir Richard Livingstone: "The most indispensable viaticum for the journey of life is a store of adequate ideals, and these are acquired in a very simple way, by living with the best things in the world - the best pictures, the best buildings, the best social or political orders, the best human beings. The way to acquire a good taste in anything, from pictures to architecture, from literature to character, from wine to cigars, is always the same - be familiar with the best specimens of each."

"It's really hard to know your current self, but it's pretty well impossible to know what your future transformed self will be like. You can't rationally think through this problem, because you have no data about the desires of the transformed you."

"The paradox of life is that people seem to deliberate more carefully over the little choices than the big ones. Before buying a car, they read all the ratings, check out resale values on the internet, and so on. But when it comes to choosing a vocation, they just sort of slide rather than decide. They slide incrementally into a career because someone gave them a job. They marry the person whom they happen to be living with. For many, the big choices in life often aren't really choices; they are quicksand. You just sink into the place you happen to be standing."

"The best advice I've heard for people in search of a vocation is to say yes to everything. Say yes to every opportunity that comes along, because you never know what will lead to what. Have a bias toward action. Think of yourself as a fish that is hoping to get caught. Go out there among the fishhooks."

"If you were born lucky, you should solve big problems."

"Find that place in the self that is driven to connect with others, that spot where, as the novelist Frederick Buechner famously put it, your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger."

"My own particular cover is that of a university professor. It's a way of looking responsible while attending to much more important things."

H.A. Dorfman: "Self-discipline is a form of freedom. Freedom from laziness and lethargy, freedom from expectations and the demands of others, freedom from weakness and fear - and doubt."

"At the grand level, marriage means offering love, respect, and safety, but day to day, there are never-ending small gestures of tact and consideration, in which you show you understood her moods, you cherish his presence, that this other person is the center of your world."

"Marriage comes as a revolution. To have lived as a one and then suddenly become a two - that is an invasion. And yet there is a prize. People in long, happy marriages have won the lottery of life. They are the happy ones, the blessed ones. And that is the dream of marital union that lures us on."

George Eliot: "What greater thing is there for two human souls than to feel that they are joined for life - to strengthen each other in all labor, to rest on each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent unspeakable memories at the moment of last parting?"

"Marriage is the sort of thing where it's safer to go all in, and it's dangerous to go in half-hearted. At the far end, when done well, you see people enjoying the deepest steady joy you can find on this earth."

"Politeness is at the core of morality."

Garry Shandling: "My friends tell me I have an intimacy problem, but they don't really know me."

"Love relies a bit on generous idealizations."

"Real forgiveness is rigorous. It balances accountability with mercy and compassion."

Martin Luther King Jr.: "He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love."

Allan Bloom: "The lover is the clearest expression of man's natural imperfection and his quest for perfection."

"When love strikes, it becomes clear that under the influence of our own egos we have been sleepwalking through life. It exposes the fact that the chasms within us cannot be filled by the food the ego hungers for."

"I sat at that table marveling at the fact that of all the people around it, only she was special to me. Why should that be? Everybody else seemed bright and kind, too. They all had heads and torsos, arms and legs. And yet I was connected by magical life-altering chords to just this one, magical chords that no one else in the room could see but which shaped the whole room and made it revolve around her."

C.S. Lewis: "Better this than parting. Better to be miserable with her than happy without her. Let our hearts break provided they break together."

"The obvious reason to step back and appraise, even at this late juncture, is that you're not the first person on earth to feel this way. Presumably, most of the couples that went on to get married walked through most of the same stages of intimacy as you did; they felt the same rush of love, the same sense of fusion and destiny - and then they married and then they got divorced. Love and passion are not enough. You're setting a higher bar."

“Since this is the most important decision of your life, you would think society would have prepared you for this moment. You would think that the schools would have provided you with course after course on the marriage decision, on the psychology of marriage, the neuroscience of marriage, the literature of marriage. But no, society is a massive conspiracy to distract you from the important choices of life in order to help you fixate on the unimportant ones.”

“Everybody spends too much time appraising the other person when making marriage decisions, but the person who can really screw things up is you.”

“The quality of the conversation is the quality of the marriage.”

“When J.F. Roxburgh, the headmaster of the Stowe School in Vermont, was asked in the 1920s about the purpose of his institution, he said it was to turn out young men who were 'acceptable at a dance, invaluable in a shipwreck.' It did that by exposing students to excellence.”

John Ruskin: “Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see.”

“A lot of our thinking is trying to have the opinion that will help you win social approval and admittance into the right social circles. The hard part of intellectual life is separating what is true from what will get you liked.”

“To read Whitman as he exults in joy, to be with Antigone as she struggles to bury her brother, to travel with Galileo as he follows his discoveries wherever they may take him, to be with the mathematician Pascal as he feels the direct presence of God, or to travel with Sylvia Plath into the depths of madness is not necessarily to learn a new fact, but it is to have a new experience.”

“The educated life is a journey toward higher and higher love.”

“I have few friends left over from high school or college, but I have about forty or fifty lifelong friends from camp, and for decades they did not even realize that Brooksie had a first name.”

“To be religious, as I understand it, is to perceive reality through a sacred lens, to feel that there are spiritual realities in physical, imminent things.”

“It was relatively easy to perceive God's presence up at American Lake. It was going to be a lot harder to actually practice a faith. I was always proud, striving, taking control. They don't make the eyes of needles big enough.”

“A commitment to faith is a commitment to stick with it through all the various seasons of faith and even those moments when faith is absent. To commit to faith is to commit to the long series of ups and downs, to intuitions, learning and forgetting, knowing one sort of God when you're twenty-five and a very different God at thirty-five, fifty-five, and seventy-five. It means riding out when life reveals itself in new ways and faith has to be reformulated once again. To commit to faith is to commit to change. It includes moments of despair, or it is not faith.”

“The sheer shock of it. Religion is a never-ending surprise. You never quite get comfortable with the idea that creation is alive, and that there is such a thing as universal love.”

“Today, faith doesn’t feel like faith in an old man with a white beard who is separating waters. It feels like faith in wider possibilities than I had imagined and living one’s life in the shadow of those possibilities. Reality shimmers.”

“Throughout this book, I’ve been talking about commitments as a series of promises we make to the world. But consider the possibility that a creature of infinite love has made a promise to us. Consider the possibility that we are the ones committed to, the objects of an infinite commitment, and that the commitment is to redeem us and bring us home.”

“A community is healthy when relationships are felt deeply, when there are histories of trust, a shared sense of mutual belonging, norms of mutual commitment, habits of mutual assistance, and real affection from one heart and soul to another.”

“So, how is community restored? Basically, it’s restored by people who are living on the second mountain, people whose ultimate loyalty is to others and not themselves.”

Peter Block: “Most sustainable improvements in community occur when citizens discover their own power to act. Whatever the symptom - drugs, deteriorating houses, poor economy, displacement, violence - it is when citizens stop waiting for professionals or elected leadership to do something, and decide they can reclaim what they have delegated to others, that things really happen.”

George Eliot: “The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

“Communities are defined by the treatment of the least among them.”

“This is possibility thinking. If you want to shift the culture, you’ve got to have a conversation you haven’t had before, one that is about long-term possibilities. What can this place be like in 2049?”

“They want all of the players in the system to be cooperating, not competing. They need to have purity of communication above all and transparency about the data. They don’t want anybody hiding data because they’re afraid of what punishments may come. They use data as a flashlight, not a hammer.”

Henry Moore: “The secret of life is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of every day for the rest of your life. And the most important thing is, it must be something you cannot possibly do.”

“A contract gets you benefits, but a commitment transforms who you are.”

T.S. Eliot: "The chief illusion of modern political activity is the belief that you can build a system so perfect that the people in it do not have to be good."

"The ultimate faith of relationalism is that we are all united at the deepest levels. At the surface, we have our glorious diversity. But at the substrate, there is a commonality that no amount of hostility can ever fully extinguish, that no amount of division can ever fully sunder."

"If you love a person and keep loving a person, they may lash out at first, but eventually they will break under the power of your care."

"When commitments are strong, when communication is pure, when the wounds of life have been absorbed and the wrongs forgiven, people bend toward each other, intertwine with one another, and some mystical combustion happens. Love emerges between people out of nothing, as a pure flame."

"This book is about relationship, and it grew out of relationships. Over the past five years, as life took its twists and turns, my old friendships grew deeper and dozens of new friendships came as gifts. One of the things I learned is that if you are in need and you go to your friends for help, they prize the opportunity to help you. It deepens your friendship and sets up a season, later on, when you can help them, after the tables are turned."

"The love that I feel for Anne and receive from her colors everything, warms everything. When people try to describe her, they usually settle on the same word: incandescent. This book has been, and the rest of my life will be, warmed and guided by Anne's light."

"What have you truly loved so far? What has ever uplifted your soul, what has dominated and delighted it at the same time?"