

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

DAVID BROOKS INTERVIEW
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

David Brooks
Journalist

Interviewed by Teddy Kunhardt

Date of Interview: October 17, 2019

Total Running Time: 3 hours 19 minutes and 25 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Story Features
Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:

David Brooks
Journalist

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Cool. Thank you. Thank you, David.

David Brooks
Journalist

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So talk about what you mean when you describe the American social fabric.

00:00:17:00

DAVID BROOKS:

My favorite definition of the American social fabric comes from Jane Jacobs. She was living in the West Village in New York and she was—she had a second floor apartment and she looked down onto the street, this was in the early 60's, and she saw a dad pulling on the arm of a nine-year old girl. And she didn't know if it was a kidnapping or just a father disciplining her child. And so she thought, "I should go down there and check this out."

00:00:42:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And as she was about to go down, she looks out on her street and she sees that a butcher has come out of the butcher shop and noticed the commotion. The owner of the fruit stand has come out, the locksmith has come out. So she writes, "That guy didn't realize it but he was surrounded." And so the social fabric is eyes on the street, it's people looking out for each other and just sort of extending care when it's needed. Danger, love, it's just the network of care and seeing each other.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And talk about how the American social fabric has been ripped apart.

00:01:17:00

DAVID BROOKS:

You know, so we used to live in a society where we were deeply planted and deeply connected. To get through the Depression, World War Two, Americans had to adopt a culture; we're all in this together. So it was very collective, very communal. If you grew up in Chicago in the 1950s, you didn't say I'm from Chicago, you said I'm from 59th and Pulaski, because your block was the place you were. And you knew

everybody on the block; there was no TV, there was no air conditioning. So in the summertime the kids were running through the homes. And that was—had really rich community.

00:01:48:00

DAVID BROOKS:

We rebelled against that culture because it was too anti-Semitic, too racist, too sexist, too conformist, too boring. The food was really bad. And so in the 60's we adopted a much more I'm free to be myself. I want to get rid of restraint and have an individual life where I can live the way I want to live. And that was the right move, but we've sort of overdone it over the last 60 years, and so we've gotten to a place where we're too different from each other, we're too distanced from each other, we're too buffered from each other.

00:02:17:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so you get the rise of loneliness, you get the rise of alienation. You have a 30% rise in suicide, a 70% rise in teenage suicide over the last eight or nine years. You get to a society where we are alone, alienated, bitter, and divided, and not really seeing each other very well.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

You briefly mentioned the close communities in the 50's. Can we go into that a little detail of—

00:02:40:00

DAVID BROOKS:

So if you grew up in the 50's in Chicago, you didn't say I'm from Chicago. You said I'm from 59th and Pulaski because your neighborhood and the immediate four or five ten-block area was your home and your base. And if you grew up there and you were a guy, you probably went to work at the Nabisco plant where your dad worked and your grandfather worked. You probably joined the union where your dad was a member and your grandfather was a member.

00:03:03:00

DAVID BROOKS:

You probably went to the parochial school where you were terrified of Father O'Shaughnessy or whatever it was. And so your life was bounded by that neighborhood. You didn't have mobility, but you had deep roots and deep connections and in the summertime there was no air conditioning and the TVs really hadn't penetrated very far. Everybody hung out outside. They had kaffeeklatsches, they had volleyball games; you had to work really hard to be alone. And they did not have a conception of privacy the way we do today.

00:03:33:00

DAVID BROOKS:

In my neighborhood right now, if I knocked on somebody's door at 8:30 at night, it would be like the grossest violation of privacy. But in Chicago and in lots of American communities in the 1950's, that's what they did. They knocked on each other's door and they just hung out. And so it was densely connected communities with limitations and with some conformity and a lot of social pressure, but they had rich relationships with one another.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Good, but then the downsides. There was racism, anti-Semitism, women were trapped. You've just talked about the Ying, now talk about the Yang.

00:04:09:00

DAVID BROOKS:

So the great fear in the 50's that a lot of writers wrote about was conformity, soul-crushing conformity. People felt they were living out their social roles but they were dead inside. And that was particularly true for women. Betty Freidan talked about the anxiety that has no name where women were trapped in the home and felt their great purpose in life was unfulfilled and they were just bored out of their minds basically. And so you had a culture that had tight boundaries, but was intolerant of racial difference, was intolerant of much lifestyle difference, was intolerant of women exploring their full potential.

00:04:45:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so it was a culture with great deal of boundaries holding people down and finally people said enough, and we're just going to have a rebellion and we had the 1960's.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Individual, new loneliness came out. Can you talk about that?

00:05:01:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. So we had a cultural revolution in the 1960's. And to me it's symbolized by one of the great events of my childhood, which was Super Bowl III. And in Super Bowl III on one side of the—team was

Baltimore Colts and there was a quarterback named Johnny Unitas who was a classic 1950's guy. Crew cut, kind of boring, just did his job like a plumber. Completely unflashy, an organization man. On the other side of the field for the New York Jets there was a quarterback named Joe Namath who grew up just miles from where Johnny Unitas grew up but ten years younger.

00:05:33:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And he had an entirely different culture. He was flamboyant, long hair, swinger, partying all night before the games. Joe Namath wrote a memoir called, *I Can't Wait Until Tomorrow ... Cause I Get Better Looking Everyday*. And Johnny Unitas would not have written that memoir. So in these two individuals you see how the culture shifted. In the 50's it was cool to be old, by the 60's it was cool to be young.

00:05:54:00

DAVID BROOKS:

In the 50's it was cool to be institutional, by the 60's it was cool to be a rebel. And so you see a whole shift in values from one thing people admired in the 50's to another thing people admired in the 60's and people growing up in the 60's, 70's and 80's, had very different attitudes to authority, very different attitudes about their personal space, very different attitudes about freedom. I want absence of restraint. I want to do what I want to do, I want to do what myself wants to do. And that was great in some ways. It created a very creative culture. We could not have had Silicon Valley without that rebel ethos and the love of disruption. But we took it to an extreme and so we got to a place where we were too separate from each other.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

But talk about how a culture changes.

00:06:40:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, a culture changes when a small group of people find a better way to live and the rest of us copy them. So in the 1960's, for example, a small group of people founded communes, they went to Woodstock, they lived in Washington Square Park with long hair and free love and rock music. And everybody else said yeah that's pretty cool. And so more and more people began to copy them and then they started singing songs about rebellion. I'm a rambling man, I'm born to run. I'm a free bird. And through that music really, through rock music, a whole different culture and a different way of picturing your life and imagining your life seeped slowly into the culture. First with a small group of beatniks, then with hippies, and then with college students on campus and eventually throughout the whole culture.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So why do Americans have less faith in the nation's institutions?

00:07:33:00

DAVID BROOKS:

If you go back to the 50's and you ask people, do you trust the institutions of your society? 70 or 80% said yeah, the institutions of my society are working well. Now if you ask people that question, it's 22%. People have lost faith, and they've lost faith in each other. And the loss of faith in the institutions happened all at once. It was Vietnam, it was Watergate, it was the sort of stagnation of the 1970's.

And so people decided the government's not working anymore. The more disturbing thing is loss of faith in each other. If you asked people in the 50's, do you trust your neighbors? 60% said yeah, my neighbors are trustworthy. Now if you ask people that question, 33% say yes, my neighbors are trustworthy and only 19% of millennials. And so the younger you go, the more distrust of other people there is. And so that has happened by generation. Each generation is more distrustful of the other and the reason they're distrustful is not perception, it's reality. It's because people are not as trustworthy. And so whether it's in their dating lives, their personal relationships, their business relationships, there's more betrayal.

00:08:39:00

DAVID BROOKS:

So last night I met a woman who teaches at a school and she was telling one of her students that she was gonna go on vacation to visit her best friend. And the kid started weeping and she said, "What's wrong, what's wrong?" And he said to her, "You're gonna leave forever and you're never coming back." And he said that because a lot of adults in his life have left forever and never came back, and so she tried to reassure him and said, "No, I'm coming back. I'm just going to visit my friend." And she took off her watch and she handed it to the kid and said, "Hold my watch till I get back. I'm gonna come back and get my watch." And somebody coming back was a new experience for that kid, but she came back.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And did giving him the watch satisfy his fear?

00:09:28:00

DAVID BROOKS:

I think it did. I think he felt well, maybe she is coming back. I have a friend who has a—runs a program in Baltimore named Sarah Hemminger and she takes kids who are underperforming in the Baltimore schools and she creates relationships with them. And when an adult tries to create a relationship with a lot of these kids, the first thing they do is they reject them because they say, if you get close to me, you're gonna betray me, you're gonna leave me and so I'm gonna reject you first. And Sarah says it's identity changing for a kid when somebody keeps showing up after you've rejected them. And suddenly these people have someone in their life who they reject but the person keeps showing up and she says it's identity changing also to be the one rejected and then you have to keep coming back to that kid. But when you're dealing with relationships with a lot of young people in American society, you have to overcome waves of fear and distrust and that's just the reality of the world we live in.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Why is it critical that we look inward first?

00:10:27:00

DAVID BROOKS:

At the core of our problem is a problem we don't see each other very well. We generalize about each other. We stereotype each other. We ignore each other. And so the core problem in American society is a lot of people feel unseen and disrespected. Where blacks feel that whites don't understand their daily experience. Where rural people feel looked down upon by urban people. Where teenagers who are depressed feel that no one knows them at all. Where husbands and wives are trapped in bad marriages and feel that the person who

9

should know them best actually has no clue. And so this is just not a big economic thing, this is the intimate act of knowing other people. And whether we're good at it or not. And we've gotten to a place where we're just not that good at it.

00:11:11:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And in order to behold others you have to be willing to be beheld. You have to be willing to be vulnerable. Then the other person will hold your vulnerability and give it back to you. We, ourselves, have to become better people, more open people, more vulnerable people, more expert at building relationships. And so that's the sort of thing that is not just the thing you do, it's a way of being. It's a process of transforming who you are so you're able to be vulnerable, so you're able to trust, so you're able to walk alongside someone, you're able to harmonize with someone. And that's why it's not enough just to think of external fixes for our problem. It's an internal transformation, a moral transformation, a cultural transformation, a psychological transformation that absolves each of us in all of our relationships.

00:11:57:00

DAVID BROOKS:

One of the things you find when you have cultural change is that people realize that personal transformation and social transformation have to happen at the same time. In order to have a better society, we have to be better people. We have to have a different set of values, not the values of the ego, not the values of competition but the values of solidarity and bonding. And so it involves shedding some of the ego desires and it involves seizing some of the others. And I think most of us become better people in one of two ways. Sometimes we get loved into it. Someone extends such love and care that our heart opens up

and we become the kind of people that are capable of bonding with others.

00:12:38:00

DAVID BROOKS:

For other people and for most of us probably it's a moment of suffering. You go through a valley in your life and what suffering does as the theologian Paul Tillich said, "Suffering carves through what you thought was the floor of the basement of your soul and reveals a cavity below that. And it carves through that floor and reveals another cavity." You just see deeper into yourself than you'd ever seen before. And when you see that deep into yourself in these moments of suffering, you realize that only spiritual and relational food will fill that gap and you realize you have to live at a different register. You have to have a wider consciousness. And when you do that, then you become the sort of person who is able to make connections because you've exposed the soft parts of yourself and opened up the crusty top-soil above and you become the kind of person whose capable of being adhesive, capable of offering love, capable of offering vulnerability, you become a different person. And after enough people have become that, and extend that care to each other, then you begin to see cultural shift, you begin to see social change.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

One thing that's throughout all your three books is losing ego. Is there a strategy to losing ego?

00:13:44:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Right. You know, losing ego is something you never entirely do. We all want to think about ourselves, we all want to think the world really likes me. And I wrote a book about how important it is to get deeper than ego but when I'm on my book tour, I'm checking my amazon ranking every hour. So like it's a constant battle. But I think you do see people who have done it. You see them all the time. I get to work with a very famous cellist named Yo-Yo Ma. And he lives his life as a gift for others. Every time he runs into a human being it's like he never met a human being before. It's like these things are so amazing. And there's another human being, they're so amazing. And so he lives in a way that expresses delight every time he meets a person. And he's not struggling to be the most famous one in the room anymore. He's just delighted by others and I have—I certainly about once a month I'd say, I run across somebody who just radiates a sort of joy and they genuinely care about others.

00:14:43:00

DAVID BROOKS:

They take delight in other people's good and they're not competitive. They're not like, how does this person think about me? They genuinely are thinking about another person. I knew a guy when I was young named Wes Wubinhorst and he was sort of a holy child, really. He talked in whistles and pops and he was exuberant and he just was a man for others. He had seen hard things in his life. He worked in Honduras; he worked with battered women in Annapolis, Maryland, and so he'd seen the worst that life can offer people. And yet his life was pure service. It was, what can I do for those women? What can I do for the people in Honduras? And I never saw him particularly talk about himself. He lived as gift and very few of us are ever going to achieve that. But we can all shed a little of our acute self-consciousness some of the time and just say, well how am I going

12

to serve others? And I think most of us achieve that in parenthood. When my oldest kid was—when he was born, he had a low Apgar score, he had bad health. It was a tough delivery.

00:15:51:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And when you—and they whisked him off to the intensive care. And I remember thinking that night, suppose he only lives thirty minutes, will his life be worth a lifetime of suffering for his mother and myself? And if you asked me that question before he was born, I would have said no, that's ridiculous. A lifetime of grief for a thirty seconds of a creature that doesn't even know it's alive? And after he was born, I came—became aware of a level of love and devotion that I did not know existed before having children. And so by that very act, most of us get transformed and we want to serve our kids, we want to make promises to our kids; we want to be there for them. And so out of that transformation comes a different way of being in the world. And for most of us, parenthood is the big shock that opens up the heart to that sort of way of living.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So you were just talking about the joy of when your eldest child was born. Describe that moment you held him for the first time.

00:16:59:00

DAVID BROOKS:

A friend of mine when her daughter was born she said, "I found that I loved her more than evolution required." And I've always loved that sentiment because some things we do pass down our genes, some things we do in life to pay the rent but there's an extra layer of

enchantment in life if we're willing to tap into it that is our illimitable ability to care for one another. Penguins are really loyal to each other but they don't have the kind of love that we have for the ones we love. And with that when you live in that realm, you're living in an enchanted realm. I remember one time I drove home from work and it was a summer and I got home and I pulled into my driveway and I looked in the back yard and my kids who are then like twelve, nine and four were playing with a ball and they were kicking it up in the air and chasing each other across the yard and they were giggling and rolling all over each other and having the greatest time.

00:17:52:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so I pull up and I'm just looking at them through the windshield of my car, and the summer sun was coming through the trees and my lawn for some reason looked perfect, and I became aware of a level of joy that's greater than anything you ever feel at work. It's just a picture of family happiness and it's realized it's a level of joy that you couldn't possibly earn but that reality sort of slips outside its boundaries. And that is something mystical in human relationships that it doesn't quite make sense. It's super abundant, but it is—there is something deep inside ourselves capable of that kind of gracious care.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

You describe yourself as a teacher. Can you talk about your job as a journalist and your vocation that has taken you on a pilgrimage?

DAVID BROOKS:

When I was seven, I read a book called *Paddocks and the Bear* and I discovered at that moment I wanted to be a writer. And I've been writing for 50 years since, almost every day. Maybe I've missed 200 days in the course of my whole lifetime. And I have decent communication skills. I say I'm an average person with above average communication skills. And when you have decent communication skills, you can get by on glibness. You can get by on the fact that you can be charming in print; you can be charming in your speech. You can glide superficially in life.

00:19:18:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And I remember in my 30's there was a time I thought I'm so glad I'm superficial because look at all these deep people and they're suffering and I'm just cruising. And it seemed plausible at the time, but eventually the wages of sin or sin. If you live a life on a superficial level; you'll find that you're living a dispassionate life and you'll find a shallow life and you'll find parts of your heart and soul are stuck buried down deep inside, unable to get out, unable to express themselves, unable to be touched. And so most of my writing has been an attempt to work on my own problems and get a little deeper. I wrote a book about emotion that was at a time when I wasn't feeling that much emotion. Because I wanted to understand emotion. Then I wrote a book about moral development because I needed moral development. Then I wrote a book about spiritual life and relational intimacy because I need to get better at all of those things. So at least my kind of writing, and I think for a lot of people, you're just working your shit out in public. You're just trying to become the best form of yourself you can be and the way that I ended up doing that was just through writing, trying to write myself into being a better person.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And what do you mean by being—you're a middle man?

00:20:30:00

DAVID BROOKS:

So some people are geniuses and they come up with brilliant thoughts and that's their writing. I don't have that kind of mind. So what I do is I do a lot of reading and I try to take the parts that meant something to me and I try to share it with the readers. And somebody said writers are—we're beggars who tell other beggars where we found bread. And so if I read Dostoyevsky or if I read Tolstoy or George Elliot and I find a passage that's meaningful to me, then I put it in my books because I want to pass it along. These are jewels of insight that are just deep guides of wisdom and how to live.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So you're reading a book. You find a quote you like, what do you do?

DAVID BROOKS:

When I read books, I mark—I write in books, I write a lot. And then I get a stack of books that I've read and marked up and I go over to FedEx office and I Xerox off every page and—that I've marked on and then I have stacks and stacks in my office. And then the way I write my books is not by typing into a keyboard. I make piles on the floor on the carpet of my living room or of my office, and each pile is a section of my book or even a paragraph.

00:21:51:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so to me the act of writing is not typing into a keyboard. The act of writing is crawling around on the floor of my living room and organizing my piles. And there are moments when I'm organizing my piles, I'm taking all these Xerox pages and I'm moving them here, moving them there, see what goes together, see what the structure is, and thoughts are coming out. I'm scribbling on post-it notes. And it's like the best part of my job. It's those moments when creativity actually happens when I'm crawling around writing on post-it notes. And organizing my piles and writing is about structure and traffic management. It's not about the prose.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And that system seems to work for you but have you tried just typing into Microsoft Word?

DAVID BROOKS:

You know, I tell my students and they don't listen that by the time you start typing into the keyboard, your paper should be 80% done. You have to get the structure right. If you don't get the structure right, nothing else will follow, and so I spend a lot of time on structure. And for some reason I just have a geographic mentality. I have to see it laid out on the floor in a landscape. Some people I've known—everybody has a system. Some people write on the walls in pencil each book and they structure it so they can see it on the walls and then they finish the book and they paint over the wall and they write on the next layer of paint. But every writer I know has some sort of way to create a structure around the vast amount of information you're gonna put in any piece.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So you've written and talked about that you had a happy childhood. Why was that important?

00:23:20:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, I had a completely untroubled childhood. I grew up in New York City. I went to a wonderful school called Grace Church School. I joke I was part of the all-Jewish boys davening choir at Grace where we would sing the hymns and to square it with our religion we wouldn't sing the word Jesus, or the volume would drop down in the church. I had loving parents who offered love but not really talking about it. We were in the kind of family that was not expressive about love. We showed love, we were aware of love, but we were not expressive. And I think in my case that created a blockage where I had the advantage of having a secure childhood but I didn't always have the capacity to express with my mouth the feelings that were in my heart. And so like one of the worst moments for me and most shameful moments in my life was toward the end of my grandfather's life, and my grandfather really raised me, gave that—me that immigrant mentality that we're gonna try to make it in America.

00:24:23:00

DAVID BROOKS:

He was at a—in the hospital and he'd just been diagnosed with the cancer that was gonna kill him and I visited him, I was by then in my early 20's and he—I walk in the hospital room, it was stiflingly hot and he says, "I'm a dead duck, I'm gonna go soon." And I sat with him for a couple hours and we talked and talked, and as I was walking out, he with a gulp and with a cry said, "I love you so very much." Which is the

18

first time he had ever said that to me. And I was 22 and I felt the moment but I didn't know how to say that back to him. Just 'cause it was not the way we talked in my family, we were so reticent, and so I didn't say it back to him. And he died without ever hearing those words from me. And that's a moment that haunts you because it's a moment where you realize your deficiencies in openly expressing and communicating your emotions, even to the people you love the most. And so that's the sort of thing you try to recover from and you try to not let that happen to you again. You try to become a different sort of person.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And was it ego or you just didn't have the vocabulary or why couldn't you say I love you?

00:25:38:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Some people are emotionally open and expressive and emotionally transparent, and I'm now drawn to those people 'cause they pull something out of you. Some people are just emotionally closed and I think that's true of a lot of guys. We have a certain front we put up before the world. And there's a—there's a feminist scholar named Niobe Way who thinks people are very open when they're eight, when they're seven, eight, nine. The friendships kids have are so deep and so emotionally open but then they learn to cover themselves over. And guys do it because they think in order to be a man I have to hide my emotions. And girls often do it because they think in order for people to like me I have to hide my emotions. And so we get better at hiding our emotions. And we get worse at expressing, worse at being open, worse at even feeling. And I think that was—the lower points of my

19

life was not misery, it was nothing. It was unfeeling. And the way you recover from that is being around people who are emotionally transparent who beam love at you and demand you beam it back at them.

00:26:47:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And that means putting yourself in circumstances where you feel completely uncomfortable. So I was at a conference a couple of weeks ago and the person organizing that session gave us all pages with lyrics to a song and they said, find a stranger next to you, look into their eyes and I want you both to sing the lyrics to each other. And if you had told me to do that 20 years ago, I would have completely freaked out because that emotional intimacy was not something—it would have killed me. But slowly if you open yourself up to these experiences, you get a little better at being open. And openness and vulnerability are a skill just like any other thing. And so I could through that, barely, I could get through that.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

But back when you were a kid, you got your freedom by going to camp. Can you talk about the camp and how it was important to shaping who you are?

11;05;51;12

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. So I went to the same camp for 15 years. It was called Camp The Incarnation in Connecticut, the middle of Connecticut. Ok. Should I start over?

00:27:40:00

DAVID BROOKS:

So starting in—at a very early age, six or seven, I spent two months every summer at a camp in the center of Connecticut called Camp Incarnation. And I was there for 15 years, it was my childhood and it was the in part the only successfully racially integrated institution I've ever been a part of. We're just—we were removed from the other parts of the world and we had kids from the projects in the Bronx and in Brooklyn. We had kids from upscale schools in Manhattan and nobody had any—nobody knew where their background was, so we bonded. We slept in tents, by teenage years you had to cook fires. And we learned a couple things, first courage. One of the things that being out in nature does when you're young is it teaches you courage. How to go canoeing down rapids. How to jump off a cliff into the lake. How to do things that scare you. And so that's a level of moral development you don't get at school. But the second thing it does is it puts you in a tent with seven other kids and you live there for a month or two, and so you're so up close to each other and you create a sense of belonging and care for each other that you can't really get in a classroom, and often you can't get in your neighborhood because you're going back to your separate homes.

00:28:58:00

DAVID BROOKS:

At camp, for me, there was a level of intimate bonding and community that maybe I'd never experienced before and now it's been 40 years later and the people I knew at age 12 are still some of my best friends. My camp friends are the core of who I trust and treasure. And it reminds me just socially there was a moment in the 18th century when you had the European colonists and the Native American culture side by side. And all the Europeans or many of them would go and live with the natives and none of the natives would go live with the Europeans.

21

And this really bugged people like Benjamin Franklin. It was like, we're the superior civilization, how come people are leaving our culture to go to them but nobodies leaving them to come to us? And the reason is that people in the native communities had real community. They had deep connection, deep tribal relationships with each other. And we in the European were more separate from each other. And when you think about that story, sometimes you think our whole civilization is kind of screwed up.

00:29:58:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And there are moments in each of our lives when we find real community, when we find out what it feels like and those are life-altering moments and they haunt you for the rest of your life. And for me it was camp. And I go back to those people and we just know each other at a—we've seen each other in the worst circumstances and the best circumstances. A lot of the bonding and friendship, a lot of the sort of sexual adventures you have when you're a teenager, it all happened at camp. And so it was living in an enclosed community surrounded by the beauty of nature.

TEDDY KUNHARDT

Tell me about the letters that your grandfather wrote you.

DAVID BROOKS:

Ya know, my grandfather used to take me to pancake shops and teach me how to pour—how much syrup you should pour on the pancakes and how you could—it was free so you could pour all you wanted. He also taught me about his experience, his—it was his father who really

came over to this country and he had immigrant experiences, and I remember one letter where he described a map of his neighborhood, who lived in each building. One was a Finnish building; one was a Swedish building; one was an Italian building, a Czech, a Bohemian. And so he introduced to me the world of New York, which was sort of my historical roots. We all want to have a sense that we're connected through time to some sort of ancestral history, and my grandfather connected me backwards to time. But he also projected forward to what we were doing here. And we Jews were somewhat outsiders but there was this place we called the city that we wanted to grow up into and the city was north of 59th Street. It was the Upper East Side. It was basically where the Protestants lived.

00:31:42:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And that seemed to be a world of glamor and ease and comfort and neatness and nobody was screaming at each other the way they were down in our neighborhood. And so it's the immigrant dream. You get to this country, I don't care if you're an immigrant from Mexico or Russia or China, wherever, it's a sense that we're kind of outsiders here but we're a little superior in a few ways. And so my grandfather raised me with that ethos and it's an ethos of ambition and achievement and try to get inside, try to get inside, and you do it through learning. And so that ethos of education, of writing is the way you get there.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And why did he have an immigrant mentality?

DAVID BROOKS:

So my grandfather's father who came when he was a young man had a butcher shop on the Lower East Side, a kosher butcher shop. He sent my grandfather to City College of New York, which then as now is almost 100% immigrants. It's the school—it's free, it was free in those days, and it's a school for strivers and education was the way you made it in America. And our family, I think typical for Jewish families had an image of what America must be that was this ideal Promised Land. We were living out Exodus. We'd left oppression in Russia and the Ukraine; we'd crossed through wilderness and we'd come to the Promised Land and this was the Promised Land.

00:33:09:00

DAVID BROOKS:

I had a great uncle named Irving Browning who was a movie director back when they made silent pictures in Atlantic City and he made westerns. And if you went to his apartment in Washington Heights in New York, it looked like you were going to Wyoming in 1860. He had powder horns, he had lassos, he had chaps, it was all western stuff. And Irving Browning, himself, never went west of the Hudson River. He was just imagining what the west was like and out of that imagination The West was created. The imaginary ideal of America was created by these immigrant kids who just had a picture in their heads of what this country was, and so I was raised with that inflamed love of America that I think so many immigrants have to this day. I remember once I was walking around the Metropolitan Museum of Art with a friend who was actually related to George Washington. Not directly but indirectly. And we looked at a picture of George Washington on the wall at the museum and my friend innocently asked, "What's it like for you? 'Cause for me he is the father of my country but you're not related to him."

00:34:13:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And I remember thinking that thought has never occurred to me. That I assume of course he's my father figure. This is my country and it didn't matter that I didn't have any relatives here when he was alive. He's still the father and I think that's what a country is, that's what America is.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And back when you were younger, what was your sense of the American dream?

DAVID BROOKS:

I—when I was in college—this is a sign of shallowness. When I was in college, there was a magazine called *W* which was a fashion magazine. And they had ads from the stores on Madison Avenue and I remember I had them on the wall. And like somehow that was the dream of making it in the city and making it in New York. Now I walk up and down that avenue and my career has far surpassed anything in my imagination, and it doesn't seem like much anymore. So they were bad ambitions but, you know, when you're young, you want to be recognized. You want—there's a—the Greeks had a word for it, the thymotic urge, the thumos. You want people to recognize you. And if you're a young writer and you feel like you're an outsider 'cause you come from a strange group that's a minority, you want to do something to make people notice. And I remember in those days I used to think, "If I was completely unknown in life and was a failure but a hundred years later somebody found my book and it became influential, that immortal glory would be totally worth it. And now I

think that's crazy. I want to experience the richness of life while I'm here and the future can take care of itself.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And can you talk about going to college and what did you study?

00:35:54:00

DAVID BROOKS:

So I was a poor student in high school, not in the top third in my class, maybe not even the top half. And I say that when I was 19 the admissions officers of Columbia, Wellesley and Brown decided I should go to the University of Chicago 'cause I got rejected at the three schools I applied to but I got accepted by one. And Chicago was then not that selective, they accepted 70% of applicants. And I got there and I found these professors, some of them refugees from Europe and World War Two, who took the great books so seriously. They felt if you read Hobbes and Shakespeare and Milton and George Elliot the right way, the keys to the kingdom, the keys to how to live a good life were kept in these books. There's a saying that if you catch fire with enthusiasm, people will come from miles to watch you burn. And these—my professors had that enthusiasm. And I don't remember a lot of what they taught me, but I remember their deep commitment to living the noblest life. And I think they wanted to make it clear that if we were gonna lead mediocre lives, it was not because we had an inadequate standard.

00:36:57:00

DAVID BROOKS:

They were gonna hold up a standard of how you should live a life of the mind, a life of commitment to nobility, a life of commitment to

excellence. There's a Spartan educator who said, "I make honorable things pleasant to children." And so you hold up, like this is what you can do with your life and after you've tasted the heights, it's hard to settle for the cheap wine. And so I think they taught us new things to love and they taught us ways to see the world. You think seeing the world is like obvious, you just look out and see it. But I work in politics and the people I deal with everyday see the world they want to see. They see the world that flatters their prejudices and a lot of us are like that. But the real scholars if you read George Orwell, you read C.S. Lewis; they saw the pleasant truths and they saw the unpleasant truths. And seeing the world is such an essential skill. One of my heroes, this guy John Ruskin say, the more—"The longer I live, the more I think the most important thing in life is to see the world clearly and to say what you saw in a clear way." That thousands can talk for one who can think but millions can think for one who can see. And so you have to study from the masters.

00:38:13:00

DAVID BROOKS:

You have to study from Tolstoy who saw the world with such crystalline purity. And that becomes a lifelong skill. And the other thing they did was they educated our emotions. When you hear Mozart's—a great symphony, when you read a Sylvia Plath poem, you haven't gained new knowledge but you've gained a new experience and you've educated your emotions and you've widened your repertoire of what you can feel and knowing what to feel is such a crucial skill in life. Knowing to feel properly enraged by injustice, knowing to feel grief in the presence of loss, knowing to feel just humble admiration in the presence of greatness, these are things that we were taught at school and they're not part of the normal curricula. But I do think when I left Chicago, I was happy to go but like a lot of

27

people, the further I get away from that formative institution, the more I treasure what it gave a lot of us.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

But you studied history, not journalism, can you say aloud or make that point. And you know, did that background in history help your career or did you in hindsight, should you have studied journalism?

00:39:25:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, my joke is that I double majored in history and celibacy while I was at Chicago. And I don't believe in majoring in journalism. I don't even believe in journalism schools. You can pick up the craft of journalism by doing it. But a good piece of advice that was offered to me young was know something about something. When you go into the world, have some body of knowledge you can bring into the world. If I had to do it all over again, I'd probably do genetics because I think if you're living now and living for the next 50 years, genetics will be really important. And if you have the body of knowledge, you can figure out the craft of journalism later. The other thing about studying history is our own lifetime is not big enough to develop a broad understanding of how human beings behave. And the study of history allows you to go back centuries and see how human beings behave. And so I wrote like 16 papers on Thucydides and the Peloponnesian wars. And one of the lessons of that, which I've carried through life, is that in politics, the lows are lower than the highs are high, meaning that when a politician screws up, it is a big disaster.

00:40:32:00

DAVID BROOKS:

When they do something really good, you get a modest uptick. And so it teaches you to be really careful when you do political life. And so these are lessons that just sort of lodge in you when you're 18, 19, 20. And then later life happens to you. One of the things that teachers sacrifice for us is a lot of professors pour into us things that we're not yet ready to receive. We're like 20. But then when life happens and you go through a bad thing or you go through a good thing, suddenly that point that the professor lodged in your brain blooms. It was just a seed that was planted and you're like, oh yeah that's what he was talking about. I'm a big believer in the saying that you can be knowledgeable with other men's knowledge but you can't be wise with other men's wisdom. You have to go through life yourself to become wise and the knowledge, the really important knowledge you get is learned through experience, not out of a book. But when you have the experience and you've got the book in the background, then you have a name for what you've experienced and you think, oh that's what that guy was talking about.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Speaking of knowledgeable men, who was Bill Buckley and how was he important to your life? And tell me the story of him hiring you.

00:41:47:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. So I was a humor columnist at the school paper, the Chicago Maroon and William F. Buckley was coming to campus. And I wrote a parody of him for being a name-dropping blowhard. And it was like, Buckley spends his afternoons making everyone else feel inferior. At Yale, he founded two magazines; one called the National Buckley and one called the Buckley Review, which he merged to form the Buckley

29

Buckley. It was jokes kind of like that. And he comes to campus and gives a speech and at the end he says, "David Brooks, if you're in the audience I want to give you a job." And that was the big break in my life. Now sadly I was not in the audience but three years later I called him up and I said, "Is that offer still open?" And he said, "Yeah." And so he flew me out to New York and I had lunch with him, and he hired me for this 18-month internship and for that time I became not quite a surrogate son but he took me to Bach concerts, he took me yachting, he introduced me to a lifestyle I never could have imagined.

00:42:48:00

DAVID BROOKS:

He taught me to write; he was a pretty hard editor and I think that's what we want from our mentors, we want hardness in a context of love. And his great capacity was friendship and he asked me my opinions about things and then he sent me on my way. And so it was that relationship that really introduced me to the world of ideas, the world of opinion journalism, and it's the flow of how the American debate happens and I look back on him as—with great admiration just for what a good friend he could be to really thousands and thousands of people.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And who was he?

DAVID BROOKS:

William F. Buckley was, for in the 50's and 60's, the most famous conservative commentator in America. Maybe the most famous commentator in America. He founded a magazine called National Review, which was really the beginning of the modern conservative

30

movement. He had a TV show on PBS called Firing Line, which was intellectual conversation of a very high level which no TV show does today. And so he became a big celebrity. He was on The Tonight Show all the time. If you have the movie *Aladdin*, Robin Williams who's playing the genie does a William F. Buckley impersonation in the middle of that.

00:44:03:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so he was a figure on the cultural landscape and a gigantic celebrity. He was rich; he introduced me to a lifestyle I'd never seen before. Big long limos back in those—the days when that was unusual. A Park Avenue pied-a-terre, a house in Connecticut. It was the old grand style of living and yet instead of hanging out with the glamorous people that frankly his wife hung out with, he hung out with a bunch of writers and he loved ideas. And the people he brought to his home were not political people. He loved people who wrote for the *New Yorker*, he loved literary critics. He put literature and art and culture above politics. That was an important lesson to learn as well.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

I was watching you on CSPAN and they showed clips of Buckley and it was terrific from the Firing Line.

DAVID BROOKS:

Oh, yeah. Those—when you go back to TV in those days, there's a famous episode of Buckley with Noam Chomsky, the big left wing philosopher. And they are talking at such a high level I have no idea

what they're saying. But they said, we're going to have a serious conversation here and that was TV in those days.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Can you tell us about your first job, then what came next, what came next?

00:45:15:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. My first job out of college was bartender, which was one of my best jobs ever. I was trying to be a freelance writer and every week I'd send off an article to a magazine and every week it got rejected. So that was my first time. And then I got a job as a police reporter for a legendary outfit called the City News Bureau of Chicago. And the saying of that institution was, "If your mom says she loves you, check it out." And so that was journalism 101. And it was police reporting and it was, you know, covering rapes, murders, fires on the south and west side of Chicago. And I loved it because I came home every day with a story. And I covered a lot of incredibly stupid people, a lot of bad criminals. There was a bunch of guys who broke out of a prison, got hungry, ate at the restaurant across the street in the window and got caught. A guy wanted to hold up a fast food restaurant so he held up the one where he worked. They all said, "John, we sort of know you here." So every day I came home with some absurd story. And so I did that for a too brief period and then I called up Buckley and I worked at National Review and then someone said, "Say yes to everything." So whenever somebody offered me something, I just said yes.

00:46:28:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so I became a movie critic and then I became a writer about economics. I became a foreign correspondent. And it was a pretty boring, linear climb upward. A great facility—if you're going to be a journalist, the most important quality your pieces can have is the quality of doneness. Getting it done on time. And so I understood that pretty quickly, that I just—as long as I was a reliable writer who could get things done on time, people would want you. And so I went to work at the *Washington Times* for a brief period as a movie critic, as an editorial writer. Then I went off to Stanford for a little fellowship. Then I went to work at the *Wall Street Journal* and I was the book review editor when I was about 25, 26, pretty young.

00:47:09:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And I loved the job but I realized it's an old man's job. I want to be out in the world, I want to be experiencing things first hand. So when I was 30, the *Wall Street Journal* asked me to go to Brussels with my wife and be a foreign correspondent for the opinion pages, and they gave me a section of the world to cover, which was from Wales to Vladivostok, from Scotland to Cape Town. So it was like half the world and it was the early 90's and I covered nothing but great news for about four years. The end of the Soviet Union, the independence movement in the Ukraine, Nelson Mandela coming out of prison in South Africa, the Oslo peace process, German reunification, the Maastricht Treaty, European unification. And I just traveled around covering these big events. The end of the Soviet Union was the biggest story I've ever covered in my life and I would just travel around and see the most amazing things. There was one day when there was a coup against Boris Yeltsin, who was the first independent Russian president. And tanks rolled into Moscow to sort of depose his government, or an attempt. And Yeltsin came out with his people, with

33

the democrats and gave a very brave speech on a tank, sort of pushing back at the attempted coup of the military. And I met a woman there who was in her 90's and she was handing out sandwiches to the protestors in defense, holding up the democrats.

00:48:32:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And I asked her about her life and she'd grown up in the czar's household so she knew the royal family before the Russian revolution. Her first husband died in the civil war that followed the revolution. Her sons were killed in the battles of Stalingrad in World War Two. Another husband was sent off to Siberia and disappeared. She was part of a people called the Kalmyk people who were moved by Khrushchev and exiled away from Moscow. And so I'm talking to this woman and every important event in Soviet history happened to her family. And every trauma that the Russian people experienced in those years happened to her directly. And it was one of the most remarkable interviews of my life because here's living history and she ends up handing out sandwiches to the democrats who are going to create a new Russia. And it was those moments in the early 90's where we really thought history had turned wonderful, the end of history era where we thought we've discovered how to live with each other. And I remember in the Middle East I was covering the peace process there.

00:49:35:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And I had a kid, my oldest kid who only slept when you drove him around, so to get him to take a nap you had to drive him. And so we

were staying in Jerusalem and I would drive him through the Palestinian areas, it was safe. There were no checkpoints and because we thought peace was at hand. And it was sort of a golden moment to be covering what looked like the rebirth of a much more better world. It turned out disappointing since then. The last thing I covered, which I barely paid attention to was the Yugoslav civil war, which was when the Serbs and the Bosnians were fighting each other and atrocities, ethnic cleansing. And I barely paid attention to that story compared to all the other stories I covered. But in retrospect that was the most important story I covered because the last 25 years have been a story of ethnic cleansing, of identity politics, of strong man, rise of authoritarianism. And so history took an ugly turn with that moment and a lot of the things that we thought were being buried, tribal hatreds and such, have come back with a vengeance.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So you finish up your time in Brussels, and then what happened? How long are you there for and then—?

00:50:49:00

DAVID BROOKS:

I was in Brussels for nearly five years; I come back and become the op-ed editor for the *Wall Street Journal*. So I'm getting 100 submissions a week or a day and I had to say no to 99. So I had—I learned to say no in those years, which was a very hard thing. And then in 1995 my best friends were starting a magazine. And they were people like Bill Crystal, a guy named Andrew Ferguson, a guy named Fred Barnes, and it was called the *Weekly Standard*. And it was a conservative magazine; the Gingrich revolution was just happening and we thought, there should be a magazine to guide Republican

Party—or to be a conversation place for the Republican Party can become a solid reformist party.

00:51:28:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And we had great hopes for the Gingrich revolution. And it didn't really work out and the Republican Party has become the opposite of what at least I envisioned in those days. My big heroes are Edmund Burke who's a classic conservative, when you do change you should do it constantly but incrementally because life is really complicated and you don't know enough to do dramatic change. And my other hero is Alexander Hamilton who's a hip-hop—a Puerto Rican hip-hop star from the Heights—no. He was an immigrant kid and he believed in social mobility and using government to give poor boys and girls like him a chance to rise and succeed. And so there was a time—a time of Abraham Lincoln, a time of Teddy Roosevelt, a time of a few Republicans when there was a moderate Republican tradition, which harkened back to Alexander Hamilton and Edmund Burke. And so I became a moderate Republican at the exact moment that was dying. And I still sort of am there but there are only six of us left so...

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So after the *Weekly Standard*?

00:52:32:00

DAVID BROOKS:

So I worked at the *Weekly Standard* for nine years, and it was a very useful, period, because I came to know what I believed. I find that when you're in a group and everyone's believing the same thing, you just believe what the group believes. You sort of have to strike out on your own to figure out what do I actually believe. And through a

36

process of trial and error or sort of on my own in the wilderness, I found out yeah, these are the important writers for me, these are the important ideas, this is my worldview. And it was a process of trial and error like putting on suits in the department store in the mall. You try it on, does it fit? Nah, this doesn't really fit. I tried on Libertarianism. I tried on social conservatism, and finally I found something that fit, which was Alexander Hamilton. And so I was there for nine years and we tried to create a modern conservative party and failed miserably. And then in 2003 I got a call from Gail Collins who was the editorial page editor of the New York Times and she asked me to come up and have lunch.

00:53:35:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And I had an inkling that they were gonna offer me a column, and I decided I would not do it because I like writing—I was writing for the Atlantic and the New Yorker at that point and I like writing these 5,000 word pieces. And a column is only 800 words; it's not my best length. So all the way up, I remember on the train going up to New York I rehearsed, "No, I'm gonna say no to this. I'm gonna say no to this." And when the question finally came, would you like to be a columnist for the New York Times? In my memory I said, "Well, has anybody ever said no to that question? Has anybody turned you down?" And I think the answer was no, no one ever turns down a chance to have the best real estate in journalism. So I had a failure of courage and I said yes, and so that is—now I'm on like 16, 17 years of writing a column. And the first six months on the job was miserable, because I didn't know how to write a column and I'd never been hated on a mass scale before. And so I came in more from the right, the Times readers are more on the left and they bombarded me with hatred. I remember there were—I took out—I cleaned out my email

37

folder about six months into the job and there were literally hundreds of thousands of emails there.

00:54:44:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And the core message was Paul Krugman was great, you suck. And so the people who write the nasty stuff online, they're not only critical and cruel, they're very effectively critical and cruel. They pick the things that you're most insecure about and so I would sit there, read all the comments on the bottom of my column and just get pummeled and feel depressed and then I said, "I've got to stop reading this." And I asked my assistant to read them and then he got depressed and so it was wallowing in a level of acrimony that I'd never experienced and you have to go through this to get your skin a little thickened. But even today I don't know anybody who can even look at all the comments and not be depressed and not be hurt.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

In addition to writing, you do your PBS show. Can you talk about your early experiences working with Jim Lehrer and discuss his moral ecology and what that means?

00:55:36:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. So, one of the things I knew early on is I wanted to write books. And to write books, you have to have broadcast media. In my experience, it's very hard to sell books by people who aren't well known. So if you want to sell books and you want to reach readers, you have to have a platform. So I was saying yes to every TV show that called because I wanted to have a platform so I could write books. And

there were some where you walked away feeling dirty. You—it was just like a scream fest and you were on with people who really didn't know anything about what they were talking about. They were just on 'cause they were good looking. And so I didn't feel great about that. But then one day, I think it was December 31st, 2000, I got asked to be on the News Hour with Jim Lehrer. And Lehrer was the kind of guy who—he was very stoic on the air 'cause he didn't want to be the focus of attention. But when the camera was not on him, he was very expressive. His face is very expressive. And so when I said something on the air that he liked, I would see his eyes crinkle in pleasure. And if I said something crass or stupid, I would see his mouth downturn in displeasure.

00:56:50:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so basically for the ten years I did the show with him, I just tried to get the eye crinkle and avoid the mouth downturn. And that way he taught me how to do the job. He never said anything; he just had these subtle reactions that I tried to pick up on, the Jim Lehrer way of doing things. And Jim Lehrer created a moral ecology around that show, and he's been retired for six or seven years now but it's still that moral ecology, that News Hour way of doing things is still the Lehrer way. And so it was a great pleasure and a great honor to work with him and a great honor to work with my buddy Mark Shields who'd been doing the show for 17 years now. And we've never had a cross word with each other. He's like a Boston Irish kid, now in his—older but he's just a beautiful-hearted man. And having the chance to work with Mark all these years has been one of the great friendships and the great joys of my life. It's really a lesson in—if you can find somebody who's just a noble human being and funny, hang around that person. And we have a really good friendship.

39

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So was Jim Lehrer then a mentor?

00:57:59:00

DAVID BROOKS:

You know, mentor—Lehrer taught me how to do the broadcast journalist. He also taught me about loyalty. I think the thing Lehrer was proudest of, and Mark Shields is also proudest of, is the Marine Corps; they were both Marines and I saw their attachment to the corps as the proudest thing in their life. And I've noticed this before. A great Secretary of State George Schultz, if you go to his office at Stanford where he's now retired to, you can sort of see some documentation that he was a secretary of state and you know, had all these great jobs, but there are posters everywhere for the Marine Corps. And that experience that people have early in life of being part of some sort of painful and difficult and challenging cause with other people really is—it was striking to be around Marines. And what Lehrer would tell me was, "That I learned from the Marine Corps that if I got punched in the nose I could come back."

00:58:58:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so he wasn't afraid of being punched in the nose. In those ways you know, they say what teachers teach is really themselves. And so Lehrer was a mentor in that he taught himself and he also in TV language he was unusual because he didn't want to be the star. I was once on a show, a cable show early in my career. We were doing an outside shot and the host of the show was standing in front of the Capitol, the Capitol dome. And the dome took up three-quarters of the shot. And the host said, "This is my show, not the Capitol's show." And

40

so she wanted to be the center of the shot and that kind of I'm the star is prevalent in TV, but Lehrer was the opposite of that.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So lets get into your time as a political pundit. Was it a great time in your life?

00:59:45:00

DAVID BROOKS:

So the first six months as a political pundit were not great. But the ensuing 17 years were stressful but rewarding. So the challenge of being a pundit is you have to have— two times a week, you have to have a new idea. And so the joke is it's like being married to a nymphomaniac. It seems fun for the first couple weeks. But I used to have all these normal and human desires for food, water, now I just have one desire, column ideas. So I used to think, well if I got hit by a bus and survived I could get a column out of that. If I won the lottery, I could get a column out of that. It's not even the money but oh I could get a column out of that. And so you are constantly being pulled forward and the advantage of that is that you have to stretch your mind every week. You have to find something new to read, somebody new to see, somebody new to interview just so you're offering something fresh and so you can't be stuck in your rut if you're going to be a good columnist. You have to be always on the move. And being forced to be a lifelong learner has been the great gift.

01:00:48:00

DAVID BROOKS:

The second thing about writing a column is you don't really shape how people think. You try to provoke them to think. You provide a context in which they can think for themselves. So the idea that columnists are influential, politically influential I think is not true. We're just trying to poke people so they think for themselves. And I used to think that, you know, I'd write a column and the president would say, "You know, before reading your column I thought this but your column was so brilliant now I think this." But that never happens. You are just—the politicians, they only think did that column support me or hurt me? It's all about influence; it's not about persuasion. And so when you're writing the column, you're trying to write for young people, you're trying to write for open-minded people. You're just trying to pass along the best and most interesting thing that happened to you that week. And there's just tremendous sense of satisfaction in having had your say, even if nobody listened, even if readers hated it, you could say, "Well, at least I had my say. I expressed what I think is true." And that is the great satisfaction of being a pundit.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

You write, "meritocracy turns us into a certain type of person." Can you explain the word meritocracy and how it has an impact on us?

01:02:04:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Meritocracy is the system most of us live in. It is the system that we get promoted in life through achievement. We get good grades in school and we rise to the top of our class. That's the meritocracy. We get admitted to selective colleges. We get to go to prestigious institutions. So it's the world in which we swim. And in some sense, the great struggle in my life is how do you live in that world and still

42

be a decent person? Because the meritocracy contains lies that are soul destroying if you take them too seriously. The first lie is that career success can make you happy. And I'm the poster child for that's not true. The second lie is that you can make yourself happy. And that's the lie of self-sufficiency. That if only I get better at Yoga, lose 15 pounds, get better at my job, then I'll be happy. But if you talk to people at the end of their lives about the times when they were most meaningful, it was not when they were self-sufficient. It was when they were utterly dependent on other people. And so it's the opposite of self-sufficiency, but the meritocracy doesn't tell us that.

01:03:07:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And the big lie of the meritocracy, which we pretend not to tell each other but we do in our actions, is that people who have achieved more career success are worth more than other people. And if you want to rip apart your society, that's a very good lie to spread into it. And by who we pay attention to, by who we honor, we have this logic that the big successful people are worth more and that creates resentments, that creates pride, that creates deep inequality and it's an insult to the basic equality of all human beings. To me, the effect of meritocracy on me was, makes you streamlined. Like I'm not gonna develop messy relationships because I'm on the move. It gave me—I had all these commitments. I had deadlines I had to fulfill. I had parts of my job I had to do and so I had a clock in my head and the clock was always move on from this conversation because you have more stuff to do. And so I became—I began to value time over people and relationships are slow. You've got to sit at dinner for three hours and not check your email and not do your work.

01:04:16:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so I had this productivity problem and still struggle with it where I've got to do my job and therefore can't linger with you. And therefore if you're a friend going through a hard time, I can't stop everything to be with you because the demands of the workplace seem so pressing. And that's a seduction that I think a lot of us fall into and I certainly still struggle with that today.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Yeah but wouldn't one say too, though, you know, you've got three kids that you want to send through college, you have to be somewhat successful?

DAVID BROOKS:

Right, right, yeah, no. I don't renounce the meritocracy, I think it calls for a great achievement. But it's like capitalism; it only works when you have another moral system to balance against it. So capitalism wants us to work hard, make money, rise, invest, produce, but you have to have a moral thing that goes against that. The logic of capitalism, the logic of a meritocracy is direct logic. Input leads to output, practice makes perfect. Effort leads to reward. But moral logic is inverse logic. It's you have to lose yourself to find yourself. You have to surrender to something greater than yourself to get real power. And so the logic of morality is an inverse logic, and you have to have both those things in your heads at the same time and life well lived, to me, is trying to live within that contradiction.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So in the early 2000's you were on the straight talk express. Can you talk about that as a communal experience?

01:05:48:00

DAVID BROOKS:

When I first got my job as a columnist, an older columnist named Robert Novak gave me a good piece of advice, which was interview three politicians every day. And in those days I did it. And the problem was most politicians didn't have much of an inner voice. Then I met this guy John McCain. McCain had an inner voice. McCain you could ask him any question and he would actually tell you what he thought and so I loved being with him. And so in 2000 he ran for president and he had no money so he had to have journalists around him all the time. And we'd get up in the morning and we'd get on the van with him and we'd just start talking to him. And I learned early on the way to get McCain to talk was to get him angry. So I picked someone he didn't like. I'd say, "Did you see what Rick Santorum said today?" He'd go, "Fuckin asshole." And then he was off and he would talk and talk and talk about every subject under the sun. And he would talk about things he had done well, things he had done badly, times he was ashamed.

01:06:51:00

DAVID BROOKS:

The one thing he didn't really talk about was Vietnam and his war service. I think he was a little bored by that. He knew it was part of his biography but he'd done it to death. But we got to go everywhere with him. We got to sit with him as he responded to the attacks of George W. Bush who was running against him, we got to see the anger that built up in him at those attacks. We got to, you know, he once took me to Antoine's, this restaurant in New Orleans and we had like a 35,000

45

calorie meal, we had nine different kinds of whiskey. And I remember that at the end they poured off this coffee with Brandy in it and it was flaming and we were drinking this flaming Brandy and coffee and I remember asking the waiter, "Is it decaf?" And then he once took me to a casino. What kind of presidential candidate takes a reporter to a casino? And he taught me how to shoot craps. And I remember I won because he taught me how to do it. I won 300 dollars in chips and—but there was a line as we were leaving the casino outside where you go cash in your chips and he had no patience at all, he said, "Let's go."

01:07:58:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so I left with the chips, I never got to collect my 300 dollars. And so what I think I saw in McCain was a flawed man but a great man. And when the campaign was at its low, I got an email from a friend who had also got to know him and that email said, "Whatever is happening, we all know there's only one great man running in this campaign." And I reflect on McCain as truly a great man, great in spirit. And I think because he experienced death or proximity to death, he never could lie to himself. That everything that came later was gravy and he was not going to be a self-deceiver. And that was a—that's a great gift in a politician.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

That's great. When we spoke for that film you said that the pinnacle of your career in journalism was working and being in this communal area. But then you write that you were enclosed in a prison of individualism, yet you had a wife and two children at the time. How is that possible that you were enclosed in a prison of individualism?

46

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. I thought I was absorbing the culture around, which was you know, be successful, make the most of yourself. And the people who could crack through that were my kids. And the—I remember when my oldest was 18 months we were playing early in the morning and I had this thought that I know this person better than I've known anybody and he probably knows me better than anybody's known me. And at that age I'm not sure we'd ever said a word to each other because he couldn't speak yet.

01:09:33:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so I think one of the joys of fatherhood is that even if you're a little emotionally inhibited, which I was at the time, it smashes that all to pieces. And so for us playing and my sons baseball and my daughter hockey became the language we spoke to each other. I think for most people parenthood is the great opener and you become aware of a joy in commitment that you weren't aware of beforehand. And so I think at work I think's fair to say I was not spending as much time on friendships as I should have and not investing in friendships as I should have but I love being around my kids because they want to have fun all the time and nothing—

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

What is a prison of individualism?

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, the prison of individualism is to think that life is an individual journey and so we give our kids this book, *Oh, The Places You'll Go* by Dr. Seuss. And if you go back and look at that book, it's the story of a life where he goes to school and then is a series of individual accomplishments on the way to success. And that kid has no friends, he has no relationships, it's all individual. It's like my life is my own individual journey. And that is so steeped into our culture. If you give that book to immigrant kids, they hate that book because that's not how they see life.

01:10:53:00

DAVID BROOKS:

My life is defined by the relationships I have with my kin, with my people, with my neighborhood, with my community. My life is lived communally, not individually. But in America we have always been a highly individualistic people. We have this illusion that the West was settled by the lone cowboy. We have this illusion of the rags to riches story that I pulled myself up alone by my bootstraps. We have the illusion that we earn our own success, and this is the story we tell about ourselves. But it's—and it's the way the categories we carry in our head, but if you actually try to live that way you'll wind up lonely.

01:11:32:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And you'll wind up detached, and you'll wind up buffered from other people. And you'll think, oh the purpose of my life is to be self-actualized, to touch this magic part of myself and just be myself. But if you live that way, you'll wind up unremembered because the person who is unattached, the person whose personal freedom is uncommitted to anything and that life never adds up to anything. And when that person dies, everything dies. And so it's the great illusion of

our culture and American society is a great—the individual is good, it gives us dynamism. But it's our greatest weakness as a country, the idea that it's about me, me, me, me. They give these tests called the narcissism test the psychologists do, and they give people a bunch of statements and they say, they're statements like 'I love to look at myself in the mirror', 'I find it easy to manipulate people because I'm so extraordinary', 'Somebody should write a biography about me'. Americans rank number one in the world in narcissism in these tests. The median narcissism score has gone up 30% in the last 20 years.

01:12:44:00

DAVID BROOKS:

If you ask Americans are you—if you test Americans on math, Americans rank about 26th in the world in math ability. If you ask Americans, "Are you really good at math?" We're number one in the world in thinking we're really good at math. And so self-esteem, self-promotion, narcissism have become part of who we are. And I call it the big me, living with the big me. And the thing I've learned through life is that personal freedom sucks. That if you are unattached and you have this freedom, I can do whatever I want, I can see whoever I want, I can date whoever I want, I can befriend whoever I want, it sucks. Because you're not really attached to anything and your life has no sense of closeness, no sense of intimacy and no commitment. And without commitment, you really don't build your character, you don't contribute much to the world.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Alright. You spent your adult life in the conservative movement, but that movement has changed. Can you explain what has changed and where you were left hanging?

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. Everything about the conservative movement has changed in the course of my career. So when I entered it, Ronald Reagan was still in office and it was the party of free trade, and now it's the party of closed trade. It was the party of open immigration and now it's the party of closed immigration. It was the party of American involvement in the world, now it's the party of withdrawal from the world. It was the party of—desperate for diversity and pluralism. We love openness because life is a big adventure and we want to welcome all sorts of people to this country who are very different from each other because this is the adventure of being in America. And now it has the opposite ethos.

01:14:31:00

DAVID BROOKS:

So it's a great lesson that you can keep a name, conservative, you can keep a party label, Republican, and almost every single tenet of belief within that system can totally flip. And that happened because conservatism was grabbed, starting with a guy named Pat Buchanan but most recently Donald Trump, by a very different ethos, a scarcity mindset, a tribal ethos. That life is conflict, politics is war, it's a competition for scarce resources, it's our tribe against their tribe. And that is a scarcity mindset that was not there under Ronald Reagan, it was not there under George W. Bush and certainly not George H.W. Bush. And it has crept in and infected as a force of white identity politics. And in my view it's the receding war of a white America that's never coming back. And in my view the Republican party is—has got a very bad future in front of it because the American future is not gonna be formed by 76 year old white men in Florida. And—but seeing this

community fall apart has been the story of my life. So of the people who I knew when I was 25 in the conservative movement, some of them have gone left, some of them have gone Trump right.

01:15:52:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Some of them—most of us are never Trumpers, which say we still call ourselves sort of right but we can't stand that guy and what he stands for. And so it's been every Wednesday I think it was when I was young and in New York and in my 20's. We would meet at a townhouse and just have a cocktail party with our friends and we were all conservatives together. And that group, most of them wouldn't talk to each other now and that's the convulsions of history.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

What was your moment that you can pinpoint that you remember like I don't want to be affiliated with this?

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, I don't even call myself a conservative anymore. I call myself a moderate. I don't think my basic beliefs have changed, but I think my basic—my faith in what the Republican Party stands for and what the word conservatism has certainly changed. And for me it was a slow motion thing, but it was really capped off by Trump. I liked people in the George W. Bush administration. I think they had—there was a colonel there, which he called compassionate conservatism, which was my kind of conservatism. A conservatism which measures itself by how you treat the least amongst us.

01:17:06:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And I remember that conservatism lost favor when the tea party rose, it lost favor when Donald Trump rose. And Trump was the break. Trump was the moment where a lot of us really were shocked. You know, I wrote like 1,600 columns in 2015 saying, “Don’t worry, Donald Trump will never get the Republican nomination.” And so what I thought the Republican Party was, turned out to be not what the Republican Party is. What I thought conservatives would stand for were not what the conservatives would stand for. And so when he starts winning primaries saying the racial things that he says and saying the lies that he says, I think for us that was the moment. And we all came to it at—those of us who became never Trumpers, we came to it in about 2016, late 2015 and we all sort of wrote these columns saying never Trump, never that guy. And some people have gone back and now they’re Trump, pulled by the power of team loyalty. But for me at least it’s been liberating because I don’t quite know where I am, I’m politically homeless and so I can think whatever I want.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Explain what you’ve learned about many of your friends, particularly your professional friends during this period of time.

01:18:23:00

DAVID BROOKS:

I lost some friends but not so many because most of my close conservative friends, those of us who founded the *Weekly Standard* and those of us who worked at the Wall Street Journal, we all turned

into never Trumpers right away. There was a period in the 90's when I wrote the *Social Animal*, and it was a book about emotion and my friends joked that me writing a book about emotion was like Gandhi writing a book about gluttony. It was like, what the hell are you doing? People saw me as an emotionally closed person who was not exactly the warm embracing soul that he wanted to be. And so I wanted to learn to be more emotional. And so I did what any complete wonk would do, I looked at brain science.

01:19:08:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And like who tries to become more emotional by looking at an fMRI machine. But that's what I did. And—but I got to meet so many great scientists who wrote about emotion. There was a guy named Antonio Damasio who's out in California. He studied people who have had strokes and they have lesions in their brain, they can't feel emotion. And you would think those people would be super smart Mr. Spocks but in fact they can't function in life because what our emotions do is they tell us what we value. They tell us what we desire. And if you don't desire, if you can't assign value to things, you can't make decisions. And so those people Damasio would ask them, "Do you want to come have an appointment on Tuesday or Wednesday?" and one guy spent 20 minutes debating the merits of Tuesday versus Wednesday. He couldn't come to a decision because he didn't have the emotions to tell him what he wanted. And so through that process I began to see that the head and the heart are not different, that the head and the heart are the same thing, that knowing is a form of love, and that we're not primarily cognitive thinking creatures, we're primarily desiring creatures.

01:20:16:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so it was a slow process of sort of opening up the heart and you know, I write in the book I read about a guy who bought a home with a bamboo stand by the driveway and he hated bamboo, so he chopped it down, he took an axe to the root system, he dug a three-foot hole, he pours plant poison into it, he pours three feet of gravel, six inches of cement and then two years later a little shoot of bamboo comes up through the driveway. And in my view we all have that. We all have these deep desires and when you see kids in fourth grade at a school play, you see their fervent desire to be great and you see a lonely person at a bar in New York, you see their deep desire for connection. And we sometimes try to pave over those desires, but eventually the bamboo shoots up. And so just living in the world with emotion, thinking about it and writing about it was my process of trying to touch the bamboo.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Can you tell me the difference and describe the difference between finding happiness as opposed to finding joy, 'cause I'm still struggling even throughout all your readings trying to pinpoint those differences.

01:21:30:00

DAVID BROOKS:

So happiness is an expansion of self; you get a victory, your team wins the super bowl, you get a promotion. You feel big about yourself and you're proud of yourself. And happiness is great. Joy is the transcendence of self. It's a mother and daughter staring into each other's eyes so they forget where one ends and the other begins. Joy is a moment where you're out in nature and you've lost a sense of your own body, you're just part of nature. And so Joy is the transcendence

of self. And I'm for both; I'm for happiness and joy. But my view is if you aim for joy, if you aim to transcend yourself, you're heading in the right direction and your life will go well.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And what does transcend yourself means? I mean—

DAVID BROOKS:

So you know, there's a passage I quote from Zadie Smith and she's in a nightclub and she's lost her handbag, her feet are killing her and suddenly this song from A Tribe Called Quest comes on the sound system, and a guy with big eyes reaches out to her, grabs her hand and just start dancing with her and she says, "I gave myself up for joy. The top of my head flew away and we just danced and we danced." And there are some moments when you're dancing or sometimes when you're playing basketball where it's not you, it's just the whole movement, that you feel at one with the larger movement of the group.

01:22:53:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And you're not thinking, oh I'm David Brooks or I'm Zadie Smith, you've lost consciousness, you're in a state of flow if it's at work. And I think there are times when we all experience that. And the best part of work for me is the moments when I'm writing and I'm not thinking about myself at all, I'm just in the work, I'm in the writing. And there are moments when you're dancing, what they call collective efflorescence. You're not thinking how do I look, how stupid do I look, how bad do I dance, you're just in the dance. I had a friend named Chris Wyman who was writing poetry in Prague and a falcon landed

on the windowsill and the bird was so beautiful he just looked at it and he called his girlfriend who was taking a shower and said, "You've got to see this." And they came out and they looked at the bird and the bird turns its eyes and locked eyes with Wyman and Wyman said, "When I locked eyes with the bird, I felt my insides crumble. I felt the distance, the connection between me and the bird, it was like looking into centuries." And his girlfriend understood the power of the moment and said, "Make a wish, make a wish."

01:24:03:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And Wyman wrote a poem about it later with the stanza, "And I wished and I wished and I wished and I wished that the moment would not end and just like that it vanished." So Wyman is talking about these moments of transcendence where we feel oneness with nature. Some people have those moments where they feel oneness with God. Sometimes oneness with someone you love. And it's that sense where self and other overlap, and you can't tell where you end and the other begins. You're just un selfconsciously in life, and to me those are great moments.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Can you explain how our society endorses goals that are ultimately unsatisfying? We've—this is a different way of asking about the meritocracy I guess but...

DAVID BROOKS:

Right. Well, I—we do have the illusion that career success can make you happy. And in one of my books I made the distinction between the

resume virtues and the eulogy virtues. And the resume virtues are the things that make you good at your job, whether you're a good accountant, a good lawyer, a good teacher. And the eulogy virtues are the things they say about you after you're dead. Whether you're courageous, capable of great love, honest. And we all know the eulogy virtues are more important but look at our school system, what do they teach?

01:25:15:00

DAVID BROOKS:

They spend a lot more time teaching the resume virtues, how to be good at your job, how to do the technical skills that will make you a good lawyer, how to be successful. And so on the most important things of life of how to have good character, our schools often have nothing to say. And on the most important things of life, our school systems and sometimes our families say, you're on your own kid, figure out what goodness means to you. And so that leaves a lot of people adrift and so we have a society that's—we're just much better at talking about career because we preach the illusion that career is gonna be the core of your life and what's gonna make you happy, even though we know that's not true. And I do think the reason we do it is because we don't have the moral vocabulary to know how to talk about that other stuff. And I had one of my students, I was having coffee with him and he said, "We're just so hungry." And I found that to be true of my students and society in general.

01:26:13:00

DAVID BROOKS:

That people are hungry for a moral vocabulary. How do I talk about spiritual transformation? How do I talk about moral growth? How do I talk about being good at relationship? When I'm out on book tours,

57

one of the things they do is they book you into these business conferences where you get to talk about your book to a group of 3 or 5,000 business executives. And at the conference they've been talking about their fiduciary responsibilities and healthcare benefits and you walk into a room and there are like 3,000 62-year-old white guys in boring suits and I'm going to go talk to them about George Elliot's love life. Or I'm gonna talk about how Saint Augustan felt his soul expand in the presence of God. You know, you always think, well this is not gonna go well. And yet when I speak of these things compared to all the other speeches, there's a quality of silence that I don't get because people are so hungry for spiritual and moral conversation. And every—almost every time after the speech, somebody comes up to me and it might be a CEO or something and they say, "Hey, can we have a phone relationship? 'Cause I'm going through some stuff I have nobody to talk to about." And I realized I could have a career as a CEO whisperer. And I take that as a sign that a lot of Americans really know this is really important but don't have a venue to talk about it, don't have a vocabulary to talk about it, and feel the gap, feel the hunger.

01:27:39:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And it manifests what the medievals called *ascidia*, which is lack of desire. When you're sort of lost without a sort of spiritual calling, when you don't know how to do moral development, you're not touching your deepest desires, and so life just seems kind of flat and I think I've certainly suffered that and I think a lot of people suffer from that.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

You keep on saying we don't have the vocabulary; I'm sitting here talking to you right now, can we—let's talk about the vocabulary.

58

DAVID BROOKS:

Sure, so—well, let’s talk about—I was talking about one of my books on a TV show and I said, “This book is about sin. This book is about confronting our own sinfulness and how do we overcome it.” And I got an email from somebody in the publishing business that said, “You know, I love the way you talk about your book but I wouldn’t use the word sin, it’s such a downer. Use the word insensitive.” And in my view if you don’t have a word sin, if you don’t understand what sin is in yourself, then you don’t really know how to confront your own weaknesses. And you don’t see how sin can be so corrupting and can be this contagious thing that can spread throughout you. Similarly, grace.

01:28:56:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Grace is unmerited love, and grace doesn’t make any sense. But if you don’t have a sense of grace, then you don’t have a sense of the fundamental goodness of the universe and you don’t have a sense that sometimes you just surrender to that goodness that you don’t deserve. And so for example, sometimes you get sick and people who are your close friends don’t show up for you, but then there are other people you barely know they totally show up. And when those other people totally show up for you, that’s grace. They’re giving you love you have not earned, you don’t deserve, it doesn’t make any sense. But you just get to experience grace. And so when you’re in this language, you’re in a language of good and evil, you’re in a language of fall and redemption, and one of the passages I love is a John Steinbeck passage that says, “We’re all trapped in the drama of good and evil, it’s the only drama we know. And at the end of your life there’s only the clean hard

question,” he writes, “was I good or was I evil? Did I do well or did I do ill?”

01:30:00:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And seeing daily life as a moral drama is something a lot of us don't do. I had a friend who—he identified his core sin, which was aloofness and not really paying attention to other people. And every night on his pillow, he was saying, “When I was with that person, was I thinking about that person or was I thinking about my next meeting?” And so he sort of registers the moral drama of his life, and on days where he did what he should do, he feels good. On days when he did not do, then he feels the shame. And for him I think the internal moral drama of ‘did I do well or did I do ill today?’ is the central drama of life. And that's sort of kind of cultural, but that's the way he lives. And I think that's the way people used to be trained to live. One of the stories I tell in one of my books is about Dwight Eisenhower. When Eisenhower was nine he wanted to go trick or treating and his mom wouldn't let him. He threw a temper tantrum and he punched the tree in the front yard and he punched it so bad he rubbed all the skin off his knuckles. And his mom sent him up to his room, had him cry for an hour and then came up an hour later to bind his wounds, and recited to him a verse from proverbs, which is, “He who conquers his own soul is greater than he who taketh a city.”

01:31:25:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And 60 odd years later when Eisenhower wrote his memoir, he said, “That's the most important conversation of my life.” ‘cause it taught him that he had this moral failure that was baked into his nature, which was anger and temper and passion and hatred. And that his life,

60

if it was going to amount to anything, he had to really engage in moral combat against this sin, this sin of anger and hatred. And we think of Eisenhower as this sort of garrulous country club kind of guy, but that was an illusion. He was a hater during World War Two and during his presidency. He would be up nights smoking, hating, and he tried to combat that. He would—all the people he hated he'd write down their names on a piece of paper and rip up the paper and throw it into the garbage can as sort of an effort to purge his hatred. And so seeing life as a moral combat is not something we do a lot, but I do think it's sort of the right way to see the world.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

We're gonna leave here today and I'm gonna go home and I'm gonna sit at the dinner table with my wife. What are some of these vocabulary discussions I should be having? Because naturally it's gonna go, "How was your day, how did the interview go?" But that's all surface. Give—give us some—

01:32:40:00

DAVID BROOKS:

So practically, say in the case of marriage, there's a formula that Tim and Cathy Keller talk about. You marry somebody and you think they're perfect. And then about six months into the marriage you realize the person you thought was perfect was—is actually kind of selfish. And as this person is making the—as you're making that discovery about her, she's making it about you. And your natural tendency is to think, well our relationship has some problems and the real problem is their—the other person's selfishness. But if you have a moral conscience, you say, "No, actually my selfishness is the problem here. My selfishness is the only selfishness I can control." And the

Keller's write that if you have a couple, both of whom see their own selfishness as the core problem, then you have the makings of a good relationship 'cause each is working on themselves. And how does that selfishness express itself? Marriage is about the day to day. And so there's a great marriage expert named John Gottman. And he says, "A relationship is made of bids and counterbids." So you're sitting reading the paper and your wife says, "Oh, look at the beautiful cardinal outside the window." You can either move toward her and put down the paper and say, "Oh that is a beautiful cardinal."

01:33:57:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Or you can ignore her or you can make what he calls an away bid; "Leave me alone, can't you see I'm busy?" And the Gottman's say a marriage will survive when there are five toward bids for every one away bid. And so with every conversation we are having with our spouse, we're either moving toward her or him or we're moving away. And the quality of the relationship and your goodness as a partner is determined by how you make these tiny, small decisions in the day to day. And so the rule is always move toward. And the people they say who are relational masters are looking for things to be grateful for. Looking for ways to talk to their spouse and say, "That was wonderful what you did. I'm so grateful for you for doing that." And these are just like the small conversational bits of everyday life. But they're the way you make your marriage either a loftier thing or sort of a degraded thing. There's a great C.S. Lewis passage that says, "There's a core piece of us inside that is the piece that decides." That decides how we're gonna behave in the day-to-day actions of life.

01:35:08:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And every decision we make either makes that core piece of ourselves into something a little more holy or a little more degraded. If you take a homeless person in to have a burger at McDonalds, you've improved that core thing. If you walk by the homeless person and ignore their existence, you've slightly polluted it. And over the course of a lifetime your core self is shaped by the small decisions you make every day and when most of us think about life in that terms it's embarrassing because most of us screw up so often.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

This is all helpful. I'm still a little confused of if I want an example of this vocabulary besides appreciating the little things that go unnoticed. What are some actual things we could discuss that improve this vocabulary?

DAVID BROOKS:

I look at the examples of virtue around and I was down in Waco and there's a guy named Jimmy Durrell down there who had a church and it was a comfortable, normal church and—but there were a lot of homeless people in Waco and he said, "You know, the homeless people should be in church." But he couldn't get the homeless people to come to church so he moved his church to the homeless people. And they call it church under the bridge because it's under a highway bridge where the homeless people live. And that's an act of self-sacrificial love because he's doing something hard and he lives in a building with six—a homeless shelter attached to his home, sixty homeless people. And he has built a supermarket to cure the food desert that was there. And what marks him, I was with somebody in Waco early morning and he just walked up to her and he grabbed her by the shoulders and said,

“I love you, you’re the best.” And so here’s someone who’s seeing someone else with dignity, who’s reaching out emotionally, reaching out practically, it’s just gift.

01:37:13:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And the life as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Life lived well is life of gift.” And we tend to live transactionally. I do this for me and you do this for you. But if you live life as gift, that’s just a very practical way of walking through the world. And Jimmy Durrell lives that way and you look at him and you think, “Wow, that’s a really remarkable person.” He does not have a lot of income, he doesn’t have—he dresses in sort of a sloppy way. But he sees other people very deeply and opens their heart to them. And that’s just daily in practice and it’s not easy. I was with a woman yesterday who started a school, which is called the Fugies and it’s for refugee kids. And it started sort of haphazardly. There were these refugees that came to her town and she started a soccer league and they called the team the Fugees. And she saw some needs. Some of the kids— their parents weren’t employed and the kids were coming to the soccer games anxious. And so she took care—she tried to get the parents jobs and then she opened a school and then one thing led to another and she’s got a neighborhood school which helps all the parents.

01:38:21:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And then she opened another in Atlanta and she’s moving to Cleveland and it’s just radiating care in ways that, in her case, are kind of heroic. But she says, “Listen, it’s not a heroic life. You can see me starting schools for refugee kids, but what I see is I’m in the corner cleaning up where the kid threw up. It’s not easy, it’s not fun, it’s not glamorous,

64

it's just extending care." And a lot of the people I admire most extend care to non-kin which most of us extend only to kin. So most of us are pretty loving to our families, but there are some people that have a super abundance of care and they—if they see a kid lonely on the street, they extend care to that kid. They see a homeless person, they extend care. And it's a capacity of compassion and care that is beyond what most of us do and when you see them, usually that's what a good life looks like. One of my heroes is a woman named Dorothy Day who spent 60 years not only serving the poor but living in poverty, living with the poor.

01:39:28:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And she did it because she was—when her daughter was born, she had sort of a messy young adulthood. When her daughter was born, she wrote an essay about what it feels like to give birth. This was back in the 1920s and she wrote, "If I had sculpted the greatest sculpture, composed the great symphony or written the greatest novel, I could not have felt the more exalted creator than I did when they placed my child in my arms. With this vast flood of love and joy came a need to worship and to adore. She needed somebody to thank for the vast flood of love and joy that she felt. And she became a Catholic at that moment and the church commanded her as Jesus did in the Beatitudes to live with the poor and serve the poor. And so she spent 60 years doing that and that's—ya know, that's not something most of us are capable of. But it's a model; we can do a little more in that direction.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Didn't she fall in love and then have to break up the relationship?

01:40:24:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. The man who was the father of her child was not religious, hated her for becoming religious. He was a materialist and she basically had to leave him. And in her case she suffered too much. Sometimes people want to live a life of chastity, of estheticism and they make service to the poor seem like a horrible burden. And sometimes she could do that. Other times, she wrote a book called *Duty to Delight*, and she could also take great delight in music and other things. The people I know who say are serving the poor or serving the homeless, they have what Richard Rourke calls a bright sadness. They've seen the worst that life offers to people, but they go about their life with a sort of brightness and they tend to be extremely cheerful. And they're like coaches on a soccer team. They're just, "You are great, you are doing great." And so I've certainly—the people I admire most have that bright sadness 'cause their life is gift and their life is deep relationship, their life is care and it's a life of emotions all on the surface. And as a result they—they are up nights worrying about the people in their care, and they can't detach themselves, but it's—it's certainly a rich life.

01:41:49:00

DAVID BROOKS:

You know, the—one of the transformational moments in my life was being invited over to the house of a couple named Cathy and David in Washington DC in about 2015. And I was then divorced and single and sort of on a downward valley of life. And Cathy and David had this kid named Santi who was in the DC public schools and he had a friend whose mom had some health and other issues and often this friend didn't have a place to stay or food to eat. So they said, "Well, he can stay with us." And then that kid had a friend and that kid had a friend and by the time I walked over to their dinner on a Thursday night in

66

2015 there were 40 kids or 25 kids around the dinner table and various kids sleeping around the house. And they had created a chosen family and I walk into the hallway and I meet the first kid and he's a tall kid named Ed, very charismatic. And I reach out to shake his hand and he says to me, "We don't shake hands here, we hug here." And so I'm not the huggiest guy on the face of the earth but I learned to hug with them and I went back for years after years. We've been having dinner on Thursday nights, we go to vacations together, and what was transformational about that community was that the kids were emotionally transparent, that they beamed love at you like flowers beaming into the sun and they demanded you beam it back.

01:43:11:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so there was just an opening up of care and relationship. And I took my daughter there and she said, "That's the warmest place I've ever been." I took a friend there who's been doing youth programs for 50 years and he said, "I've been doing youth work for 50 years. I've never seen a program turn around a life. Only relationships turn around lives." So this community, our community is like a chosen family. We have our own families, which we love and cherish, but we've got another family filled with people we care about. And so we sort of help each other along. And the father figure of this family, this guy named David, when one of the young women, her kidney failed, he gave her a kidney. And that's what I mean about extending care even to non-kin. And to me that—these are the kinds of lives that you don't have to get all theological, you don't have to get all philosophical about what goodness looks like, but when you see it right in front of you, you say, "I'd like to be a little more that way." And so to me that's what moral education is, just finding people where you think, "Wow that's really admirable. I'm not gonna do that but I could do a little."

67

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So you gather wisdom from others. Can you explain how you do this?

01:44:21:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, I read a lot. So I travel a lot, so when I'm on planes I'm reading and I'm marking. And so I don't read the way normal people do. I read to collect wisdom, and some of it's just anything that I found useful for myself. Sometimes it's stories that exemplify a process I'm trying to understand and sometimes they're unusual. So for example, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the Russian novelist, was a guy who was super ambitious in early life and he was a revolutionary and the Czar arrested him and they sentenced him to death with the other people in his radical group and they put him one morning in coffin ware, like in shrouds and they marched him out to the square. And they were about to shoot when a horse arrived and said, "The Czar has spared you. You'll do hard labor, but you will not be executed today." And he went back to his cell and he sang at the top of his lungs and he wrote a letter to his brother right away and said, "I've just seen that all that I've worked for in my life is all wrong." And he had this revelation about how to live life and what mattered in life. He had a revelation about what mattered in other people and how to see other people, and he went and did five years of hard labor in Siberia and in those five years he was never alone for one second.

01:45:50:00

DAVID BROOKS:

But he came back and he'd had a moral education and he was able to write *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and all the other books because he'd had an episode, which was a moral education in a particularly traumatic form. And if anybody wants to know, well how do people get better in life? Well, he's a very concentrated form of that. So it allows you to think about it and see. And so I'm always looking for stories like that, that are teaching us how to get a little better, and they're instructive for me and when I find something that's instructive for me, I pass it around.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So talk about the period when you were writing *The Road to Character*; what were you learning?

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. I was writing *The Road to Character* just to understand—it started out just as a book on humility, 'cause, you know, I have discussions with my friends about what's the most important trait a person can have? And some people think it's courage. That if you don't have courage to lead life, then you can't achieve anything. But I think it's humility and I think our society is torn apart by egotism. But humility to me is not thinking lowly of yourself. In some parts it's not thinking about yourself at all, but my favorite saying about humility is, "It's being radically honest about yourself from a position of other-centeredness."

01:47:07:00

DAVID BROOKS:

That is to say, the people who are able to get outside themselves and see what they're really good at and see what they're really bad at really honestly. So Abraham Lincoln was a very humble man. There was a moment where he was trying to get one of his generals, General McClellan, to fight more aggressively in the civil war. And he visited McClellan at his home with his aide John Hay and McClellan didn't come down to see him. And Lincoln, the president is waiting in his living room for 45 minutes and the guy doesn't come home, or doesn't come down and eventually just goes to sleep. And Hay is incensed; he's insulted the dignity of the president. And Lincoln's not bothered. He said, "If I can get somebody to fight, it's not about my dignity. I'm happy to sit here." And so Lincoln had real humility about himself. He knew he was really good at some things, his brain, his speaking ability. But he didn't put himself at risk. It was not his ego on display that needed to be flattered. And so what's valuable about that is humility. And so I wanted to write about people who were pathetic at age 20 but by 70 they were magnificent. And I wanted to understand how this process came about that some people who could be scattered and disorganized, as young adults seem really remarkably admirable as older adults.

01:48:24:00

DAVID BROOKS:

One of the people I read about who was a favorite of mine was a woman named Francis Perkins. And she was sort of a do-gooder, but she was sort of rootless in her twenties. She wanted to do some good for society, didn't quite know how to do it. And then one day in the early part of the 20th century she's having tea in Washington Square Park in lower Manhattan, and she and the other ladies she's having tea with, hear a commotion. So they rush outside and they see a fire and they've stumbled on one of the most famous fires in American history,

70

the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. They had put up a factory, all these seamstresses were in there and they had done terrible exit avenues, bad regulations, violated all the codes and she went to the fire and saw 115 odd people burn to death because they were trapped in this factory, and she saw about 40 or 50 of them decide rather than to burn to death they're going to leap to their deaths. So she watches them leap to their deaths. And it was her agency moment. It was a moment, or as they say a call within a call. There are some moments where we sort of know what we're going to do but then everything gets clarified and crystalized.

01:49:37:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And she decided at that moment that worker safety was gonna be the calling of her life and worker rights. And so when you see that— And then she spends the next 60 years doing worker safety and worker rights and became secretary of labor under Franklin Roosevelt, the first woman in the US cabinet in history. And when you see that, you think, oh, a call within a call. There are moments when we're sort of marching along but then something burning happens that outrages us and we become indignant and our ambition is focused. And so for Perkins after that moment she would work with anybody, make any compromise to get—to advance the cause of workers safety and workers rights. And so you think, oh, so that's how some people get admirable. They respond to a moment of anger and indignation at some social wrong and they get laser beam focused. And so when you read these stories you think, oh, that's how the process happens. And so, you know, as a writer you're just trying to learn from people who've been through stuff that's bigger than anything you've been through and trying to apply it in your life.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And what happened to your life when that book was completed?

01:50:42:00

DAVID BROOKS:

You know, I think that was the first time—when *The Road to Character* came out, it was the first time I was really speaking in public about moral things. And there are downsides to speaking in public about moral things. You can come off as super preachy and I sometimes do that. You can come off as self-righteous and I sometimes do that. And you can come off as a hypocrite 'cause I'm writing about all of these amazing people, but I know in my own life I don't live up to it most of the time. But I still think it's important to hold up the standard, and I think our culture is over-politicized and under-moralized.

01:51:16:00

DAVID BROOKS:

That we spend a lot of time paying attention to every little political scandal and every little political poll but we don't pay attention to the things that are really the most important; what's the quality of our character, what's the quality of our relationships. And so I think one of my callings or one of the assignments I've given myself is to try to shift the conversation a little to the extent I'm able more in the direction of moral conversation. How do we treat each other well? What's an admirable life look like? And so I've written a lot less about politics over the last few years, though Donald Trump has made that hard. But I do think that's sort of what I'm here to do and I feel that's an important thing to do and I feel there's a great hunger for that. And so *The Road to Character* sold twice as much as any other book I've written and it wasn't because it was better, it was because there was a hunger for, well how do we talk about character? And people

72

understood that yeah, I want to figure out how to talk about that. And I certainly didn't have it figured out but I had stories of ten or fifteen individuals who had great character and from whom we can all learn one thing or another.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Does it really matter? Does living a moral life really matter?

01:52:30:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yes, I—you know, one of my core beliefs and one of the things that has lost in our society is the concept of a soul. And I think the core driver of all our lives is the desire for meaning. What Victor Frank called man's search for meaning. And the soul, I don't ask you to believe in God or not believe in God, it's not in my department. But I ask people to believe that there's some piece of them that has no size, weight, color or shape but which has infinite value and dignity. And slavery is wrong because it's an attempt to obliterate another person's soul. Sexual assault isn't just an assault on physical molecules; it's an insult to another person's soul. We're all unequal in our brainpower. We're all unequal in our physical strength. But we're all completely equal at the level of the soul. And what the soul does is it yearns for goodness. I've interviewed a lot of really bad people in my journalistic career. I've never met anybody who didn't want to be good. And even the people who've done all these terrible sins have all these rationalizations about what they—why what they did was actually good.

01:53:34:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so I think for all of us we want to think we made a good difference in the world, we served some good. And if we don't feel that, our life feels meaningless and we get tortured by it. And so we've fallen into a trap, which I think we're pulling out of where we used to think we were driven by the things economists think we're driven by like the desire for money, for status, for power. But I think most of us are driven by the desire to try to have a meaningful life and the desire to live in the right relationship with others. And if you ignore those things then your nature will catch up to you at some point and you'll find yourself adrift, you'll find— you'll wonder if your life has purpose and meaning and that's a very horrible state to be in.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

To you David Brooks, what is the soul?

DAVID BROOKS:

The soul is this mysterious dissatisfaction. The soul is the thing that yearns and that keeps me reading all these books about moral philosophy because I want to understand it better, I want to behave better. I was at Penn Station in New York on the subway line, right near Penn Station if anybody's ever been to Penn Station in New York where Amtrak is and the subway; it's like the most soulless place on the face of the earth. I was in this crowded thing early in the morning; we were all walking like ants through the tunnels.

01:54:55:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And suddenly I became aware of this fact that every person around me had a soul. That in some of them their souls were singing, some of

them their souls were sick, some of them their souls were sanctified, but each person of all these thousands of people had this completely, infinitely dignified piece of themselves that made them special in who they are. And when I do journalism I couldn't care about my stories if I was just writing about sacks of genetic material. I mean, what's the point? The stories only have relevance and importance because I'm writing about human beings who have souls.

01:55:33:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And their—the destiny to their lives really matters, and that's the enchanted piece of life that I think if we lose the concept of the soul, we sort of lose the concept of how to treat each other because you want to treat someone well because their life has such dignity, and if we just treat them as physical material things, then why treat anybody well? And so to me that concept, when you've lost the concept of the soul, you've really lost a lot. And so I fight to preserve that concept.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Is the little voice inside our head that we all have, is that the soul or is that the mind?

DAVID BROOKS:

You know, I identify the soul as—I mean it has no space, there's no thing in us, but I identify the soul by what it yearns for and so these are metaphors. But the mind yearns for understanding. We all want to figure out the world. You know, a little kid will look at a car and try to understand how the car works. The heart yearns for fusion with another and the soul yearns for goodness. You know, and sometimes

the soul feels sick. I was very—earlier in the week, a friend of mine had his father die and I didn't show up for him.

01:56:48:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And I should have gone out of my way to be with him and I didn't. And I did—I just felt crappy. And so that's my soul feeling sick, and sometimes the soul sings. I love this quote from my Rabbi Wolf Kellman who marched with King at Selma and he said, "We felt the most transcendental feeling." They were marching across the bridge with King and suddenly they were swept up in this group sensation that things changed for the good, that progress is possible. And he said, "That was the most spiritual, transcendental experience of my life."

01:57:22:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And the piece of him that was singing was the soul. And these are just metaphors, they're not—there's no physical part of us, but I don't understand human behavior without that concept because I see so many people trying to lead good and caring lives often at great sacrifice. And it wouldn't make sense unless they had some piece of them driving them to do that. And that set of desires to lead a good and meaningful life I call that set of desires the soul.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

That's great. Can you describe what the first mountain is?

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. The first mountain is the mountain we seek to climb, most of us early in our lives. We get out of school and we want to establish our identity. We want to know who we are, we want to achieve success, we want to make a difference in the world, we want to get good at our job, and that's the normal thing to do. And so a lot of us spend the early parts of our adulthood or the early parts of our life getting good grades, trying to be good at school, trying to get into a career, trying to establish yourself in your career.

01:58:24:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And it's a perfectly good thing to do, but in my case you get to the top of your career and I had way more career success than I ever thought. And I was like, eh, this ain't so great. I remember the first—I wrote a book in 2000 called *Bobos in Paradise* and I was driving around LA on my book tour and I got a call from my publisher and it said, "You're going to be on the New York Times Bestseller List. And so I wanted to be a writer since I was seven. This was one part of the dream, like to get on the bestseller list. And I felt nothing. It was nothing. Like getting on the bestseller list was something that was happening externally to me and it was sort of a disappointment. And—but we all know people who have achieved great success and their life is not going well. We have these celebrity suicides, Anthony Bourdain, Kate Spade. And that first mountain doesn't satisfy. And so a lot of people achieve success and it's just not satisfying. Some people fail, they're no longer climbing their mountain and some people something happens that wasn't part of the original plan.

01:59:27:00

DAVID BROOKS:

They have a cancer scare. They lose a child and when that happens, the desires of the first mountain, to become corporate vice-president or whatever, just seem trivial. And so I think the first mountain is the part of life we're often good at which our society orients around, but it's insufficient.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And then what is the valley?

DAVID BROOKS:

The valley is when—we all have valleys in our lives. The valley is the moment when you're suffering and the suffering carves open the topsoil that you use to cover up your heart and soul and it exposes the soft fertile flesh below. And for some people it's the death of a loved one. For some people it's getting fired. For some people it's a public humiliation. For me it was a combination of events that happened around 2013 when my marriage had ended, my kids were leaving or had left for school, college.

01:00:22:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And all my friends had been in the conservative movement and they—I was no longer really part of the conservative movement anymore, so I lost a lot of friends. And so I was living alone and I did what any idiot would do in a moment of spiritual and relational crisis, which was that I tried to work my way through it. Workaholism is a very good distraction from any spiritual or emotional problem. And it's what a lot of people do and I did that, and so the story I tell is that if you went to my kitchen in my apartment where I was living alone

and you open the drawer where there should have been silverware in my kitchen, it was just post-it notes.

02:01:01:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And where there should have been plates, it was just stationary 'cause I was just working, working, working. And that—when I think about that, that's a metaphor for a life misspent. And there are a lot of valleys in life. I lost my mother a couple of years ago and that's a dark moment, but there are different kinds of valleys where it's your own fault, where you've been living by the wrong values and people who go through those valleys have to do a more recalculation of what am I doing with my life? And what do I need to get out of this? And I think the valley—you know, there are certain moments you do, certain things you do in the valley. One of the things you do is you throw yourself on your friends. And I had a friend who was a great listener and we would have these late night conversations on the phone. And I would describe a problem and he would ask me six questions and then I'd expect in the rhythm of the conversation for him to give me some advice. But then he'd ask another six questions. And I would think, oh that's what good listening is; it's asking the next six questions.

02:02:01:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so that was very important to have friends like that, and when I was in that valley I felt oh I'm being such a pain to my friends. But now that I'm out of the valley, when a friend throws themselves on me, I'm delighted because it's a chance to deepen our friendship and be of service. And so it's always a mistake to think you're being a pain when you throw yourself on your friends, I've learned that. And then the

other thing you have to do is go out into the wilderness and spend some time in solitude. These moments, solitude is sometimes necessary. And there's a rabbinic story about Moses who was a shepherd and one of his little lambs took off like a gazelle and went into the wilderness and Moses had to chase it deep into the wilderness.

02:02:45:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And the rabbis tell us the lamb was Moses himself. He needs to go off and be alone to find himself. And the reason you need to be alone is if you've lived life as performance to try to impress other people, when you go off into the wilderness, there's nobody to perform for. The trees and the mountains, they don't care. And so you have to go out there and not be the gifted child anymore, just be on your own where everything else falls apart. And as one scholar said, "After that has crumbled, then you are ready to be loved." Now, Einstein had a good phrase that our problems cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness at which we created them. That you have to get a bigger level of consciousness. And that's a hard process because you have to crack open your old self and try to be a new self. And I read a guy named Henri Nouwen and I was in the valley and I read—somebody recommended this book and Nouwen said, "You have to stay in the pain to see what it has to teach you." And I was like screw that, I want to get out of the pain. But—and I tried but I think what now and is essentially right that you have to rest in that and see what—you know, why you got to this place.

02:04:03:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so there's throwing yourselves on the friend—on your friends; there's going out in the wilderness and sort of cracking open your own self and then the final thing I learned in the valley is that you have to be lifted out of the valley. Very few of us can climb our way out on our own. But usually there's some loved one around or some group of people who reach down into the valley and they embrace you, they give you a hand and they help pull you out. And—but you have to be willing to be led by those people and to be open to those people and dependent on those people and that's how the valley ends.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

There's one phrase you use in your book, you said, "It's gotta crack you or crack you open." .

02:04:45:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Those moments of suffering in the valley, of moments of painful moments in our lives can either break you or break you open. And the breaking is when you get fearful. Some people, something bad happens and some people just get fearful and they close in on themselves. And they want to be invulnerable so they close in and they develop this coding of hard brittle stuff. And often they react angrily and they lash out at others because they're fearful, and there's a saying that pain that is not transformed gets transmitted. And often you're around people who are very hostile and angry. And usually something that's touched them deep inside and they just cover it over. But other people are broken open. They discover those low moments, the really vulnerable parts of themselves that are—the nerves that are exposed. And they decide I'm gonna live in a way that they stay exposed because when I expose these soft tender nerves, I'm able to

relate to others, I'm able to be a better person, I'm able to be a more caring and loving person.

02:05:43:00

DAVID BROOKS:

I had a guy from Australia write to me, and he said, "The worst moments in my life was when my wife died young." And he said, "In the years since, I read a guy named Parker Palmer." And he said, "I Learned what Palmer had to teach me, which was you have to listen to your life and see what your life has to teach you." And he said—this guy from Australia said, "I feel almost guilty at how much moral and spiritual growth happened after the death of my wife because I profited from her death. But I lead a different kind of life. I speak in a different register, I value different things." And I think there's an example of a guy who was broken open and who something really bad happened to him and he benefited in a weird way. And if you ask people—go around and ask people what made you who you are, it's never—nobody ever says, "You know, I took a vacation to Hawaii and it was great, and that changed my personality, it made me who I am." Nobody ever says that. People say, "I went through a hard moment of struggle and it refocused my life." Or "I was in the Marine Corps, I was in war." "I struggled with a very ill child." "I had a cancer scare."

02:06:57:00

DAVID BROOKS:

I covered John McCain, he was in a prison camp and a little of the shallow frat boy that John McCain was went away in that prison camp and a deeper register entered his life. And most people have had that moment. It's very rare that you find someone over age 30 or 40 that hasn't had that moment and been changed by it.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So then you leave—hopefully you leave the valley and enter your second mountain. What is the second mountain?

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. If the first mountain is about acquiring things, getting a big career and getting a name, getting an identity, the second mountain is about contributing things. The first mountain is about climbing up, the second mountain is reaching down and helping people who are struggling themselves. The first mountain is about ego; the second mountain is about an orientation about others. So I met a guy in Kentucky a few months ago who was a banker and he lost his job. And now he works helping men come out of prison to re-enter the world. And when he talks—he's on the second mountain.

02:08:00:00

DAVID BROOKS:

When he talks about that experience, his eyes just glow in a way they never did around banking. And if he hadn't been fired or faced bankruptcy or whatever it was, I'm not sure he would have reoriented his life because, you know, the momentum of life just keeps you going and you get a sort of short term reward for being a successful banker. I mean, you're a big person in your community. And if—when he's going to wherever the prison is and helping the guys who are coming out, there's probably not any reward at all. There's not any status reward and certainly no financial reward, but to see him is to see a guy whose

eyes are lighting up. And this is a pattern I see again and again as I travel around and talk to people that their lives really did have two halves.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So you've said, "I can recognize first and second mountain people." Explain what you see.

DAVID BROOKS:

Well, the first mountain person, they want to know what you think of them. And the first mountain person they've got a certain rhythm and pace and they're somewhat hard to reach. And so they—they're sort of clawing their way and the things they talk about—and I see this where I live in Washington. You go into a coffee shop and you overhear conversations and 90% of the conversations are about career strategy. And I'm all for having a great career, but really, 90%? And so those people are living a certain kind of life.

02:09:29:00

DAVID BROOKS:

But then you look at somebody else and you see their eyes are locked into another person and they're talking in hushed tones and they look at life a little differently. So for example, one of the stories I read in a book called *Practical Wisdom* was about a hospital janitor named Luke. And Luke cleaned the rooms on a floor of his hospital and one of the rooms has a kid who was in a coma that he wasn't coming out of. And his dad would sit there, just sit vigil over him. And one day, Luke cleaned the room but his dad was out getting a smoke and the dad later came up to Luke in the afternoon and said, "You didn't clean my kids room." Now, the first mountain response is to say, "Yeah, I did

84

clean your room but you were out getting a smoke.” And in the first mountain mode, you think of my job, my job is cleaning rooms. But the second mountain mode is saying, “My job is not cleaning rooms. My job is providing comfort to patients and their families.” And so in that case you go back to the room and you clean it for a second time that day so he can have the comfort of seeing you clean it. And that’s what Luke did. And so it’s a very subtle difference. It’s how do I see my job? Is it doing a transaction so I can make some money and go home? Or am I serving patients and their families? And it’s just this little shift in perception that can actually change a lot of how people live.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

You say that during your years in the valley, you were radicalized. Can you explain that?

02:11:01:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, I mean I think our society is much more screwed up than I thought. That if you look at our society right now, you see a 30% rise in suicide rate, a 30%--or 70% rise in teenage suicide rate since 2011. You see mental health facilities in every college I go to being swamped, the number of people who say they’re depressed has doubled in a generation. And so what you see is a lot of people in a lot of pain who are expressing themselves partly as suicide, partly as depression, partly as opioid addiction. It’s 72,000 people die of opioid addiction every year. So that’s more people dying per year of opioid addiction than died in the entire Vietnam War, and that’s happening every year. And that’s a social problem. People cut off from meaningful lives, people cut off from each other. It’s a cultural problem, it’s a moral problem and it’s a relational problem. And how have we gotten to a

point where we not only lead the world in narcissism, we lead the world in depression given all that we have in this country?

02:12:08:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And maybe it took me going through it to observe it in the world around me, but it's certainly evident in the world around you and you know, I talk to people who are managers in businesses who I overheard them ask, "What's the thing you need in your department?" And the person answered, "A shrink. My employees need mental health." And so this is—I don't quite understand why it's all happened. Maybe it's the smart phone, I don't know. But something pervasive is happening in the culture that makes us feel more isolated, more alienated, more distrustful, more tribal and more alone. And that's, I think, just cultural values that have kind of run amok.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Explain how you make yourself strong in your weakest places.

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, I think what you do is you—I think we have to analyze what's our weakness and tell a story about that and we make sense of our lives by telling a story of our lives and so for me, I think my—one of my weaknesses is a tendency toward shallowness. And so the story I tell is someone who's like struggled against that. Other people—you know, psychologists have a phrase, some people need tightening, some people need loosening. And some people, their emotions are all on the surface.

02:13:28:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Dorothy Day, one of my heroines when she was a young woman, when she read a novel, she didn't just read the novel, she started acting like the characters in the novel. And unfortunately she read a lot of Dostoyevsky. And so she was like emotionally a wreck, living in a garret, sleeping around, two suicide attempts, two abortions, living like one of these lost Dostoyevsky characters. And so she needed tightening. Some of us who are overly inhibited and overly reticent, we need loosening; we need to be loosened up. And so you've got to tell a story about what that core problem you face is. And I think that's part of what moral development is, just like telling a story about what your problem is and what you need to work on, and then taking action about that. So another hero of mine is George Marshall who is—who ran the US Army during World War Two. And his core problem was ambition, he was just ruthlessly ambitious. And so he said—made a rule, “In the Army I'm never going to advocate for myself. If somebody wants to promote me, fine, I'm not going to advocate for myself.” And in World War Two, he wanted to take the command of Operation Overlord, which was the D-Day invasion.

02:14:38:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And he really wanted this job. And Churchill or Stalin told him he was gonna get it and FDR pulled him into his office and said, “Would you like to run Operation Overlord?” And instead of just saying yes, he said, “My own personal desires have no bearing on your decision.” And Roosevelt asked him four times and four times Marshall said, “It's not about me, you do what's right for you and the country.” And FDR took the chance to give the job to Eisenhower instead of Marshall and Marshall was crushed. They said—one of his biographers said it was the only day in the war he went home early because he really wanted

87

that command. But this was his code, and he became one of the most admired Americans of the 20th century because he was able to live by a code. He knew where his weakness was gonna be and he took action to make sure it didn't bring him down.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Can you discuss how too much emphasis is placed on mind and reason and not enough on heart and soul? The things that bind us together.

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. Well, starting in the 18th century we had this image of us as rational creatures. The enlightenment, at least the French enlightenment, René Descartes, he first thought that the mind was separate from emotions. The mind is separate from the physical body and that the mind was the beautiful thing about human nature. And so he decided he could create a whole philosophy which was, "I think therefore I am." I'm gonna rationally and logically think my way through my life and I'll direct my life as my reason tells me to direct it. And if our reason was really that powerful, we would follow through on all our New Year's resolutions.

02:16:20:00

DAVID BROOKS:

We'd decide, hey I'm gonna stop eating donuts and we would actually stop. I'm gonna stop drinking and we would actually stop. Most of the time when we screw up it's not 'cause we don't know what to do. We know what to do, we don't have the willpower; don't have the drive and the desire to know what to do. And I think one of the things I've learned in life by reading Antonio Damasio and many other people is

that knowledge is plentiful but motivation is scarce. That it's getting the desire to do the right thing and getting the motivation to do the right thing, that's really the tricky part. We know we should be kind to strangers, that we should not just walk by that homeless guy, but we're busy and we're shy and we're a little uncomfortable by the homeless guy, and so we don't do what we know we should do. And getting the motivation to do what we should do is the hard part. And so to me we're not primarily thinking creatures. We are primarily feeling creatures and desiring creatures. And this is—St. Augustan said this 1,500 years ago, we are like just desire. And one of the tasks in life, and this is how Augustan put it, is to educate your desires so you want the right things.

02:17:31:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so Augustan said we all have a lot of loves and we all know some loves are higher than others. And if you—if a friend tells you a secret and you blab it at a dinner party, then you're putting your love of popularity above your love of friendship. And we know that's wrong. That's putting a lower love above a higher love. And so what Augustan said, with great wisdom, 15 or 1,600 years ago, is that you can't replace a low love by saying— with a no. If you are smoking, you can't say, "I'm just gonna stop." You have to replace it with a higher love. And so for a lot of people they stop smoking when they start having kids and they don't want to smoke around their kids because they love their kids more than they love cigarettes. And so the way we improve in life is often replacing a lower love with a higher love and that's another way you learn how moral progress happens.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And what is deep love?

DAVID BROOKS:

Well, it—a deep love is completely—a passionate love. And one of the things that entrances me is that when people fall in love, the first few months are often like the rock music video. I love a rock music video by the Goo Goo Dolls called “Come to Me” and it’s about that passion of that first dating love. And I read a study recently that 15% of people have that love all through their lives. They can be married for 50 or 60 years and complete passion never goes away. And those are the lucky people. And occasionally you’ll see a couple in their 60’s or 70’s or 80’s and they look at each other with the same passionate love they did when they were 18 and they tended their relationship well.

02:19:16:00

DAVID BROOKS:

The Greeks had three words for love and it’s a helpful distinction they observed. The first kind of love they said was philia, that’s friendship. The second kind of love is eros, and that’s passion and desire. And the third kind of love is agape, that’s charity and just giving love. And one of the books I read said if you’re gonna marry somebody, try to have all three. If you just have eros, that’s a hookup, that’s not a real marriage. If you just have philia, that’s a friendship but it’s not a marriage. Try to have all three. And I found that’s a useful way to think about the decision of who you’re going to marry, who you’re really gonna devote yourself to in life.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So we're talking now about moral joy and you've mentioned Yo Yo Ma but I was hoping you could talk about a couple more. You mentioned Jeffrey Canada.

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. So there's some people who have joy where it's just a second where you had a moment, a great thing happened, you're lost in nature and it's just like wow, that was an amazing moment. But some people, joy is their permanent outlook. They're just grateful for the people they're around and they live their life as just service. And so they walk through life—I was just with this guy in Waco, he's fresh on my mind, Jimmy Durrell. And you see him walking amongst the homeless and you see him walking among the poor or you see him walking among the rich and he's just like—peers into people and he bores down on them and he's just all enthusiasm.

02:20:49:00

DAVID BROOKS:

He's like a cheerleader of life and he's sort of got himself out of the way and he's just a bright, warm, sunny person. And so I see these people who just live life as gratitude, and they live in horrible circumstances but they're oriented around the right thing and the right thing is building intimate relationship with somebody else. And they force you with their good vibe to reflect good vibe back on you. And so I've met—I meet these people once a month. Jeffrey Canada who founded Harlem Children's Zone. I was sitting next to the Dalai Lama at a Washington function and that guy just radiated joy all the time. He sat there and laughed for no apparent reason and I was sitting next to him and I would laugh and he would laugh and I would laugh, and it wasn't clear what was happening 'cause I had nothing to

say to the guy but he radiates joy. If you see him on TV you just see him smiling and he'll—there's a little childishness about a lot of these people including him. I have a friend who's an economist and the Dalai Lama had him—he visited the Dalai Lama in wherever in India and the Dalai Lama just grabbed him by the cheeks and they pushed their foreheads together. And this is usually not what grown men do with each other but there's an openness and a joyousness toward life that he just carries around with him everywhere he goes.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So can you describe what the Weave Project is and how you got involved?

02:22:23:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. I was writing these columns and everything I wrote about was about social isolation. It was the rising suicide rate, it was neighborhoods breaking down, it was families breaking down. It was the tribalism in our politics and the hatred from one tribe to another. And I thought, the social fragment—the social fabric is just fragmenting before our eyes. And then I had the realization that—but it's being solved at the local level by these people we call weavers who are just really good at building community. And so I wanted to understand how can we lift them up and illuminate their example, learn from their values and spread them around and nationalize their effect?

02:23:04:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so we spent a year or two visiting just the best people on earth and people who do live lives of service. One woman in Chicago, a woman named Aisha Butler. She lived in this tough neighborhood in Chicago called Englewood and the bullets were coming through her window from time to time and she was scared for her nine-year old daughter. And she told her husband, "Let's get out of here, let's go to Atlanta. It's just too dangerous here, we can't raise a family here." And so they were gonna go to Atlanta and then they were about to move out, they had a barbeque, said goodbye to all their neighbors and one day she was looking across out of her window at the empty lot across the street and she saw a little girl in a pink dress playing with broken bottles and tires.

02:23:50:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And she turns to her husband and says, "We can't leave that. We can't just be another family who left that." So they canceled the move. She said, "I'm gonna get involved in my community, I'm gonna do something for this community." And so she googles volunteer in Englewood and she finds an organization, then she start—has another and has another. And now she's the head of the big Englewood community organization, which is called Rage. And now when you go to Englewood and you go to the stores, there's t-shirts that say proud daughter of Englewood, proud son of Englewood. It's still in some ways a challenging community but they got some spirit there. And one of the things she does is she takes the empty lot, of which there are 5,000 in her neighborhood and one by one they buy them from the city and they turn 'em into parks, they turn 'em into something. So here's a woman who said, "I'm gonna fix this place." And so we could all learn from that kind of example. And to me, the weavers are doing good in their community but they're also cultural revolutionaries and

moral revolutionaries who are living in a different way by a different set of values, not by the hyper individualistic competitive values that a lot of us are raised in, but by much more relational values.

02:24:53:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And I—and we travel around, we meet them, we bring them together, we lift them up. A lot of them are lonely because the work is hard and unglamorous and they're underfunded and we try to support them by bringing them together so they can say, "Oh, there's other people like me who do this work." And I think—ya know, my theory of change is that culture changes when a small group of people find a better way to live and spending time around—with these weavers is transformational. And you want to say, I'd like to live a little of the way we're living and I think social change will happen as we change the culture and I think the weavers are the vanguard of showing us a better way to live and showing a way toward a better America.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And did the Weave Project start—were you part of the start of that or was it around and then you were writing about it and then you got involved?

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, so I—I helped start it. And partly it was just like, 45,000 people kill themselves every year, it's like a silent pearl harbor. 72,000 dying

of opiate addiction, we're all called upon to do something a little extra. And so my normal life is just writing and I thought, "Well, if I can do anything beyond writing, and I can do a different kind of communication. I'm not gonna be one in the trenches but at least I can lift up the people in the trenches to show this way of living.

02:26:14:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so the Aspen Institute was looking for—their former head, a guy named Walter Isaacson had retired and they were looking for a head, and I am not qualified to run the Aspen Institute because I've managed one person in my life so I'm not a manager or anything like that. But I said, "Listen, America's divided by ravines. You guys are in the bridge building business, this is what you should be doing." And they said, "Well we're not gonna hire you to run this place but why don't you try doing what you just said?" And so it got started that way. And so we built a team and we traveled around the country and now we gather them together online and in person. We try to build curricula to train people. We're creating a guidebook where the expertise of these community builders, it can be all concentrated and they can better learn from each other. And so we're just trying to be supportive in any random way we can think of.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So we're now into the weavers, you've defined what the program is. Can you define what a weaver is and can you tell me how weavers are healers?

02:27:18:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. A weaver is someone who's building community but really the core act of weaving is seeing someone deeply and being deeply seen. So it's taking a spot where there's distance and creating a relationship. And so, for example, there's a woman named Sarah Hemminger who grew up in Indiana and when she was growing up, her dad reported on their church pastor that he was an embezzler, and instead of getting rid of the pastor, the family shunned Sarah and her family. For eight years of her childhood, people in her own community wouldn't talk to her. When she was at parties, she would have to sit separately in separate rooms from even members of her own family. So she suffered severe loneliness. And she's—grows up, becomes a PhD student at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore and she's on a bus one day and she's passing a high school called Dunbar high school and she's looking at the kids outside the school and she sees their loneliness and she says, "I know exactly what they feel like. And they're lonely, I'm lonely, maybe they'll be my friends." So she gets the names of 450 underperforming high school kids in Baltimore and she gets them into her program with pizza, gives them pizza and they—she surrounds them with relationship.

02:28:31:00

DAVID BROOKS:

So four adults who are sort of parent figures, then four more who are grandparents, then 12 more collaborators, this intricate social network around. And so where there was distance, these kids are now surrounded by adults, mentors and friends and basically a second family. And so she's a weaver. She's someone who's taken isolation and replaced it with relationship and community. And one of the great things about her program is, it's not only a structure, it's an ethos. They have a saying called show all the way up. So if you're in a meeting, you lay all your crap on the table; you're completely

96

vulnerable with everybody else around you. And that even happens with the people on the board. And so she's got a woman on the board named Michelle who had something bad happen in her childhood which was, she was abused by her dad. And she has—Asian American, she used to say, "I was glad I had thick hair 'cause nobody could see the welts on my head from where he punched me." And—but she never told her husband that, she never told her kids that.

02:29:30:00

DAVID BROOKS:

But on the board—on the board of thread, this showing up ethos influenced her and so she loosened up and told them on the board about her childhood and then told her husband and her kids and she wrote a letter about it which she gave to me and showed to me and it's really about—thread has changed her and taken a life that was sort of repressed and given her a life of thick relationship. And one of the things that happened to her when she was down in the dumps as a child, attempting suicide, other things, she listened to Elton John. And that was the soundtrack of her misery, and later in life she took her 13-year-old daughter to an Elton John concert in Baltimore and she started weeping. And she was weeping because her life has turned out so much better than she thought it would. She now has a life full with rich relationships with her kids and her community and she never could have predicted that when she was 13. And in part because thread changed her culture and her mindset and weavers do that, that's one of the things that's great about them.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And what is thread?

DAVID BROOKS:

Thread is this organization that helps these 450 underperforming kids in Baltimore and surrounds them with 2,000 volunteers. And so they take people from all around the city and they just connect them. And so the volunteers will pick them up in the morning, drive them to school. If the kid leaves school, they call the volunteer, the volunteer leaves work, picks up the kid, drives him back to school. Basically all the things parents or cousins or grandparents would do, these volunteers are doing for those kids.

02:31:05:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And they—you can't leave Thread. It's like a family, you're there. Once you're in, you're in for life or at least ten years. And so these people are in each other's lives doing the mundane things. Getting a new phone, finding some food, helping get art for an art project. It's just mundane stuff, but it's taking people who are disconnected and giving them really rich family-like connections.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Explain to me, I'm just—Thread sounds like its own thing which is then a part of the weavers?

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. So basically all around the country, if you go into any town and say, "Who's trusted here?" people will take you to the person who is binding up the community. In some places it's a formal organization like Thread in Baltimore. In some places it's just someone who helps

people in the community out, out of a sense of caring for those around them, just out of a sense of love your neighbor. So in Columbia Heights in Washington DC, a neighborhood in Washington DC, there's a guy who works in the parking garage, he takes the money in the parking garage.

02:32:10:00

DAVID BROOKS:

But his hobby is understanding how the DC government works. So if somebody needs a building permit or is having a problem with the city, they go to the guy in the parking garage. And he's like a node of their community. And I found that in many neighborhoods there's a Miss Tompkins. And the Miss Tompkins is this old little lady, kind of tough, and she's the one who's on the block when somebody is—if the kids are playing the music too loud, she tells them to turn down the music. And everybody's sort of afraid of Miss Tompkins, but everybody sort of loves Miss Tompkins too. In a healthy community, you've got a Miss Tompkins. And basically they assume responsibility for the neighborhood. If there's someone who's suffering something in the neighborhood, they're the ones who are bringing over the food. There's a woman we met in Chicago who—she had 75 kids over to her apartment most afternoons just doing their homework because they needed a place to do homework. Another guy in Chicago named Charles Perry served 20 odd years in prison, came back and he walks out among where the gangs are, gives them their number and says, "I'm gonna help you lead a better life. Call me."

02:33:15:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so that guy's on call 24/7 ministering to these young men and trying to get them out of the gang activity. Some—there's—also in

99

Chicago there's an organization called Becoming a Man and they take young gang members, twelve at a time, put 'em around a room and they have a check in where they go around the room and each of the guys, men and women, say how they're doing emotionally, physically, spiritually and intellectually. And these guys are super armored up, they're in gangs but they have to be vulnerable when they get in relationship. And so what weavers are, they come in all shapes and forms but they're rebuilding community and they're weaving relationship and by and large, they're geniuses at relationship. If people got into Harvard for being really good at building relationships, they would get into Harvard because that's their magic skill. And I just want to understand how they do it and I want us all to learn from them and get a little better at that skill.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Tell me the story of how you once asked your *New York Times* readers whether they had found purpose in their lives and what was that reaction?

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, I—I've had a few times where I've just asked readers questions I'm curious about. Once I asked readers over 70 to grade themselves on their lives and I called it life reports. And they— we got about 5,000 essays, people over 70. And the average grade for professional life was A- and the average grade for personal life was B-. Some people thought they'd done better at work than they had in their families and their friends. And one of the things I learned from that is the people who were happiest were those who had divided their lives into chunks.

And they'd said, "The next eight years are a chapter in my life. What am I going to do with this chapter?"

02:35:00:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And the divisions were somewhat arbitrary but it was a way for them to think about and control their lives and plan their lives. And then later I asked readers to say what's your purpose in life. And I expected, like when I think about my purpose, it's to shift the conversation a little away from politics and more so about relationships and character. Another of my purposes is to spread the kind of Alexander Hamilton moderate republicanism that I believe in as a political philosophy and so I think of my purpose as pretty well defined. I was struck when people talked about their own purpose, it was just, I try to be nice to people. It was very general and often it was very small. One of the most moving descriptions of somebody's life purpose was a guy said, "I just—I have a little backyard garden and I find pleasure in the smallest things, just the small plants and tending to my own little garden." And I was struck by how small most people's sense of purpose was. Maybe they were humble, they didn't want to seem to get above themselves, and how, frankly, people were less articulate about what their purpose was than I expected.

02:36:06:00

DAVID BROOKS:

I expected to like have grand designs. I'm gonna cure cancer, I'm gonna turn my town around. I'm gonna—ya know, whatever. I'm gonna serve God. But people were very small and somewhat inarticulate about purpose. And I think it's an exercise we don't ask ourselves a lot of the time, what am I called to do here on this earth?

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Is gentleness a trait you have seen in people who have compassion?

DAVID BROOKS:

I would say kindness but often kindness mixed with anger. A lot of people go into this profession—sometimes they were loved into it. That somebody poured such love into them they just took it as a norm they're gonna pour love around them. Sometimes something really bad happened to them and they think, "I'm gonna make sure that doesn't happen to other people." I have a friend who they lost their son Henry and they created an organization called Hope for Henry, which goes to kids who are in the hospital and give—brings super hero—people in superhero costumes to the hospital so the kids can have a fun day even if they are suffering cancer. What they tend to have most of all is extreme extroversion and so there's a guy in Shreveport Louisiana named Mac McCarter.

02:37:12:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And he—when you walk into a coffee shop with Mac, the first time he's in the shop, within 10 minutes, he learns everybody's name. The second time, everybody thinks he's their best friend. The third time, they all want him to officiate their wedding. Like he's just like extremely extroverted and warm and a big presence and a big personality and Mac is from Shreveport, which is a city that's terribly divided by economics and by race. And so Mac came back as an adult and he created this thing called Community Renewal International to reweave the fabric of Shreveport. There are like 300,000 people in Shreveport, 55,000 are volunteers in his organization. And so if you

102

drive through Shreveport, there are a lot of signs that—houses that have a lawn sign that says. “We care.” And that means they’re the host family for that block and they have a settlement house in the poorer areas where the kids can come in the afternoons and a bunch of kids live there if they’ve got nowhere else to live. If you’ve got a we care button, and the volunteers wear these we care button and you’re in the elevator in Shreveport, you see somebody else with a we care button, you strike up a conversation. And I was with a couple last night named Emmitt and Sharpel who are hosts of one of the families in Shreveport, and they have seven kids who live with them and then dozens who come to their home in the afternoons.

02:38:31:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And Sharpel used to be in the Army and she teaches them to do drill marching, and the kids loved to do drill marching. And so they are the neighborhood host family in their neighborhood. Emmitt and Sharpel are the only married couple in their neighborhood. And so they just gravitated—and it’s 24/7. And they happen to be up here in New York and all their kids were like texting, “When are you getting back? We don’t know how to live without you.” And that’s grinding, exhausting work, 24/7. At one point in their lives they went six months without getting a paycheck ‘cause their organization had no money, but as they say, this is a lifestyle and one of the traits about weavers is vocational certitude. I’ve never seen anybody do this kind of work and say, “You know, I’m gonna do this for five years and then maybe I’ll do something else.” They all say, “This is why I was put on this earth, this is what I was called to, I’m gonna die doing this.” And so the weavers are—know why they’re here and they have a clear sense of purpose.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Which leads me to, how is finding a vocation different than finding a career?

DAVID BROOKS:

Career and vocation are different and vocation's just bigger. A career is something—you look at your skills and you look at the marketplace and you say, "What skills can I develop? What are my strengths? And how can I apply them to the marketplace so I can make a decent living? And there's nothing wrong with that of course. A vocation you're called to. It's not something you choose based on your skills. It's something, some problem in the world that calls for you to solve it that you feel outraged by or you feel somebody else needs.

02:40:09:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And the distinction was made clear to me by Victor Frankl who was a psychologist in the 30's in Austria. And he was a psychologist and he was captured by the Germans and sent to a concentration camp. And he had always asked the question, "What do I want from life?" And when he got in the camp, he realized that's the wrong question. The right question is, "What does life ask of me? What problem is in front of me that I am qualified to solve?" And that's being called. And so he was a psychologist in a concentration camp and he decided he should study suffering. As he said, "Suffering became a problem I did not want to turn my back on." And specifically he wanted to know why some people got to the camp and died right away. They just withered. Some people could live on months and months and years even in these harsh conditions. What did the people who endured have? And basically they had an imaginary relationship with something outside

104

the camp. So Frankl when he was doing his hard labor, he would have conversations with his wife who was somewhere else.

02:41:11:00

DAVID BROOKS:

He didn't even know if she was living or dead. But he had these long conversations with her. Some people had a book they wanted to write outside the camp, but they had something they were committed to outside the camp. And so he said, "What problem is demanding that you solve it?" And I have a friend named Fred Swaniker who's in Africa and he grew up as—his mom was a teacher, he started teaching at 18. And he came here to go to college in the states and somehow he felt called that Africa's big problem as a continent was lack of educational opportunities. There weren't enough universities. And he just felt, "My whole life has been pointing in this direction." And so, he said if—"When you choose, when you're called by a vocation, first of all, it should keep you up at night. You should care about it so much that you can't stop thinking about it. Second, it should be something your background uniquely prepares you to do. And third, it should be a big problem." He said, "If you're fortunate enough to have some skills, don't tackle a little problem, tackle a big problem." So Fred Swaniker started something called the African Leadership Academy, a school for very talented kids from all over Africa. And now he's starting universities in Mauritius and in Kenya and across Africa.

02:42:23:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And he's tackled a gigantic problem, education across a continent but he just—he had no choice. And people who have discovered their vocation have reached the point of the double negative. I can't not do this. This is my identity, this is who I am. And those people are driven

105

for life. They are totally focused and it's very impressive to come across such people.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And one of your pieces of advice is just start doing it. Can you explain that?

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. You know, you've got to—most people find their vocation by going out to where the problems are. I ran across a guy named Antonio who—poor kid from California but he got into Harvard and he had a Harvard degree and he had a chance to go into a consulting business or something like that and he said, "I want to go out where the problems are." And so he taught in the Philadelphia school systems, then he went to San Jose. And if you go out to where the problems are, you'll find some problem that really grabs you.

02:43:23:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And you never quite know what that problem is but it's through a process of trial and error and very few people conceptualize this intellectually. They just are out there and they see a kid and it's just like them. So I have another friend named Kennedy Odayday who's Kenyan and he grew up in this slum called Kibera, which is the biggest slum in Nairobi. And he had the worst childhood you could imagine. His mom died, his grandmother who raised him was killed when she was bit by a rabid dog. He was in a gang where many of the gang members were killed because they were a criminal gang. He was adopted and rescued by a priest who then abused him. And so he had

106

an awful childhood. Got a lucky break and got to go to Wesleyan University in Connecticut, but still thought of all those kids in Kibera. And so he went back to Kibera and created a kindergarten school for kids in Kibera called SHOFKO. And a lot of it was just that thing, his childhood and the way he lived in his childhood, was sort of the core of his life and he felt called back to go do that and that's what he does.

02:44:32:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And the odd thing about Kennedy is he's had, in many ways, a really horrific life, but he is completely happy and he's another of these people who just radiates joy and he gives you a big hug. He's just ebullient all the time. And you think, wow, how is he so ebullient in the—having come from a life of abuse and near death and smoking a lot of glue with drugs? But he said, "Before she died, my mom poured unconditional love into me and that's been my fuel ever since.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

A lot of these stories have forgiveness in them.

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, a lot of them have valleys and a lot of them have—the weavers have genuinely been through something. Sometimes they just had a grandmother or somebody in their life who said, "You assume responsibility. You see a poor person in your community, that's your problem." Like most of us walk through the street like that's a problem, it's not our problem. But they just assume responsibility, and a lot of them have been through some tough times, which has given them the vulnerability.

02:45:34:00

DAVID BROOKS:

So there's a guy I know in New Orleans named Dylan Tet who was in the war, in the military, suffered from PTSD, really went through a hard time. Now he's created a community of men who are dealing with their trauma together. There's a woman also in New Orleans named Lisa Fitzpatrick. She was a healthcare executive and she was driving one day and she saw a ten and eleven year old kid on the sidewalk and they held up a gun and they shot her in the face. And for them it was a gang initiation ritual. They had to shoot somebody to get in the gang. And she recovered and she realized, you know, I wasn't the victim here, I was just collateral damage. They were the victims 'cause they had to shoot somebody to have a family. And so she quit being a healthcare executive and she went to work at gang relations, now works for the city of New Orleans doing work of that nature. And so a lot of them have had something really bad happen which awoke them to a calling. And they try to address the wrong that was done to them and so it doesn't happen to other people.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And one of those weavers is Sarah Adkins. Can you tell me her story?

02:46:42:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. Sarah was a pharmacist living near Athens, Ohio, and she was out antiquing with her mom and she came home on a Sunday evening and her husband was taking care of their kids, but she hadn't heard from them. She texted them but had not gotten anything back. So she got into the house and it was dark and there were some packages by

the front door, which puzzled her. And so she opened the door and said, “Mommy’s home.” And she noticed a mattress had been placed on the doorway to the stairs to the basement. So she thought the kids were playing hide and seek with her, and so she pulled aside the mattress, she went down the stairs and she saw her husband sort of slumped over. And nothing registered. Then she saw her older boy on a couch and it looked like there was chocolate on the couch and she touched him and realized he was cold. And she says she had a vision of just golden light at that moment and she ran upstairs to see her younger son and he was also—he was in a crib and he’d also been shot. And she wouldn’t—she couldn’t tell me what body—what condition his body was in.

02:48:00:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And her husband had killed their kids and himself. And he had killed their kids on Saturday and not killed himself till sometime Sunday afternoon. And he wrote a note saying, “This mental illness ends with me. I’m not going to pass it down to the future generation.” He somehow had rationalized that he was doing somebody a favor. And so she called and she didn’t—for the next six months she never slept alone. She slept in the bed of her parents, or somebody else. The community just embraced her. And she decided that she was so angry at him for what he had done that she was going to make a difference in the world. And she told me, “I do what I do now because I’m angry. Whatever that guy tried to do with me, screw you, I’m gonna make a difference in the world.” And so now she has a free pharmacy, she teaches students at Ohio University, she helps women who have suffered violence in their families and as she says, “I’m a woman on the edge.” It’s been three or four years now, and when you watch

Sarah, her face is super responsive to any kind of passing emotion, as you see it written all over her.

02:49:14:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And you see she's still strung, but she lives a life of great service and she's quite a giftful and also very funny person. She has a black humor about her situation that enables it to project sometimes as jokes. And she deals with that. And we brought Sarah together—to DC with one of our Weaver conferences. We started to bring people together so they can be resources for each other. And there was a kid there, Sarah's white and quite short and there's a kid there named Darius Baxter who's lost his dad at age nine to—his dad was murdered by a mistress. And Darius now runs football camps for men so young African American men will have dads. And there was just a moment at the conference where Darius, who is a tall African American guy, and Sarah who's a short white woman, he just draped his arm around her, he's about 20 or 30 years younger than her and just offered a benediction over her. And it's people who have been through the valley together but have come out with knowledge and so a lot of weavers are of that sort.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And when you go speak to someone like Sarah, how do you prepare yourself?

02:50:31:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Well that I—that day when she walked me through her story, I had no preparation. I sort of knew the outline of the story but she walked

through every detail and I hope it was therapeutic for her to talk about it. What you get out of talking to these people is you get the raw story. You get complete vulnerability from them. My friend Sarah Hemminger who runs this organization in Baltimore, she'll say, "I'm lonely." And they will tell you when they are close to burnout. They are not hiding anything back. And that's been a lesson in how to communicate, how to build relationship. And often the stories are really hard and often their lives have what Richard Rourke calls a bright sadness, a joy but also a pain, maybe like everybody. But they trust, that's a thing that's about them. They are rooted down in a community and if you go and ask for their story, they just straight up tell you their story. Lisa Fitzpatrick, who was shot in the face. And they're not holding back because to them, the solace is in relationship to others.

02:51:44:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And if they're lonely, if they're depressed, you know about it. And I've found that a lot, especially with the younger generation, a lot of people in their teens, there's zero hesitancy about mental illness, about admitting depression, complete comfortableness talking about this, along with great fragility but great honesty, emotional honesty. And I take this as a great sign of hope. And I—when I meet weavers, they really preach emotional honesty. And if you're around them, you'll just get transformed, 'cause you sort of want to be a little more like them. And spending two years so far with them has, I hope, loosened me up a little.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

But when you speak with mothers or fathers or brothers or sisters who have had a terrible accident or a death, you said, "We need to all

111

work on our vocabulary about how to speak to these people and to not hide the elephant in the room.” Can you talk about that?

02:52:40:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. They—people who have been through the valleys, they’ve had their emotional moments where they’ve had reckonings where they really had to understand how weak they were, they had to understand their own brokenness. There are certain values that show up again and again. One of them is radical mutuality. They never think they’re better than anybody they’re helping. It’s we’re all broken; we’re all in this together. As Lisa Fitzpatrick says, “I don’t do anything for people, I just do things with people.” And they have moral motivation. They just want to be a good person. I just want to build a life around love your neighbor. And so they have these values and traits and this is true in red America or in blue America. And so, I’m inspired by an ethos that they share. And sometimes they’re driven by faith, often they’re not. Sometimes they’re kind people. Sometimes they’re really angry. This is especially true of—in—among the weavers in the African American community.

02:53:38:00

DAVID BROOKS:

They—this woman we met named Tracy who lives in Greenville, South Carolina and she just says, “I am furious at racial injustice in this country. And I have to go—I can be in a room with people who respect me but then I have to go home to Greenville and I have to deal with what’s there.” And the impatience, the anger bubbles forth and we thought we could just talk about community in sort of a nice way of friendship, let’s be nice to each other. But in this country you can’t really talk about community and relationship if you’re not doing a

racial reckoning. And so we've tried to learn how to talk about that across race and how to put that front and center in every meeting we have.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

I realize we've talked about the second mountain but we haven't talked about your second mountain. Is this weavers part of that second mountain?

DAVID BROOKS:

I think so. You know, a couple things happen on the second mountain. First, you try to make your commitments big commitments. So you don't just have a career, you have a vocation. You don't just have a set of opinions; you try to have a philosophy and a creed. You don't just have a contract marriage where it's transactional; you try to have a covenantal marriage where you're really serving the marriage. And then for me it's been hanging around my A-ok DC community, the kids in our community has been part of the second mountain, just trying to be there for them.

02:55:02:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And it's been a lot of days, four states a week. A lot of you're flying into the—whatever, Tampa airport at 1 AM and you're trying to meet with weavers the next morning and have dinner with weavers that night and then another 6 AM flight out of Dallas-Fort Worth airport and meet another set. And so the hardship is all the travel. The reward is getting to meet the people and the work is trying to spread their values, just to be an evangelist for them and for the way they live. And

113

I write about politics a lot. I'm still a political writer, but America is not going to be solved from the top down. To have healthy politics, we have to have a healthy culture and a healthy society. And to have a healthy society, we have to have a place where people can feel connected with one another in their local neighborhood, have friendship groups, grow up in homes where there are enough adults in their lives so they can relax and focus on being a kid and being a student. We have to have a society where trauma is not everywhere I go.

02:56:05:00

DAVID BROOKS:

I was in Detroit a couple weeks ago and I was in schools in Detroit where 3% of the students were at grade reading level. And what the teachers were doing was just trying to get the kids' lives together. So they had brought a washer and dryer 'cause some of the schools—some of the kids came to school and their clothes just stank because they'd never been washed. And so they have to wash the kids' clothes. They have to get detergents to send 'em home so maybe they can do some laundry at home. And so a lot of what's being done at these schools is not teaching and reading, it's just trying to get things ok. And so we can't thrive as an information age society if kids don't have a stable background. One of my favorite sayings in life comes from psychology attachment theory. It is that life is a series of daring adventures from a secure base. And a lot of young people grow up in society without a secure base and they never get to have daring adventures as a result. And what weavers do is they basically create family type relationships and they give kids a secure base so they have a shot in the world.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Tell me the story of E.O. Wilson and how his childhood experience led him to his vocation.

02:57:18:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. I think we all have—some of us if we're lucky, we have moments in our life where—that prefigures all the rest. And I call those annunciation moments. And so for me when I was seven I came across this book *Paddington the Bear* and discovered books were cool, I want to write books. And so that's been the whole life course, prefigured at age seven. And for E.O. Wilson, it was the same age, he was seven. And he—his parents were getting divorced and they shipped him away one summer. He was living in the South. They shipped him away to a place called Paradise Beach in Florida and he was staying with a family he didn't know but he—they were on the beach and he had never seen a beach before, he was living inland. And so he started wandering the beach at seven and he spent all the days out on the beach, and he saw animals he had never had any conception of. He saw a jellyfish and he was boggled. One day he was sitting out on the dock and his feet were in the water and a stingray slid beneath his feet. And he said, "In those moments a naturalist was born." He was losing one world, which was his family but he discovered this beautiful world, which was the oceans and nature, and he became a naturalist at that moment and he's now in his late 80's and he's still a naturalist and one of our greatest scientists.

02:58:41:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And what's interesting to me about moments when people find their vocation is that they're very aesthetic. They find something beautiful

115

and beauty calls to them. The Greek word for beauty is similar to the word for call, and they find something beautiful and they just want to pay attention to that beautiful thing. My daughter, when she was five, she walked into an ice hockey rink, fell in love with hockey and she now teaches hockey in California. Just—it's where she feels at home. I ran across a description of a painter and they asked her why you're a painter and she said, "I love the smell of paint." It's just aesthetic. And sometimes we find our role in life just 'cause something seems really beautiful and we're curious about it and we spend our lifetimes learning about that thing.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

You use Bruce Springsteen as an example a lot. Can you discuss how he committed himself to music?

DAVID BROOKS:

Ya know, Bruce Springsteen had an annunciation moment also at a very early age. He was home, watched the Ed Sullivan Show and a guy named Elvis Presley come on and he said, "That's me, that's what I want to do." And so he got his mom to rent a guitar, tried to play it, found out it was hard and he quit. But then a few years later he was also watching the Ed Sullivan Show and the Beatles came on and this time he said, "That's me, that's what I'm gonna do."

02:59:55:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so he spent his childhood doing one thing, learning to play a rock star and as he says, I had no plan b. And what's impressive about

116

Springsteen to me, a lot of things, I'm one of those people who goes to all the concerts and stuff is—the most impressive moment in Springsteen's career for me was he had his two albums, first two which failed commercially. Then the third one was a smash success, *Born to Run*. He was on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek* the same week. The natural progression after you have your big smash success would be to go big and do this big global album that'd make you a worldwide sensation. Instead, he went small, he stripped down and he planted himself in the towns he grew up in; in Freehold New Jersey, in Asbury Park New Jersey, and he wrote about the small lives there that he wanted to figure out, how do these lives work. So instead of going big, he went local. And he tapped into the core of who he was. He didn't sell out the thing that was animating his art, he went down into the core of it and he made an album called *Darkness on the Edge of Town* about these places.

03:01:02:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And what's interesting to me, he wasn't afraid to be particular, to be local. And I saw him perform decades later in concert in Madrid. 65,000 kids and they have—they're wearing t-shirts like a t-shirt that said highway 9, which is one of the highways near Freehold New Jersey, or Greasy Lake, which is a lake near Freehold. The Stone Pony, which is a bar where he played in Asbury Park. And if you build—if you stay close and you build a landscape as an artist like Faulkner or Saul Bellow or Toni Morrison, people will come to you and they'll enter your landscape. And so, I think it's a lesson for anybody, find out what your daemon is. Find is the core thing that animates your life. For Springsteen it was those people in Freehold, New Jersey from his childhood. He needed to understand them. He spent his whole life trying to understand them and he would write—make songs called

117

“Born to Run” about escape and getting out of this town but the guy in his 60’s or 70’s now, he lives ten miles from Freehold, New Jersey. He’s right there, and so there’s always something that really rubs at us. I ran into a guy who’s a child psychologist. He has a—he’s very famous for the theory called the orchid and the dandelion.

03:02:16:00

DAVID BROOKS:

He says some kids are orchid children. They—if you plant them in a good situation, they’ll bloom; if it’s a bad situation, they really struggle. And some kids are dandelion children. Wherever they grow up they’re fine, they’re just resilient. And his life has been about exploring the two different kinds of kids and I finally learned why he’s so fascinated. It’s because he grew up with a sister. He was a dandelion. Wherever he’d been, he thrived. His sister was an orchid. She was more brilliant than him, more friendly than him, more sociable, more beautiful, but she would sometimes be on top of the world, sometimes deep in depression and struggle. And eventually in her 40’s she committed suicide. And so for this researcher, the contrast between him and his sister is like the animating question of his life that he wants to understand. And you can be a writer, you can be a musician, you can be in any line of work. Often there’s that one aggravating thing you’re just scratching at over and over again.

03:03:15:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And for me, it’s been like depth, like depth is the word. Like, why—how do I get as deep as those people?

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

You talk about how gathering people together is the start of community. Can you explain—

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, well everybody—every organization I've ever seen and every group I've seen has a technology for convening. They have some way they get people together and often it's a shared dinner party, sometimes it's a shared love. They all love model trains and they work on model trains together but the model trains are not really the thing. The model trains are just the excuse for them to get together. And so communities have a lot of things in common. One of them is they have a common story.

03:03:59:00

DAVID BROOKS:

How do we get together? How do we form? Where are we going? They also have a common project. So Rabbi Jonathan Sax points out that in the book of Genesis, the creation of the universe is told in nine verses. In the book of Exodus, the creation of the tabernacle, which was this little structure the Israelites were building is told in hundreds and hundreds of verses. Why did it take so long to describe how you create a tabernacle with this kind of wood and that kind of wood? Because the Israelites were a divided people; they needed a common project to hold them together, and it was building this tabernacle is what took a divided people and made them a common people. And so they—everybody has this technology for convening, which is the way we just—the excuse we have for getting together with each other and then the relationships flow out of that excuse.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And on top of that, what role does trust play in community building?

01:04:54:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Trust is what we used to have, and trust is when you walk to your neighbor's house and you assume they'll show up for you. If you knock on the door, they think it's normal you're knocking on the door. You say, "Can I borrow your car?" or "Could you drive my kid to school?" And people who are from certain neighborhoods and still some neighborhoods today, that's the norm. They leave their doors open, they—because of the experience of their lives it's, "Nobody's gonna come into my house. We trust each other." But in many communities, people remember trust but there's much less trust. And if you do these social science measures of trust, you find it's way down. And it's especially prevalent among the young in that they assume that life will not be there, that relationships will break down, that dad will be gone. And social distrust is just the thing you hit over and over again. So my weave project, it's at the Aspen Institute. Aspen is an elite organization, and Aspen, Colorado's a very rich town and we get money from elites. And through hard experience, a lot of Americans have come to distrust any elite institution.

03:06:06:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And I work at the *New York Times* and a lot of people have come to distrust the media. And in some sense they do it for legitimate reasons, 'cause their institutions have let them down. And the elites in our society have often not paid very good attention to everybody else. And yet I find if you don't—I say this as someone who works for the *New York Times*. Most of the things—if you write a fact in the *New York Times* and it's wrong, you get corrected right away. So the facts in our

120

newspaper are true by and large. And if you go through life thinking that everything in the *New York Times* is untrue because that place is too liberal or too New York, whatever, you're robbing yourself of the truth of the facts. And so I think the pose of immediate distrust, while sometimes earned, sometimes lapses into cynicism. We should all be skeptical but not cynical. And distrust is just this acid that detaches us from each other and detaches us from our institutions.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

That acid is being poured on by the president saying fake news.

03:07:09:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, no, listen, we live in a society of weavers who are really trying to rebuild relationship, we also live in a society of rippers. I think we live with a president who wants to always create friend-enemy distinctions. It's always us-them; it's always war, war, war. And he's not the only one, by the way. A lot of our—my colleagues in the media, our business model is polarization. We sort of whip up frenzies of people in our tribe to really hate the other tribe and instead of introducing them to get them to know the other tribe, because it's really hard to hate somebody when you're close up to them, we—there's just ripping and there's generalization and there's stereotype. And as a result, a lot of people—I used to have this dumb method. If I interviewed a Republican politician, the next one would be a Democrat. It was like a strict quota system. And the first thing I realized is that the Democrats and Republicans know nothing about each other. They would tell me you know, here's what the other team is thinking. I was like, "I just talked to them, they're not thinking that at all." And so there's just

this—even in the close—in a body like the House of Representatives or the US Senate, there's just these buffers of ignorance.

03:08:17:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And it's mystifying to me that you got—a senate is 100 people surrounded by staff. You think they'd know each other really well. That is not the case. They do not know each other well. They know people in their party well but they don't know people in the other party well, the relationships are attenuated.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Can you talk about unconditional love? Is that the core of community?

DAVID BROOKS:

You know, when I teach, there's some percentage of my students who suffer from conditional love. Their parents love them, but they're also deeply anxious about their careers and their trajectories. So when the kid does something the parent thinks will lead to success, the beam of love is strong. When the kid does something the parents think will lead to failure, then the beam of love is withdrawn. And so the most important relationship in their lives is at risk at all times if they misbehave.

03:09:14:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so they—the wolf of conditional love is in the door and so they're deeply insecure because the most important relationship of their lives is fundamentally unstable. They have to perform in a certain way to

122

earn love. And frankly, one of the weaknesses of our meritocracy is that love is something you earn by performing well. You make yourself worthy of love by getting into a good job or getting into a good school and those kids are emotionally insecure because they never know when the love is gonna go away. And there are all these—every year there are all these horrible stories of the parents not showing up to commencement because the kid didn't take the job from Goldman Sachs they wanted them to take. And so I see a—not with most kids but with a percentage just this epidemic of conditional love. And unconditional love is— it's not something you can earn. It's just you're going to be loved because that's who we are to each other. And that's the only kind that really works. And I think—I hope and believe most parents have that for their kids, but it's a love that doesn't go away no matter what you do and unconditional love is what I think weavers try to offer.

03:10:21:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Because often when you're trying to bind community, you're binding community with people who made some serious mistakes in their lives. I was with this guy from Pittsburgh last night who takes people in prison and teaches them the building trades, to do bricklaying, masonry, and stuff like that. And he says, "Listen, some people are in prison and deserve to be there, and they should be there forever. But some people are in prison, they did something really horrible but they've learned. And I'm gonna forgive them and I'm gonna offer unconditional love to them, and I'm gonna teach them how to do this trade and they have a chance to turn their lives around." And you need—what I find with those programs, is you need to offer harshness in the context of love. So they offer very strict disciplined demands. If you're in our program, there's gonna be no cursing, you're not gonna

123

check out women, you're not gonna be late to anything. And we're going to offer to you as they say, 200% accountability in the context of 200% love. And that love without the toughness is just sentimentality and toughness without the love is just harshness.

03:11:32:00

DAVID BROOKS:

But the people who really turn around lives have both those things in equal measure and they—they're just, I'm gonna love you. My love is not at risk here. You can behave badly; my love is not at risk. I may treat you differently, but my love is not at risk here. And they communicate that message, which is the message that parents try to communicate.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Is this a different type of love that you show your kids?

DAVID BROOKS:

I hope I showed my kids unconditional love. I mean I hope—I certainly never felt it. I hope I—whether they were high or low, I hope I showed them equal love at all times.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

You write, "If you want to shift the culture, you've got to have a conversation you haven't had before. And it's not an impersonal conversation, it must be a personal conversation."

DAVID BROOKS:

So take Greenville, South Carolina, a city that's really wonderful in many ways. They've rebuilt their downtown; they've done wonderfully to make a beautiful place, but they're still very divided white and Black. And I met an 80-year-old Black woman who said, "It was easier growing up here in 1953 than it is for kids today." And so to heal that kind of division and that sense of injustice, you've got to have a difficult conversation across color lines in that town. And when you bring people together across those divides, you've created the potential for a new source of power.

03:13:00:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And there's a guy named Peter Block who writes a lot about community and he says, "Power is created when new people are brought into the room, especially when people who were formally defined as part of the problem are brought into the room." So you think about the people, you think those people are causing all of these problems. If you can get them into the room and have a conversation and a relationship with them, then you have the potential to really create a new source of power that you use together. But that, of course, is super hard because you've got animosity, you've got resentments, you've got denial. But I do think social change, especially across distrust, across racial lines, across economic lines, across ideological lines, it doesn't happen without the meeting of those minds and across relationships. And people get triggered so fast. There are a lot of people who do work to heal divides across ideology. And there's a group called Better Angels and they've learned that everybody has their little trigger words. If you're a Republican, they don't—people don't like the word diversity, they don't like the word dialogue because a lot of Trump supporters hear those words and they think, if I go to a meeting that's about dialogue, it's just gonna be

125

a bunch of liberals telling me how racist I am and I'm not gonna show up for that.

03:14:16:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so you really have to be careful about choosing your words and you have to understand the vocabularies of each tribe. But we think about our problems can be solved by politics and a lot of them can. Matters of justice, economic redistribution. But when your problem is the fraying of the social fabric, that gets solved one room at a time and there's a phrase in the book of Job, "And the sparks fly upward." And when I look at the moments when America has turned itself around, I'm instructed by Robert Putnam of Harvard who studies the 1890's.

03:14:47:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And it was a moment a little like today. There was a big economic transition, there was a big wave of immigration, there was a lot of political corruption, and change came in three stages. First there was a cultural revolution. In those days, something called social Darwinism, which was super individualistic and competitive was replaced by the social gospel movement, which was very communal. And then you have the civic renaissance. You had the creation within a few short years of the Boys and Girls Clubs, the boys and girls scouts, the temperance movement, the settlement house movement, the NAACP, the unions. All these new civic organizations came into being and then a few years later you had the progressive movement, which was a political movement. So it went cultural, civic, political. And our society now is not going to be turned around politics first. You have to have the cultural and the civic before you can get the political change, and that's why I focus so much attention there.

126

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

There's a metaphor you used that I love. You said, you describe the learning process a community must go through before it can travel together like a flock of birds. Can you explain that?

03:15:49:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. We wonder how do flocks travel together in formation. And they follow very simple rules. Fly at the speed of everybody else and always fly with the center of the group. And apparently if every bird makes that individual formulation, they'll all fly together and a beautiful community is just a joy to behold. You know, just going into even a tough neighborhood like Baltimore when they—or well, I group up in Stuyvesant town, which is a project in New York City, and we had—there were a lot of rules, I used to call it Singapore on 14th Street 'cause you couldn't bring baby carriages into the playground. It's like, why is that rule there? But they had a lot of rules. But it was a community with Jamaican families with a lot of Irish families, some Jewish families, of all kinds of communities, and we had places to gather. And so we had dozens of playgrounds and those playgrounds were really the nursery school of my childhood in New York, and there were just moms and I think you can always tell a good community with two things. One is when people automatically start talking to each other at the bus stop because they assume we're gonna have a lot in common.

03:17:03:00

DAVID BROOKS:

We both live here, we go to this bus stop and so we have natural trust. And second, when people discipline each other's children. Sometimes in a tight community if a kid is acting out, it's not just one parent who's gonna discipline. There are adults all over the place who feel, "I'm close to that kid, I can discipline him." And that discipline is seen as legitimate. And when you have that, you really have families interwoven and there's a communal sense. It takes a village and you have created a village.

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And tell me why you say that the central journey of modern life is moving self to service?

DAVID BROOKS:

Well, I think we're born reasonably selfish and in adolescence we're supposed to be. You're supposed to be a little narcissistic. You're trying to establish your identity and you're thinking a lot about yourself. How am I being viewed? Do people like me? Do I look cool? Am I dressed right? And that's adolescence. And as a psychologist friend says, "The problem with my patients is they never left that phase." But most people as they age they get over themselves. They get a little easier on themselves. They don't really care what people are thinking of them so much and they start thinking about others.

03:18:14:00

DAVID BROOKS:

And that diminution of the sense of self and the sense of what they used to call in the religious days pride. Pride is always fragile 'cause the world is never treating you as well as you think you should be treated. And if your condition is pride, you're always gonna be

128

insecure, you're always gonna feel aggrieved, you're always gonna feel angry, but most people as they go through life and I really do think people get better as they age. A lot of—most older people I know have gotten out of their way. They are happier and they look—when they scan the horizon, they look for the bright things and not the troubling things. And in fact, people have done studies with this. If you show people in their 20's a photograph with a lot of faces, people in their 20's, their eyes naturally fixate on the angry faces. People—in senior citizens, their eyes fixate on the happy faces. And a little sense of security, a little sense of I can survive what happens I think grows on people as they age. And it's a good sign of life that I think most of us get better at, at this thing as we get older.

END TC: 03:19:25:00