

SUMMARY by Jackie Glover

How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen

by David Brooks – Random House – 2023 – 306 pages

David Brooks is an op-ed columnist for the *New York Times*, a writer for the Atlantic, a commentator on the PBS Newshour and a #1 *New York Times* Best Selling author of 6 books. His books include *How to Know a Person*; *The Second Mountain*; *The Road to Character*; *The Social Animal*; *On Paradise Drive* and *Bobos in Paradise*.

In this excellent book, *How to Know a Person*, Brooks is “driven by his trademark sense of curiosity and his determination to grow as a person. He draws from the fields of psychology and neuroscience and from the worlds of theater, philosophy, history and education to present a welcoming, hopeful, integrated approach to human connection.” If you enjoyed Monica Guzman’s “I Never Thought of it That Way”, which Brooks mentions, you will appreciate Brooks’ deeper dive into why conversations with all kinds of people – even those with whom we disagree – are so necessary.

The book is divided into three parts – I See You; I See You In Your Struggles; and I See You With Your Strengths.

Why the use of ‘Seeing’? Brooks writes about the power of being seen, “Human beings need recognition as much as they need food and water. No crueler punishment can be devised than to *not* see someone, to render them unimportant or invisible. ‘The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them,’ George Bernard Shaw wrote, ‘but to be indifferent to them: that’s the essence of inhumanity.’ To do that is to say: You don’t matter. You don’t exist.”

Brooks was determined to learn and share the skills that go into seeing others, understanding others, making other people feel respected, valued and safe. Why? First, it is important to do this for pragmatic reasons – you can’t make big decisions in life well unless you’re able to understand others. Second, seeing others is important for spiritual reasons – no one can fully appreciate their own beauty and strengths unless those things are mirrored back to them in the mind of another. And third – seeing others is important for national survival. To survive, pluralistic societies require citizens who can look across difference and show the kind of understanding that is a prerequisite of trust – who can say, at the very

least, “I’m beginning to see you. Certainly I will never fully experience the world as you experience it, but I’m beginning, a bit, to see the world through your eyes.”

Brooks divides people into Diminishers and Illuminators. “Diminishers make people feel small and unseen. They see other people as things to be used, not as persons to be befriended. They stereotype and ignore. They are so involved with themselves that other people are just not on their radar screens. Illuminators, on the other hand, have a persistent curiosity about other people. They have been trained or have trained themselves in the craft of understanding others. They know what to look for and how to ask the right questions at the right time. They shine the brightness of their care on people and make them feel bigger, deeper, respected and lit up.”

Beginning with the negative, Brooks first describes how NOT to see a person – perhaps because we all have a degree of this tendency. As Humans, we share egotism (being too self-centered); Anxiety (too much noise in our heads to hear what’s going on in other heads); Naïve Realism (my view is the ‘objective’ view); the Lesser-Minds Problem (we have a lot of thoughts in our own minds – but only hear the thoughts that others express out loud and therefore view ourselves as much more complicated, deeper, more interesting, more subtle and more high-minded); Objectivism (adopt the views of market researchers, pollsters and social scientists who collect data on populations of people that is a terrible way to see an individual person); and the Static Mindset (a conception of who you are as a child does not accurately describe who you are as an adult).

Brook’s chapter on Illumination is particularly helpful and inspiring. We would all do well to follow this advice – “Now, you may be an atheist, an agnostic, a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, a Buddhist, or something else, but this posture of respect and reverence, this awareness of the infinite dignity of each person you meet, is a precondition for seeing people well. You may find the whole idea of God ridiculous, but I ask you to believe in the concept of a soul. You may just be chatting with someone about the weather, but I ask you to assume that the person in front of you contains some piece of themselves that has no weight, size, color, or shape yet gives them infinite value and dignity. If you consider that each person has a soul, you will be aware that each person has some transcendent spark inside of them. You will be aware that at the deepest level we are all equals. We’re not equal in might, intelligence, or wealth, but we are all equal on the level

of our souls. If you see people that you meet as precious souls, you'll probably wind up treating them well."

As opposed to the characteristics of a Diminisher, the illuminator has the following characteristics: tenderness, receptivity, active curiosity, affection, generosity, and a wholistic attitude. Brooks devotes a whole chapter to accompaniment (the art of coming beside and journeying with others) – where he emphasizes the need for patience, playfulness, and other-centeredness.

He goes on to tackle the central question of "What is a Person?" "If you want to see and understand people well, you have to know what you are looking at. You have to know what a person *is*."

He uses a moving story from the tsunami in Sri Lanka to illustrate the central truth that "a person is a point of view. Every person that you meet is a creative artist who takes the events of life and, over time, creates a very personal way of seeing the world."

So how do persons have good talks? Brooks says that "A good conversation is not a group of people making a series of statements at each other. (In fact, that's a bad conversation.) A good conversation is an act of joint exploration. Somebody floats a half-formed idea. Somebody else seizes on the nub of an idea, plays with it, offers her own perspective based on her memories, and floats it back so the other person can respond. A good conversation sparks you to have thoughts you never had before. A good conversation starts in one place and ends up in another." He lists some nonobvious ways to become a better conversationalist – Treat attention as an on/off switch, not a dimmer (don't do anything else while you are in a conversation); be a loud listener (show what's going on inside of you); favor familiarity (people love talking about what they know); make them authors not witnesses (have people describe what they experience); don't fear the pause (listen to learn, not respond); do the looping (confirm that you have really understood what the other person has said); use the midwife model (don't lead with insights but receive and build on the insights the other person is developing); keep the gem at the center (the truth that you both agree on) ; find the disagreement under the disagreement (look for the moral, philosophical roots of why you disagree); and don't be a topper (sit with the described experience and don't offer your own).

So what are the right questions for a conversation? Brooks says that questioning is a moral practice – one in which a posture of humility is necessary. You are confessing that you don't know and want to learn and you're also honoring that person. Brooks quotes psychologist Nicholas Epley - perspective *taking* is untrustworthy but perspective *receiving* works quite well.

Here are some of Brooks' favorite questions:

What crossroads are you at?

What would you do if you weren't afraid?

If you died tonight, what would you regret doing?

If we meet a year from now, what will you be celebrating?

If the next five years is a chapter in your life, what is that chapter about?

Can you be yourself where you are and still fit in?

And some more positive ones –

Tell me about a time you adapted to change; What's working really well in your life?; What are you most self- confident about?; What of your five senses is strongest?; Have you ever been solitary without feeling lonely?; and What has become clearer to you as you have aged?

Brooks starts Part II, I see you in your struggles, with a chapter on the Epidemic of Blindness. He says, we're living in the middle of some sort of vast emotional, relational, and spiritual crises. It is as if people across society have lost the ability to see and understand one another, thus producing a culture that can be brutalizing and isolating." And so all of the conversations can become hard conversations, to which he devotes an entire chapter. This is the chapter in which he reviews the literature on having difficult conversations and that has the most resonance to Monica Guzman's book (summarized on the Courageous Conversations site on the Atonement's webpage) and to the work of the Courageous Conversations Ministry Team.

Chapter 10 is the heart of the book where Brooks talks about the death by suicide of his dearest friend. This chapter is deeply personal, and I believe it is the motivation for the book. He is trying to figure out how to serve a friend who is in

despair and questioning himself about how he could have missed his friend's condition and how he could have prevented his suicide.

Chapter 11 is about the art of empathy. According to Brooks, empathy is a set of social and emotional skills that are a bit like athletic skills. Some people are more naturally talented at empathy, but everyone improves with training. Empathy consists of at least three related skills - mirroring (accurately catching the emotion of the person in front of you); mentalizing (figuring out why they are experiencing what they are experiencing); and caring (genuine concern for the person before them).

Brooks starts Part III – I see you in your strengths - with a discussion of personality and the energy that people bring into a room. The first is extroversion - are you an extrovert that draws energy from other people and positive emotions? The second is conscientiousness – do you have good impulse control? Are you disciplined, persevering, organized and self-regulating? The third is neuroticism – do you respond powerfully to negative emotions with a lot of fear, anxiety, shame, disgust and sadness? The fourth is agreeableness – are you good at getting along with others being compassionate, considerate, helpful and accommodating? And the fifth energy is openness – are you powerfully motivated to have new experiences and try on new ideas? But why are these big five personality traits important? Brooks explains that if you understand someone's traits, you understand a lot about them and can treat them appropriately. The next three chapters talk about life tasks (much of this information is found in Brooks' book – the Second Mountain); Life Stories and How your Ancestors Show up in your life. These things are important, along with personality traits, to try to really understand yourself and others.

My favorite chapter is the last one – What is Wisdom? In this chapter 17, Brooks really brings all of his points together about the relevance of seeing others deeply and being deeply seen. He writes, "we all know people who are smart. But this doesn't mean they are wise. Understanding and wisdom come from surviving the pitfalls of life, thriving in life, having wide and deep contact with other people. Out of your own moments of suffering, struggle, friendship, intimacy, and joy comes a compassionate awareness of how other people feel – their frailty, their confusion, and their courage. The wise are those who have lived full, varied lives, and reflected deeply on what they've been through."

I highly recommend this book to deepen our mutual commitment to be a church community who has courageous conversations. We all must strive to be illuminators – because Jesus was the ultimate Illuminator.

Brook writes, “an Illuminator is a blessing to those around him. When he meets others he has a compassionate awareness of human frailty, because he knows the ways we are all frail. He is gracious toward human folly because he’s aware of all the ways we are foolish. He accepts the unavoidability of conflict and greets disagreement with curiosity and respect.”