



DAVID BROOKS INTERVIEW  
*HOW TO KNOW A PERSON WITH DAVID BROOKS*

**David Brooks, Columnist, The New York Times**  
**November 10, 2023**  
**Interviewed by Teddy Kunhardt**  
**Total Running Time: 2 hours and 21 minutes**

START TC: 00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

00:00:04:00

MATT HENDERSON:

Pardon my reach. Good on A and b. David Brooks interview. Take one marker.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

How To Know a Person  
with David Brooks

00:00:16:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

For four years you've been thinking and studying ways to really know people.  
Why is it so important to improve our social skills?

00:00:25:00



DAVID BROOKS:

Well, if you want to hire somebody, you can't just know their IQ and their talents. You've got to know if they're going to become in a crisis. Generous with other people. If you're gonna marry someone, you can't just know their looks and their income. You got to know how the wounds of their childhood show up. In their adulthood, you gotta know if their deepest longings align with yours. And if you're going to live in a society with someone. Democracy is not just voting. Democracy is about human encounter. It's about understanding. People have different points of view. So if you're going to live in a stable democracy, you've got to be able to understand the people around you. And my basic view is that there's one skill at the center of every healthy family, organization, community or nation, and it's the ability to see others and make them feel seen, heard, respected, and understood.

00:01:14:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Your previous book, the Second Mountain was about up the mountain, one, down to the valley, up the second mountain. How did you in that book and then think to come to the realization of this book, the thesis of this book?

00:01:26:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. Well, I'm on a journey. So I would say if you took David Brooks back to 15 years ago, you would have found a guy who was kind of aloof, kind of unemotional, kind of unfamiliar with how to express emotions, and a little scared of intimacy. There's one story I tell in the book that somewhat symbolizes that way of being, which was when I was at a ball game in



Baltimore, and I loved baseball. So I've been to thousands of games and I've never caught a foul ball. And so I'm sitting there in Baltimore with my youngest son, and the batter loses control of the bat. It flies in the air. It lands right on my feet. And any normal human being is going to wave that thing in the air, because getting a bat is a thousand times better than getting a ball. And I would have been high fiving and hugging everybody getting on the jumbotron. Instead, I just put the bat at my feet, and I stand there straight ahead and I have the emotional response of a turtle. And I basically concluded that that kind of living and emotional reserve is safe, but you're cutting yourself off from other people. You're cutting yourself off from being fully human. And I would say for the last 15, 20 years, I've been on a journey to become a more full human being. And so I wrote one book about emotion. I wrote *The Road Character*, about moral development. I wrote a book about what to do, how to recover from suffering. And I think this latest book is the next stage on the journey to becoming fully human. How do you become intimate with other people? How do you really get to know them? How do you let them know you? And so those intimate bonds, that ability to be vulnerable. That was a long way away from where I was 15, 20 years ago. And it's a very incomplete journey. But, you know, we're all charged to try to become better versions of ourselves. And so I think I've changed quite a lot in those 15 years. And I've gone from someone who was emotionally very reserved and aloof to someone who still, you're not the you know, I'm not Oprah, but I'm a lot closer to being someone who would. If you tell me a secret, if you're in pain, if you're suffering, if you're asking me for advice, I think I'm better at being there for you and better at sensing the emotions that are going through you. And I'm better at intimate and difficult conversation than I was before.



00:03:48:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And did your son turn to you and say, dad, you got the bat?

00:03:51:00

DAVID BROOKS:

I don't [remember]. He was young. He was like 8 or 9 years old. So I don't remember what he said at that moment. But my kids will tell you that I'm a practiced escape artist. Sometimes, like with our sons, they were baseball players when they're kids. And I would say baseball was the language we used to communicate with each other. So we weren't always hugging. And we were. We were very physical and loving with each other. But that verbal processing and having deep conversations, that wasn't something I had to learn to do and learn to model for them. And so, I think my kids have slowly begun to appreciate that I'm maybe more, I can have a relationship with them that's more adult to adult.

00:04:33:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

What does it mean when you talk about the power of being seen?

00:04:37:00

DAVID BROOKS:

When we meet someone, we're unconsciously asking ourselves some questions. And those questions are. Am I a person like this other person? Am I a priority for them? And the answers to those questions will be expressed by your gaze before any words come out of your mouth. And so let me tell you



a story to explain how important the power of attention is. And so I'm in Waco, Texas, and I'm having breakfast with the 93 year old lady named LaRue Dorsey. And she's presenting herself to me as a stern disciplinarian. She'd been a teacher and she said, I love my students enough to discipline them. So I'm a little intimidated by her. And into the diner walks a mutual friend of ours named Jimmy Daryl, who's a pastor in Waco. He pastors to the homeless, and he sees us there. And he comes over our table, and he grabs Mrs. Dorsey by the shoulders and shakes her way harder than you should shake a 93 year old. And he says to her, Mrs. Dorsey, Mrs. Dorsey, you're the best. You're the best. I love you, I love you. And that stern disciplinarian that I'd been talking to turns into a bright eyed, shining nine year old girl. And he brought out a different version of her just by the power of his attention. And that's partly because he's just a warm guy. But partly because he's a pastor. And so, according to the theology, when he looks at any person he's looking at, someone made an image of God. He's looking into the face of God. He's looking at somebody with a soul of infinite value and dignity. And I don't care if you're a Christian, Jewish, Muslim, atheist, agnostic, if you're going to see someone, well, you have to begin with the assumption that this person is due infinite respect and reverence, because a human being is not an object to be seen or a problem to be solved. It's a mystery you'll never get to the bottom of. And so the power of attention is the power to cast a just and loving gaze on everybody we meet. Human beings need recognition as much as they need food and water. When babies come out of the womb. The first thing they're looking for is a face that will see them. A baby sees the world 18in away is very sharp. That's what they can see. Everything else is a blur because they need to see a mother's face, because that's what they need to survive. And there are these things called still face experiments, where they tell moms not



to respond to their babies bids for recognition, and the moms just sit there still face. And when the baby sees mom not reacting, first they fuss, then they worry. And within their 30s they're in total agony. And I think it's pretty much the same for adults. There's nothing cooler than to not see someone to render them invisible. Invaluable. Not worth it. One of the great literary examples of this is in the first page of Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*. And in that book, he says, when people look at me, they see everything but me. They see their stereotypes. They see the background behind me. They see their projections onto me, but they don't see me. And so what is racism? But not seeing someone? And so if we want to be decent to one another, we have to offer that person recognition. We have to offer the person the sense that you are a person to me. You're valuable. You're part of the world. And once people feel that sense of recognition, then they have a sense of existential security that I'm safe here. The people here can be trusted. And all else is possible because you've been recognized.

00:08:06:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

You've written that our need to be seen is as essential as our need for food and water. Why do human beings need this recognition? And why is it ranked so high on our list of needs?

00:08:18:00

DAVID BROOKS:

I've spent four years asking people, tell me about a time you've not seen. And with glowing eyes they describe some moments. It could be decades in the past when somebody just totally got them. But I will tell you, from personal



experience, it's also a tremendous joy to be the one doing the seeing. So a couple of years ago, I was sitting on my dining room table in my home, and I'm reading some boring book, and my wife walks in the front door and she opens the door and she just pauses there, and she doesn't even notice I'm in the room. Because that's the kind of charisma I have. And so she's just pausing, and it's a summer day, and the doors open and the sunlight is coming in behind her. And she is looking at an orchid that we keep on the table by the front door. And a sensation sweeps across my consciousness, which is I know her. I saw her through and through, and what I saw was not the personality traits. It's not some of the adjectives I would use to describe to a stranger what I saw or felt I saw was the whole of her. The ebb and flow of her being. The harmony of her music, the incandescence of her personality, the occasional flashes of fierceness or insecurity. It was as if I wasn't only seeing her, I was seeing out from her. And to really know another human being, you have to know a little how they see the world. And that's when I felt I was seeing out from her. And if you had asked me to describe how I was looking at her at that moment, I wasn't observing her, I wasn't critiquing her. I was just beholding her. The only word I could think of as beholding. And it was just an appreciative awareness of who she was. And I will tell you, it was one of the joyous moments to really have that, since I really know that person. And, it's when two people have been close for a while and, you know, the insides and the outsides, and that joy of human connection was just one of the most powerful moments in my life. I told some people this story a couple weeks later, and they were grandparents, and they said, yeah, that's what we do. To our grandkids. We just behold. And you just sit back and appreciate your grandkids for who they are. And that's real happiness.



00:10:42:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Are there skills that can be learned to make us better at seeing others and making them feel seen?

00:10:49:00

DAVID BROOKS:

If you want to see someone else, or if you want to be a decent human being, frankly you have to be open hearted. That's part of being an open hearted person. But there are also a set of skills. Morality is a set of social skills of treating each other in a considerate way, in the complex circumstances of life. And these are basic skills. Like carpentry is a skill. And so there are things like being a good listener, knowing how to have hard conversations, knowing how to disagree well, knowing how to break up with someone without crushing their heart, knowing how to ask for an offer, forgiveness, even something small like knowing how to end a conversation gracefully. You say, I've really enjoyed talking with you. I particularly liked what you said about X. Thanks so much for the time, and if you can point to something you really appreciated about what the other person said, then you've put a cherry on the top of your conversation. And that's just a skill. That's just a skill. And so one of the tragedies of our society is that we don't teach these skills anymore. And so I think in particular, young people go through life without certain basic social skills. I read a study recently about the number of guys who never asked anyone out on a date in their life, and they tried to figure out why. And the number one reason is they just stink at flirting. They don't know how to flirt. And if you don't have the skills of how you do verbal flirting, then you're going to be lonely because you're not gonna be able to ask anybody out.





You're not gonna be able to develop a romance. You're not going to be able to build a friendship. And these things can be taught. And for one reason or another, society has stopped teaching the essential skills of social interaction.

00:12:27:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So for those guys at the bar on the kitchen floor, what skills would you give them right now?

00:12:32:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Well, the first thing I would give them is the ability to really be really good at question asking. I sometimes sit at a bar and I love to hear a conversation. And recently I was at a bar near my home, and there was a guy clearly on a first date with a woman, and he's looking like six feet overhead at the wall, and he's going on and bloviating and bloviating and bloviating, and she clearly is bored out of her mind. And I want to take my fork and ram it into his neck and say, ask her a question because he was just thrown and drowning and drowning. And I've come to conclude that only about 30% of the people on the earth are questioned. Ask yourself. The rest are perfectly nice people. They just don't ask questions. And the quality of conversation depends on the quality of your question. So if you want to, if you're out on a date with somebody and you're a guy who's showing off, ask her a question. And that'll be the first step to actually having a relationship.

00:13:30:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Why is there such a widespread feeling of isolation right now?

00:13:33:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, there's some sort of social, emotional and spiritual crisis in our country, and it manifests as rising suicide, rising depression. 54% of people say that no one knows them. Well, I think the most haunting statistic for me is that the number of Americans who say they have no close personal friends has gone up four times since the year 2000. The number of people that have a romantic partner has gone up 36%. And so we're just living much more isolated lives. And so why is that? I tell a bunch of stories. The first story I would tell is the social media story that smartphones and social media are driving us all crazy. The second story I tell would be a sociology story, that we're not as active in civic organizations as we used to be, so we're not interacting with each other. You could also tell an economic inequality story. We're living very different lives. And I agree a bit with all those stories. But I would tell one other story, which is a moral story, and that we've stopped teaching people the skills of moral formation. And moral formation is just a fancy word for I treat other people with consideration. And so these social skills have somehow not been taught. And so people don't know how to treat each other well. I was asking my students, you know, why is there so much distrust among the young? And some would say, well, you know, the financial crisis, the Iraq war, all this stuff led to a lot of distrust, but the interpersonal distrust, distrusting your neighbors, distrusting the people you're in the classroom with that's skyrocketing. And one woman said to me, I've had four boyfriends in my life, and they all ghosted me. They didn't even have the consideration to break up, to have a conversation and say, I don't think this is



working. That's part ways. They just cut her out. And so she felt betrayed for time. So of course she's going to think, next time I have a boyfriend, he's going to ghost me and just vanish on me. And so I think when you go through life like that, you think I can't trust anybody, and of course, you're going to feel isolated. Of course you're not going to have relationships. Of course you're not going to know how to build a friendship. And so to me, the core problem is we just don't treat each other with consideration and respect.

00:15:52:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Oprah said to you recently, "David, I have rarely seen someone change so much. You were so blocked before." How were you blocked? And what did she see change?

00:16:03:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, I think I was emotionally, uncommunicative. I think I had emotions, but there was no highway between my heart and my mouth, so I didn't know how to express them. I think it was fear of emotion. Fear of intimacy. And maybe just, the way I grew up, I grew up in a home that had a lot of love in the house, but we just didn't express to each other. We were not the I love you kind of family. We were not huggy. And so I had a natural reserve. And I realized that if you cut yourself off from that kind of emotional expression and emotional connection and verbal expressing what you feel, then if you cut yourself off from that, you've made yourself a little safer because nobody can touch you, but you've also cut yourself off from the sources of life itself and the joy of life itself. And so I went on a little journey to try to become more vulnerable,



more emotional, better at relationships. And I think what Oprah was expressing was that when she interviewed me in 2014, I was still that old guy. And when she reviewed me again in 2019, suddenly, I was just more vulnerable with her, I guess. And it's not something I consciously thought to do. I think just my way of being has changed. And if you go back and I look at the way I was, and sometimes I go on look at my old PBS NewsHour appearances or media appearances, and that guy is very different from me. The facial expressions are very different. The way of interacting is very different. And it's assigned to me, which I think is, I find encouraging, which is you're never too late to change. That a I don't care how old you are, you can radically change who you are and how you show up for people. And so there's this famous thing called the Grand study, which took a bunch of Harvard guys who were in Harvard in the 40s, 1940s. And this study followed them all through life just to see how their lives flowed. And there's a guy in that study who they gave the name, Andrew Newman. And this guy in college was a total prick. He was rigid. He was formulaic. He was unkind. He goes off and gets a job in the defense industry. His daughters say that he's a perfectionist. Cruel, just a bad father. And he sounds like a pretty awful human being. And then at some point in his 40s and 50s, he decides that the world's poor are the responsibility of the world's rich. So he quit his job in the Defense Department. He moves to Africa, and he helps people, spreading information about farming technologies and farming data and things like that to try to help the agriculture in Africa. Then he comes back to this country, and he teaches at a community college, and he helps with city planning. And one of the researchers comes to see him, and the researcher walks in his home. He says, let me give you a big Texas hug. And he's warm and he's embracing. And the researcher writes in his notes, I'm transfixed by this guy. And then when



he's in his 60s, they send him the transcripts of the interview he gave at Harvard when he was in his 20s. And he reads the transcripts and he says, they've sent me the wrong interview. This is not me. And so he sends it back to the researchers and they say, no, that was you. You were so different. But he had changed so much that he couldn't remember his former self. And he found his former self to be a stranger. And so there's an example of a guy who, in the 60s, utterly transformed his way of showing up in the world. And I'm not sure my example is stark, but I have definitely changed.

00:19:46:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

As you grow older, what shape does wisdom take? How do each of us become wiser?

00:19:52:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, so I used to think wisdom was like being Yoda or Dumbledore. It's like the sage who offers wise advice. The wise person is the person who can just tell you what to do. Can solve all your problems. I now think wisdom is the art of receptivity. It's the ability to bring out your story and to process your story and maybe say to you, you know, you're telling me the story of your life, but you're leaving this out and you're leaving that out. Have you thought about this? And it's the ability to be curious toward other people. And so if you want to know an example of wisdom, I would point people to the movie "Good Will Hunting." And in that movie, there's a character played by Matt Damon who's like this math whiz, and there's another character played by Robin Williams, who's a therapist, and Robin Williams pulls the character. The Matt Damon



character aside, sits him on a park bench and says, I look at you. I don't see an intelligent, self-confident man. I see a scared kid. And there's nothing you can do. I can learn from you that I can't read in some book. And he says, unless you want to talk about you, then I'd be fascinated. But you don't want to talk about yourself, do you, sport? Because you're terrified of what you might say. And so that is it. That speech is an example of wisdom for two reasons. The first is that the Robin Williams character has seen what the Matt Damon character is desperate to hide, which is that he's terrified all the time. And the Robin Williams character puts that fact, his fear puts it right on the table, says, I see this about you and it's going to be okay. And the second reason that's wise is because the speech shows that there are two kinds of knowledge in the world. There's academic knowledge stuff you can learn in a book. But then there's wisdom. And that's the stuff you have to learn through life. It's the kind of wisdom you have after you've suffered something, after you've ventured for something, after you've been vulnerable. And that's the kind of wisdom you hold in the body. And so there's a famous saying, you can be knowledgeable with other men's knowledge, but you can't be wise with other men's wisdom. Wisdom is something you have to earn for yourself, and the truly wise person is not lecturing at you. A truly wise person is listening to you, is hearing you, is seeing you in a noble struggle, is seeing how you're navigating life and is encouraging you to think about this, or encouraging you to think about that. So the wise person is not some sage in the sky. It's a supportive presence. It's like a life coach.

00:22:32:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And who was that person for you?



00:22:35:00

DAVID BROOKS:

That's a good question. You know, I'm, I guess I would say when I was eight, a kid, I went to college, and I was surrounded by people who devoted themselves to wisdom. And that you had read the books, but they not only read Aristotle and Plato and all those books, but many of them had fought in wars. Many of them had loved and lost. Many of them had suffered really traumatic grief. I'm not sure you can be wise if you haven't really lived through something that's really hard and understood the way it weathers you. And so I remember thinking about some of my professors, especially the one who had gotten off campus and fought in the war or done something else with their life. I just remember thinking how tremendously impressive they were. And I don't remember all the lectures that they gave me, but I remember their way of being in the world and the way they encouraged young people like me. And it set a goal. And I think once you. Once you've tasted the wine, you don't want to settle for the Kool-Aid. And once I was, writing about how hard it is to teach moral improvement in a classroom. And I got an email from a guy, a veterinarian who lived in Oregon who I didn't know. And he said, what a wise person says is the least of that which they give. What gets communicated is the smallest details of their being. So a teacher can be considered. A student can notice anxiety in a student's voice, can know when some of these feelings are strange, and pull them into the conversation. And this veterinarian writes to me, never forget the messages. The person. So it's not the words that come out of your mouth. It's your way of being in the world. And when I think of the people whose way of being in the world really changed who I am, I guess the first person I think of is a guy I



used to work for named Jim Lehrer. And Jim Lehrer was the host of the PBS NewsHour. And I was a young pundit, a bit of a smartass. And I would get on this show, and when I would talk and I would say something he thought was intelligent or clever, his eyes would crinkle with pleasure. And when I said something he felt was crass and unworthy, his mouth would downturn with displeasure. And so for ten years that I worked for him. I just tried to get the eye crinkle and avoid the mouth downturn. He never said anything about it to me. He didn't give me any verbal advice, but I could see from his small reactions how to act. And Jim Lehrer created a moral ecology around himself. Here's how we're going to do things here. Just by the small gestures. And Jim has been dead now for several years. But that moral ecology still exists at the NewsHour. The way of doing things here are our standards. Here's how we're going to do things here. And it lingers on. And it's a great thing to have created a moral ecology by just exemplifying a certain way to be.

00:25:40:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Can you talk about the lasting damage that can occur if a baby goes unseen by its caretaker for a long period of time?

00:25:47:00

DAVID BROOKS:

To me, one of the core and most important things in our lives is the models of the world. We form in our heads when we're very young, sometimes even before we have any memories before age three. And children, if they're not fully loved, if they're not fully secure, they build up defenses because they've got to do what they can to survive. And some of those defenses may be





avoidance. If the world has told me at a very early age that emotion is not there for me. Then our emotion is something very unfair and fearful. Then I will develop an avoidant personality and I will flee from intimacy. Or you could grow up in a world that is unsafe, where there's been abuse in the home, and if you or there's been some sort of neglect, and if you have childhood models in your head that the world is unsafe, then you're going to be on guard all the time. Even in your 20s and 40s and 60s. And if something triggers that sense that the world is unsafe, you will lash out and you will see threat when there's no threat. And so these models are built into our heads at astonishingly early age. And so one of the things as adults we do is we try to recognize what are my defenses, and maybe my defenses aren't working for me. And I would say, for whatever reason, I had avoidant defenses. And so I had to overcome defenses that were not working for me. And that's something people spend the rest of their lives trying to overcome their defenses. And once the world feels unsafe, then you might be 70 years old. And you'll look around and you'll see threats everywhere, and you'll be super combative, and you will lash out.

00:27:31:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Talk about how patterns from your own childhood have manifested into your adult life.

00:27:36:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. I mean, if you ever saw this movie Fiddler on the roof, you know how warm and huggy Jewish families can be. Always singing and dancing. And I



came from other kinds of Jewish families. And so the phrase in our culture was, think it is British. And so we were reserved. We were pretty intellectual. And it was a great family. It was a loving home. And we had certainly fascinating conversations. We used to have Thanksgiving conversations about the history of Victorian funerary monuments or the evolutionary sources of lactose intolerance. And so we were really interested. But I don't think I learned how to be warm and emotional and emotionally outgoing. And so that's something I've had to learn, as an adult. And I think I learned it in part by having my own kids. And kids will be an emotional revolution for most people. And they were an emotional revolution for me. And I remember once when my oldest boy was a toddler, probably 12, 14 months. We were living in Brussels then, and he, we would play. He would wake up at four in the morning, God bless him. And we played. I left for work at 9 or 10 in the morning. And there was one day about that age where we're playing, and I realized that I know him better than I've known anybody. And frankly, he's known me better than anybody's known me. Because I've been emotionally open with him. And we had never exchanged a word because he couldn't talk yet. And that struck me as the power of play. And so that, that was like an opening up for me and in play. You don't think of play much, but in play you really are yourself and in some ways where our best selves and I, I play basketball with guys and friends I've had for life. We played basketball and we're not thinking, we're not staring deeply in our eyes and, you know, peering into our other souls. We're passing the ball, we're trash talking, we're doing high fives. But you can tell a lot about a person by how they play, by how they handle setbacks. One of the most generous people I've ever known in my life was a guy named West Woman horse. And West was the best passer on the basketball court I've ever encountered. Phenomenal passer. And that



grew out of, I think, his spirit of generosity. And so out of the fact of play, is the way of living. And I do think playing with my own kids and playing in general has been, not only a source of joy, but it's been good for me. And I think it's good for all of us because we are our best selves.

00:30:16:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Talk to me about your fear of intimacy. Do you think that fear developed during your childhood?

00:30:21:00

DAVID BROOKS:

You know, I think, that fear of intimacy with someone was probably genetic. Some of it is just. I think a lot of people in my generation grew up before, especially for guys, grew up before emotional openness and really asking vulnerable questions and making vulnerable statements, was really, in the fashion. I think younger guys are very different from me. I think in my culture, you know, you don't talk to people about intimate matters. I remember when I first started out, I was working at the Wall Street Journal, and I. It was mostly male in those days in our little department of the editorial page, and frankly, it was mostly Midwestern. There were a lot of Iowans. Illinois, North Dakota. And I remember our editorial meetings. We would all sit in this space and we would all be looking at the wall. We weren't looking at each other, and we're all like, talking to the wall. And there was very little eye contact, and there certainly wasn't a lot of openness. And I think that was the culture of the time. And now, frankly, there's more women in the workplace. And I think more the norms for guys have changed. I think people are a lot more open



about mental illness than they used to be. And so I think in some ways I've talked about the way society can deteriorate. But in some ways society has vastly improved compared to where it was when I first entered the workforce, when guys were supposed to be the strong, silent type.

00:31:52:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

When and what made you realize you were leading a disconnected life? Not just from others, but also from yourself.

00:32:00:00

DAVID BROOKS:

My life kind of hit a crash. And so my kids were leaving, for school and college, and then, my marriage dissolved, and I had spent a lot of the years working. And so I went through a little valley in life, and I tried to fill my life with the way any male idiot would fill it by just working my way through it. And I thought I could fill my life with work and writing. And my work is tremendously rewarding. But it wasn't enough. And so. And in those years, I realized that I had work friends, the people I could talk about politics with. But I didn't have weekend friends. Just the people who really care for you. The people you would call at two in the morning. And so I went through this harsh period of intense loneliness, and I was in phenomenal shape because I was going running twice a day because I had nothing else to do. And that period of loneliness is symbolized for me by the way my kitchen was in my little apartment where I was living, which was, where the drawer where there shouldn't be silverware. There were just post-it notes because I wasn't having anybody over. I was just working. And in the drawer where there should have



been plates, they were just stationary. And so you go through this period and you think something's got to change here. And so I was in the valley. And my favorite thing about suffering is that we are from a guy named Paul Tillich, who was like a 1950s theologian. And he says that moments of suffering interrupt your life and remind you you're not the person you thought you were. They are carved into the floor of the basement of your soul and reveal a cavity. And then they carve into another floor and they reveal an even deeper cavity. So in those hard moments, you see deeper into yourself than you'd ever seen before, and you come to realize that only spiritual and relational food is going to fill that cavity. And so I realized I have to change parts of my life and I have to change a bit who I am. And one of my theories is you can't pull yourself out of the valley. You have to. Somebody has to reach down and pull you out. And I had this very lucky thing happen to me, which is I got involved in a community of young people, teenagers, mostly in DC, and some adults. And I would go every Thursday night to dinner with this community of teenagers, and they demanded complete emotional openness. They would beam their love on you, and they would demand you beam it back. And so that was one of the things that happened to me that really began to open me up more to being more vulnerable in public. And then I found that once I was doing it, I found people appreciated it. I've learned that you should trust first that there's a poem I like, and it has a line. If we're going to have an inequality of trust between us, let the more loving one be me. And a lot of people think that's naive. I think if you're vulnerable in public, then some people will take advantage of it and they will attack you. And they are 100% right about that. But it's also dangerous to call yourself over to cover yourself up. It's dangerous to your very nature to not be your full self. And so, in my view, it's. If you trust others first, you will sometimes be betrayed. But it's still worth it,



because most people will trust you back, and your relationships will be better and your insides will be better. And so, in my view, it's not woo-woo to be trusting and vulnerable. It's the most effective way to build a relationship, to build quality friendships. And it's the most effective way to go through life.

00:35:47:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

What have you learned is the best way to get to know someone? What do you avoid doing and what do you lean into?

00:35:54:00

DAVID BROOKS:

The crucial act to get to know someone is having a conversation. And so we think I can put myself in another shoes. I can imagine what's going on in their head and that's wrong. We just can't. People are just too different. So if you want to get to know someone, the most effective thing to do is to be a fantastic conversationalist. And so I went around and I interviewed conversational experts, and I read their books, and I learned some tips to be a better conversationalist. And these are things like being a loud listener. I have a buddy. When you talk to him, it's like, you're talking to a Pentecostal church. He's like, Amen. Amen. Amen. I get that preach, preach that. And he's so encouraging that I just love talking to that guy. Another tip I learned is get them into story mode. People are better and more personal when you get them to tell them a story. So even as a journalist, I no longer ask them, what do you believe about this? I ask them, how did you come to believe this? And suddenly they're telling me a story about some experience they had, or some person who shaped their values, and they're just a more full version of



themselves. Another conversational tip is don't be a topper. And so when somebody tells me they're having problems with their teenage son, I will say, oh, I know exactly what you're going through. I'm having troubles with my Tommy, and it sounds like I'm trying to relate to you. But what I'm really doing is let's stop talking about you. Let's talk about me. And so don't be a topper. And so these are conversational skills that will make you better at conversation. And as you get better at conversation, then other people are more available. You can read them. You can see them. And it's the most humane activity there is.

00:37:38:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

So let's go back to Tommy. If my Tommy is misbehaving, and you're telling me the story about your kid misbehaving, what's the appropriate way to handle that conversation?

00:37:49:00

DAVID BROOKS:

So if you tell me your Tommy's misbehaving, I say, yeah, I'm going through something like that. And then I think of something that, like, my kid just won't talk to me when I want him to. And then I ask you, are you having trouble communicating? And so I've something I've learned from my own experience. I turn into a question. And so it's the ability to take something that joins us. But always follow up with a question. Johnson, don't just start talking about yourself.

00:38:15:00



TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Why is it important for us all to perform a series of small social actions?

00:38:20:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, we all want to be moral beings. And some people think of morality as like what happens in the epic moments of life. Are you brave in battle? If somebody is embezzling at your company, do you report them? Do you stop somebody who's harassing somebody else? And those are all important parts of morality. But to me, I'm a fan of a writer named Iris Murdoch. And Iris Murdoch said that morality is something that happens in the small little gestures of everyday life. And she's talking about things like, oh, I hear anxiety in some of these voices. And I try to say, well, what's wrong? Or I'm at a gathering and somebody clearly feels excluded, so I pull them in. Or somebody is just nervous because it's their first day on the job. So do I invite them out to lunch? And these are small gestures, and they seem trivial. But to me, these small gestures are like being a genius at the close at hand, being a genius at everyday action. And some of these gestures can be as small as you're at a cash register and you just make respectful eye contact with the person. And I think we're shaped more than we realize by the small emotional moments in our lives. And I can tell if I'm at a cash register and somebody treats and really looks at me and just acknowledges me, it feels very, very different than somebody who's very cold at me. And so these little small gestures are, to me, as important to morality as the big heroic acts.

00:39:56:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:





And knowing how to ask for and offer forgiveness?

00:40:00:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. So forgiveness cannot come cheap. And so if I'm going to ask you for forgiveness, first I have to acknowledge the wrong. And then I have to make some reparations for the wrong. And then I have to say, can we still have a relationship despite the wrong I committed? And that doesn't mean the person is immediately going to like me or fully trust me right away. But forgiveness is we're going to still have a relationship, even though there's been a rupture between us.

00:40:30:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

But what if you're the one that is going to be doing the forgiving?

00:40:34:00

DAVID BROOKS:

If you're the one doing the forgiving, you have to expect the other person is going to first acknowledge the wrong. And so forgiveness cannot come cheap. It has to come. And in my view, one of the ways to build a relationship is to, when they've made the first step toward you, to make the step back. And our best friendships and our best relationships are not built in smooth sailing. Our best friendships and our best relationships are built in by repair. We had a rupture. We had some hard feelings, but we've repaired it. And suddenly you've got a much stronger relationship. There's an art in Japan called Shuji, which a lot of people know about, and it's an art where they take cups or



bowls that have cracked. And they glue the pieces together. With this kind of lead and gold laced, paste. And the Japanese consider the cups or bowls that have been glued back together. As more beautiful and more sacred than the bowls that have no cracks in them. And I think our relationships are kind of like that.

00:41:40:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And you mentioned this earlier, you went into the specifics of knowing how to let someone down without breaking their heart.

00:41:46:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. So when you break up with somebody, there are some terrible ways to do it. The first way to ghost them is to give no explanation. The second way is to lie and say, oh, it's all about me. It's not about you. And I think the best way to do it is to, to be honest, that there are a million ways a relationship can go wrong. And it's not the fault of anybody, but it's just there's some lack of chemistry between you or there's some misalignment between you. And so there are some things that I want in my life, and they're a little different than the things you want in life. And there are some ways of being in the world that I want my life partner to have. And there are some ways of being that they're not. They're just different. And so I think if you're honest about what exactly has caused you to want to leave this relationship, then the other person A, has some information about themselves and they can and be you told them the truth and they can respect you, and they can respect



themselves if you lie to them and they know you're lying to them and they you're not going to respect you and they're not going to respect themselves.

00:42:57:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Knowing how to sit with someone who is suffering.

00:43:00:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, I've learned a lot about how to do this, from others. So, for example, I have a friend who lost one daughter in Afghanistan to a horseback riding accident and then nearly lost another daughter to a bike accident. And I was sitting with her as she was nursing her younger daughter back to health. And she told me something very important. The older daughter who died was named Anna. And she said, some people don't talk to me about honor because they don't want to remind me of a bad subject, but they should know that Anna is always on my mind. And so if you mention Anna to me, then if I feel like talking about her, I will. And if I don't, I won't. But by mentioning her, you've given me the option to either talk about it or not. And so I've learned that it's very important to acknowledge the dead. And it's not a source of subject. It's an opportunity to comfort the other person. The other story, she told me she was nursing her younger daughter. Well, she said, you want to know the best thing that has helped me during this process? Somebody came over to our house and went to the bathroom and noticed there was no bathmat in the bathroom. So they went to Target and they bought a bathmat and they put it in the bathroom without saying anything. They didn't even do it. It was that practical act of showing they understood. We need a little help.



And they were going to do it in a very practical and concrete way. They were going to offer that kind of help. There was a woman I spoke to a year or so ago who, in early Covid, she ran a homeless shelter. And, she came home. She was overwhelmed. She came home weeping, and she's sitting there hugging her dog, and her husband comes up to her and says, sits by her and says, here are the six household chores I'm going to do while you're slammed at work. And she said, I felt really seen at that moment because he knew exactly what I needed and it was just some practical help. It wasn't any high flying words, it was practical help. And sometimes people are suffering. They just need to be seen and they need to be helped in very concrete and practical ways.

00:45:14:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Knowing how to see things from others point of view.

00:45:17:00

DAVID BROOKS:

In politics, we deal with people who just see the world very differently. I may see the Middle East conflict through one set of eyes and coming from a Jewish background. And then I meet somebody from a Palestinian background, and they see through a very different set of eyes. And so my job at that moment is to stand in their standpoint. It's to say, tell me about your point of view. And then I'm going to ask them 3 or 4 different times and 3 or 4 different ways. Tell me more about that. Tell me more about that. What am I missing here? And the first thing I'm doing is showing them respect. And there's a book I really like called Crucial Conversations. And the authors of that book say in any conversation, respect is like air when it's present. Nobody notices. But



when it's absent, it's all anybody can think about. And so when I'm trying to see the world from another point of view, I'm showing respect and curiosity. And then you feel okay. At least the person is trying to get me. So we can have a relationship. And then if I get them really talking about their point of view, I'm never going to understand totally what it's like to be a Palestinian. But at least a little I can see. Here's how the world looks to me, and I can hear that. And I think if we're going to have a friendship or if we're going to have politics or if we're gonna have democracy, we just have to be a little better at saying, here's how the world looks to me. And that's not going to happen if you're egotistical. It's not going to happen if you're unable to adopt another's point of view. I like the story about there's a guy on one side of the river, and there's a woman on the other side of the river, and the woman shouts at him, how do I get to the other side of the river? And he shouts back, you are on the other side of the river. And that guy cannot adopt another person's point of view. And a lot of us walk around like that all the time.

00:47:06:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

You've just mentioned some of the most important skills a human being can possess. Why do you think these are not incorporated in the school curriculum? Why aren't we teaching this stuff?

00:47:17:00

DAVID BROOKS:

I think through much of American history, the people's schools decided their number one job was character formation. And so there was a headmaster who said, at our school, we try to produce students who are acceptable at a



dance, and invaluable at a shipwreck. And so character formation and treating each other kindly with consideration was the core of education. And I wouldn't want to go back to the way they did it, but at least they focused on character formation and how to treat other people well. Sometime around after the end of the war, the schools changed their primary mission and it became job preparation, or it became getting kids into Harvard or Stanford. And so schools became very pre-professional. And so they became okay at preparing people for calculus. They became okay at preparing people to do other things that are good to get you into the academy, but they more or less dropped out of the business of character formation. They dropped out of the business of how we treat each other. Now, some schools have developed social and emotional learning programs where they do teach these things. But if you look at the results nationwide, not enough schools are doing this. And so we basically treat young people as little employees. And we're preparing them for jobs, or at least for the technical part of their jobs. But we're not preparing them for life.

00:48:42:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

If the school is not fulfilling this, what should we be doing?

00:48:45:00

DAVID BROOKS:

At every school, there should be social skills classes, and there should be even. How to build a friendship. How do you ask a man or a woman out for a date that should just be taught, at home? I think we should practice a little less accepting parenting. Which is whatever my kid is doing is fine. I'm going



to cheer them on. And of course, we all want to cheer on our kids. But teaching people to treat each other well is like pausing at those moments when the kids are being immature. Which kids are going to do and say no? Here's how you do that. And then I think the final problem, and the larger problem, I guess, is that we now have multiple generations, who haven't learned these skills. And they replicate the way they were raised. You can't practice a relationship you haven't experienced. And if parents have been aloof and distant, then you're going to be aloof and distant. And so I do think it's incumbent upon parents to, a model, a certain sort of behavior, create a certain sort of relationship with the kids. And then they'll pick it up almost by osmosis.

00:49:57:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

What is a deep friendship?

00:49:59:00

DAVID BROOKS:

A deep friendship is a friendship that. You can call them at two in the morning. A deep friendship is a friendship where when the chips are down, that's the person you go to. And I think most of us. You can't have too many because there's not enough space in your brain for deep friendships. Here's a guy who does research on this, and he says there's like the inner five who you people, you see, like every week. Then there's the outer 15, and then there's the outer 150. A lot of it is just how much time you spend with someone. And so I had, deep friendship with a guy who I knew since I was 11. And I found it's very powerful to know some of these adults who knew you as a kid before



things like your job or your relative level of success got in the way. And so when you need some, when you're still friends with people you knew as kids, all the superficial stuff is superficial and they know who you really are. And so I was friends with this guy named Peter Marx. And we just played basketball, even though he was, like, eight inches taller than me. And we hung out and we had known each other for decades. And at age 57, he got hit with just a severe form of depression. And I consider myself a reasonably well-educated person who should know what depression is. Turns out I didn't know what depression is. If you've been lucky enough, you've never been hit by depression. You can understand it by extrapolating from your moments of sadness and depression. Somebody once wrote, it is a malfunction in the instrument you use to perceive reality. And so Pete had these lying voices in his head that said things like, you're worthless. Nobody would miss you if you were gone. And so one of the great moral skills of life, and one of the responsibilities of a friend, is to know how to show up at those moments. And so I made mistakes because I just wasn't skilled. And one of the mistakes was I tried to give him ideas on how to get out of depression. And I'd say I used to take these service trips to Vietnam. When you do that, you find it soul lifting. And I learned gradually that telling a depressed person. I've got some ideas for you is just another way of saying you don't get it, because it's not a lack of ideas that they've got. It's a lack of energy. It lacks a lot of things. And then the second mistake I made was to try to cheer them up and to try to say, look, you've got all these wonderful blessings in life, you've got a great career, you've got a great wife, you've got wonderful boys. And that made him worse, because when you do somebody, you tell somebody who's depressed that basically all you're saying is you're not enjoying the things that are palpably enjoyable. And so gradually I learned





over time some skills of being a deep friend to somebody who's suffering in this way. And the first skill I learned, the first thing you should do is just acknowledge the reality. This sucks. This totally sucks. And then the second thing you should do is demonstrate your positive intent. I want more for you. I want more for you. And you're not. It's not going to help. It's not going to solve anything. Words are not going to be able to solve anything. But at least you're saying I have such goodwill for you. And then I read that Viktor Frankl wrote a wonderful book, Man's Search for meaning. And he was in the Nazi death camps. And when he was confronted with somebody who was suffering and thinking and thinking about suicide, he would say, life has not stopped asking things of you. You have some responsibilities here, and you have a great gift which you can now give to the world. And the gift is the ability to know about what suffering is. And so those who have been through these dark times have credibility with others, and they can say, yes, I know what it is. And as Thornton Wilder once wrote in Love Service, only wounded soldiers can serve. And so what Victor Franco would say is your low voice will tremble in the hearts of men because of what you've been through, and people will listen to you. And so you have a purpose in this life. And so these are just different ways of being. With someone who's gone through some hard times and going through depression. And to me, the essence of friendship is those who can perform well and show up well. In some of the worst moments of life.

00:54:38:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

In contrast, what is dehumanization?



00:54:42:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Dehumanization is the unwillingness or inability to recognize that as another person, another person, behind the face. And so our goal here is to see people the way Rembrandt sort of people. If you go to a Rembrandt painting, not all the faces are remarkable. There's some, just some old guy. But the way Rembrandt saw them made it remarkable. And sometimes I think we're in a great struggle in our society between the forces of dehumanization and the forces of humanization and the forces of dehumanization are the things that make us invisible to each other. And they're things like social media. I think that's dehumanizing. Sometimes capitalism can be due to humanization, so it turns every relationship into a transaction. One of the problems I have is I have an excessive efficiency mentality. There's a little clock going on in my head, and so when I pull into a gas station, I think to myself, oh, I've got 90s home pumping gas. I can get two emails done. And that may be good for work because I'm efficient. But having a clock in your head is terrible for relationships. And so these are all modes of dehumanization. And modes of humanization. We first read a lot of novels, because when you're reading a novel, you're getting into the mind of another character, and the ultimate act of humanization is having great conversations. And people think of conversations, just spending the time of day to me, conversation and a really important conversation, a good conversation, a fun conversation is almost an act of an act of rebellion these days, because you're pushing back on the forces of dehumanization in our society, and you're making people feel seen. You're making them feel respected. And suddenly. We live in a culture that's a little friendlier and a little warmer.



00:56:37:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Have you figured out how to turn that clock off?

00:56:40:00

DAVID BROOKS:

I have not figured out how to turn my clock off. And so, you know, I'm. I sometimes think I'm caught between the career mode, the building mode, and what I aspire to, which is the servant mode, the generative mode. And so I read all these books about how to be a better person and how little career success matters. And I still check my Amazon ratings every day. Like to see how it's selling. And so I think, wow, what a hypocrite. But, maybe I'm not a hypocrite. I'm just caught in this transition between the acquisition mentality of career mode and the generative mentality of the person I'm wanting to be.

00:57:21:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Has social media become a substitute for genuine intimacy?

00:57:25:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Well, I do think some people try to make social media a substitute for intimacy, but it's not going to work, because, in social media, there's judgment everywhere and understanding nowhere on social media, you can't present the full complexity of you. You can present some performative, shallow version of you. But you're necessarily leaving out the complex, deep parts of yourself. And social media has become such a hornet's nest that,



frankly, it's foolish to be vulnerable. I've learned the hard way not to tell jokes on Twitter, because if you tell jokes on Twitter, people will leap at you and attack you. And so it's just not an environment where trust can happen. And so social media is not about seeing others. It's about distraction. And so it's nice to watch a video of somebody dancing. It's nice to watch some tick tock little two minute speech or whatever it's going to be. But it's not a mode of communication between people. And frankly, if you are going out to the mall and you look around the food court there, you'll see teenagers sitting together, six of them, and everybody's on their screens, and the human beings are like, they're right in front of you. You can talk to them, but I think the conversational skills have become so diminished that it just feels awkward to have that kind of conversation. And frankly, it feels tiring. It's just a lot easier, the easier it is to be distracted by social media. So I'm a reluctant convert to the view that smartphones and social media have, since 2013, been a complete disaster for our society.

00:59:05:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Now, when you take the subway in New York City or wherever you take the subway. Tell me about your process now.

00:59:11:00

DAVID BROOKS:

So one of the things I've learned is that we should be more aggressive in talking to strangers. And so I learned this from a guy named Nick Epley, who's a psychologist at the business school at the University of Chicago. And because he's a psychologist, he knows that people are happiest when they're



talking to each other. That relationship is the thing that makes us happier. Happiest. And so one day, he's commuting by commuter train up to campus where he teaches. And he looks around the car and he thinks, you know, this whole car, nobody's talking to each other. It's all earbuds and screens. And so he's a social psychologist. So the next year he conducts an experiment and he pays people to talk to strangers on the train. And then they interview the people after they get off at their destination. And everybody says this has been one of the best rides of my life. That they have way more fun talking to each other than they do on their screens. And that's true of extroverts. It's true of inner introverts. And athletes' conclusion is we underestimate how much we will enjoy talking to a stranger. We underestimate how much people want to go deep in conversations. And so having read this research, I'm much more likely to talk to strangers. I have to say, I don't do it on the New York subway because the New York subway in New York, where I grew up, has too many people and you need some social downtime. And so in New York, you preserve a little cocoon of private space. So in a New York subway, I'm probably not going to talk to a stranger. But if I'm on a train or if I'm on a bus, or if I'm on an airplane, I'm much more likely to talk to a stranger. And I find it very rewarding. I was on a plane from JFK airport down to Ronald Reagan National Airport in D.C.. So it's a short flight. It's like an hour or so. And I start up a conversation with the guy sitting next to me. He's like 80. And I learned that he is, he came over here when he was seven from Russia. He started sweeping floors as a kid to make some money. He built a little business selling t-shirts all around the world, and he had more bankruptcies than I could count. He had more marriages and divorces than I could count. He started showing me his vacation pictures. And he's an 80 year old guy, and he's on the back of some yacht, surrounded by extremely handsome and beautiful 20



year olds. And I don't know where he got these 20 year olds, but he wasn't my cup of tea particularly. He's a super big Trump supporter. But it was very memorable. And I'll remember that conversation. And I wouldn't remember whatever book I was going to read instead. So I'm much more likely to talk to the people around me. And I've found that's very good advice. It just makes life more fun.

01:01:56:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Many of our national problems stem from the fraying of our social fabric. In order to address the larger national issues. Can you explain how we must first learn to do the smaller everyday interactions?

01:02:09:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. So I'm a political pundit. So I talk about campaigns and elections, and I talk about war and civil strife. And I talk about, you know, economic deterioration, stuff like that. And yet I've come to believe some of the big issues, the big public issues that I write about. Those problems come from deep down in the fabric of our society. They come from the fact that we just don't trust each other as much as we used to. And there's two kinds of trust. There's institutional trust. Do I trust the institutions of our society? And that really plummeted in the late 60s and early 70s, and that was Vietnam and Watergate. People came to distrust the government, distrust the institutions. But the more important kind of trust is interpersonal trust. Do you trust the people right around you? And if you would ask people two generations ago, do you trust the people around you or the people in your are your neighbors



trustworthy? Back then, two of 60% of Americans said, yeah, my neighbors are trustworthy. Now, if you ask Americans, are your neighbors trustworthy? Only 30% say, my neighbors are trustworthy and it's only 19% of Millennial and Gen Z. So the younger you go in society, the more distrustful people are. And when there's no trust in society, then you can't do business well, you're not going to do politics well because you assume the other side is out to destroy you. And then you're going to wind up with polarized politics. You're going to wind up with unhappy people. And unhappy people are mean people. Because if you feel invisible in society, you regard it as an injustice, which it is, and you feel unsafe and you're going to lash out. And so I was talking to a restaurant owner and he said, you know, I have to throw somebody out of my restaurant every week these days for rude and uncivil behavior. I know of a nurse who said our problem is that we have trouble keeping people in the profession because the patients have become so abusive, the nurses burnout, and they want to leave. And so we've just become a sadder and meaner society, and that translates into all sorts of things. So, for example, a couple decades ago, two thirds of Americans gave to charity, and now fewer than half of all Americans give to charity. Anything to charity. And so that's a society that's growing more aloof from each other and frankly, less caring toward one another. And it shows up in our politics, and it shows up in elections of people who are just mean and divisive and angry and vengeful. And so in my view, it's very hard to fix the problems in our politics. If society at the bottom is rotting.

01:04:54:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:



You said the moral fabric of our societies is fraying, or if there's a hole in our fabric. You have January 6th, you have Charlottesville. You have October 7th. Do you have the true belief that we can repair this?

01:05:09:00

DAVID BROOKS:

We've had a cascade of dehumanization. And you've mentioned some of the examples, and I think they all and you have mentioned mass shootings, for example, when a whole generation of kids grow up thinking we're part of the mass shooting generation. And so all of these things have sent the message that the world is brutal. And if I'm going to survive in it, I have to be brutal, or I have to hide, and I can't be vulnerable, I can't differentiate. And I do think all of these are symptoms of anxiety. The people feel that they feel loneliness. So they lash out these mass shooters, they feel invisible. And so what's the thing they want most? Well, the first they want to commit suicide, but they want to do it in a way that I'll make him famous. They want recognition. And there was a great interview by a great journalist named Tom Chenault, where he interviewed a guy who was about to do a mass shooting when he was caught. And so he was sent to jail and, you know, interviewed him. And the guy said, you know, if somebody just pulled me aside and said, I accept you for who you are, I think I would have stopped. He said. I remember even on that day I didn't want to do it. And so it's the invisibility of these kids that turn some of them homicidal. And I think guns also play a role. Guns are like, here's power, here's power. Guns are like serpents in the trees. Like whispering to you. You can have power if you kill people. And so that's the social decay. Now, can we get out of it? I do think we can. And I've been encouraged, through this period, through this ugly period in our history by a book I read, like during





Covid some time. And it's a book by a very famous political scientist named Samuel Huntington, who died a few years ago. And the book was written in 1983, and it was called *The Politics of Disharmony*. And he makes the observation in this book that every 60 years or so in American history, we tend to go through what he calls a moral convulsion. And a moral convulsion is when people get disgusted with established power. People who have been excluded. Want demand to be included. New passionate generation comes on the scene. There's a new communications technology that comes on the scene, and everything seems disrupted. And everything. It feels like everything's being ripped apart. And he says this happened in the 1770s, during the revolutionary period. It happened in the 1830s during the Andrew Jackson populist period. It happened in the 1890s, during the Industrial Revolution and the Progressive ERA. And it happened in the 1960s, when 1968 was as brutal an era as is. More and more than now, when we had assassinations, we had bombings and riots when the cities were on fire. And so he's writing in 1983 and he says, I don't know if I believe in this theory of 60 or cycles, but if it holds sometime around 2020, we'll probably have another moral convulsion. So I read this in 2020 or 2021, I think. Whoa. Pretty accurate prediction. And so the good news is that moral convulsions happen. But then we recover. And so basically what he's describing is we have a way of constructing a society. We have a paradigm. This is going to be our culture. This is going to be our system. And that paradigm works really well for us. But as the years go by, it stops working. And so you have to go through a period where you chop up the old way of doing things. And those periods of chopping up the old way of doing things feel terrible to live through. But in each of the previous cases, the 1770s 1830s 1890s 1960s. We recover, we build a new way of doing things. So, for example, in the 1960s, if you work,



this is going to seem trivial, but it suggests a wider cultural shift. In 1965, you look at a high school yearbook. All the guys, at least the white guys, have crew cuts. And then if you look at the high school yearbook in 1968, half the guys have crew cuts and half the guys have long hair. And then 1973, they all have long hair, and that seems trivial, but it's a transition from one culture of the 1950s, 1940s culture to the 1970s culture. And it's not just guys' hairstyles. It's like feminism comes in. We make progress on civil rights. We are more verbally expressive. And so all sorts of things have shifted in the culture. And so that culture that started, I think, in the late 60s was super individualistic. It was, if you look at the songs Rambling Man, Freebird, I'm Free to be me and you and me, Born to run. It's a culture of revolt against conformity. And I want to be myself. And so we've had 60 years now of a pretty individualistic culture. And to me, what we're living through is chopping up that culture and finding new ways to build community. And some of those new ways to build community are not pleasant. You get the racial identity politics. You get the tiki torch guys in Charlottesville, they're like, yeah, we're white males. And that's awful, obviously. But it's a bunch of people looking for belonging. And so my hope and really my conviction is we will find ways to build communities that are not oppressive to other people. And I, I'm hopeful that we're going to do what previous generations of Americans did, which is build a new culture, a new way of building our society. And we'll recover from these moral convulsions, just as we did several times in the past.

01:11:07:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Let's talk about something a little lighter and talk about what I found thrilling in your book was illuminators. Can you provide some examples?

01:11:14:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. So in book I, I say there are two sorts of people and it's an oversimplification, but to make the point, there are diminishers and there are illuminators, and the diminishers make you feel small. They stereotype, they ignore. They do a thing called stacking. And stacking is I learned one fact about you, and then I make a whole series of assumptions about who you really are. I learned you like Donald Trump. So I make a whole bunch of assumptions. You must be this, this, this and this. And that's just stereotyping. And so diminishers don't see you. Illuminators see you. And they are curious about you. They ask questions about you and they make you feel respected and lit up. So, like a century ago, there was a novelist named E.M. Forster, and his biographer said to talk to him was to be seduced by an inverse charisma. He listened to you so hard that you had to be your earnest, best and sharper self. And I thought it would be great to be that guy, somebody who could listen so hard you had to be your best self. There's a story, maybe apocryphal, Tony told about a woman named Jenny Jerome. And Jenny Jerome was an American, but living in England, in the late 19th century. She would later go on to become Winston Churchill's mother. But when she was a young woman, she was invited to dinner. And she was sitting next to William Gladstone, who was the prime minister of England. And, she left that dinner thinking that Gladstone was the cleverest person in England. Then a couple weeks later, she said, next to Gladstone's great political rival, Benjamin Disraeli. And she left the dinner with Disraeli, thinking that she was the cleverest person in England. And so Disraeli's an illuminator. If you can make somebody feel clever, you are an illuminator. Another story I would tell is, it occurred at Bell



Labs legendary research facility, and the patent lawyers at Bell Labs noticed that some of the researchers were racking up a lot more patents than everybody else. They were more innovative. They were more creative. They were solving problems. And so they want to know why. Why are some people so much better at this than others? And so they looked at their educational background. They looked into all sorts of other things, like they couldn't figure it out. And then they discovered that the people who are more creative and have more patents were in the habit of having breakfast or lunch with an electrical engineer named Harry Nyquist. And over meals, Harry would ask people questions about what? What are you working on? And then have you thought about this? Have you thought about that? And he would get inside their heads and he would help them solve their problems. So Harry Nyquist was an illuminator. And so really, the goal of the book is to help us become illuminators so we can go through life, being helpful to other people, seeing other people, understanding other people and making them better versions of themselves.

01:14:08:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And on the other side, what are diminishers?

01:14:11:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. And so 'diminishers,' they're just not curious. And I think the main reason people don't see each other is ego. They're just not interested in other people. Anxiety. Some people have so much noise going on in their own head, they can't pay attention to you. And I really think it's just a lack of curiosity.



And so, I sometimes leave a party, and I think that the whole time nobody asked me a question. They're just not curious. And I was just last night talking to a woman who took a cruise, a little boat, and they went on a cruise for a weekend. But it must have been a small boat because she said there were 14 people on it. And she said she spent the whole week learning about everybody else's lives. And she said, not once did anybody ask her what she did for a living or where she lived. And so those other 13 people in the boat had zero curiosity about her. And so I just think that that's maybe part of the egotism of the human condition. But, that's a diminisher.

01:15:16:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

All right, let's talk through a few of these terms. The gaze?

01:15:20:00

DAVID BROOKS:

The gaze is that first look. And we think of attention as something we just look at and see the world. But in my view, attention is a moral act. It's the act of looking at somebody with either generous eyes or ungenerous eyes. And if you look out on the world with critical eyes, you will find flaws in everybody. If you look out on the world with distrustful eyes, you will see threats everywhere. But if you look out at the world with generous eyes, then you'll see people, most of them doing the best they can in hard circumstances. And so the models you have in your head, and the quality of how you see, determines what you find.

01:16:02:00



TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Can you describe an immortal soul?

01:16:04:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. So I think there's some piece of us that has no size, weight, color or shape. But it gives us infinite value and dignity. And the word we use for that thing is called the soul. And we're not equal on the level of our height. We're not equal on the level of our strength. We're not equal on the level of our IQ. But we are all equal on the level of our soul. And human equality is a real thing because we have souls. And so what a soul does is it longs and I think a soul longs for goodness. I think we all want to be good people. And when we feel ourselves not living up to the goodness we aspire to, our soul gets sick and our soul begins to shrivel and our soul is sour and we don't feel good about ourselves. We don't feel good about the world. And yet there are some moments when we see the love of a child. We see the beauty of nature and our soul exults, and we experience moments of transcendent joy. And so I think we underappreciated the sense that we're ensouled creatures and that every little gesture, every little move we make either makes our soul a little sicker or a little more joyous. And so the stakes of everyday life are being felt in the soul. We're carving our soul one way or another. And so to me, when I look at another human being, I'm looking at a creature with a soul.

01:17:38:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And is the soul different from the little voice we hear in our head, or is it the same?

01:17:43:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. I think the soul is really the moral center of life. So we have a voice in our head which is not right in our head and has thoughts, and that's cognitive. And so to me we have these symbols. But the cognitive part where we say it's up here in the head, even though really our cognition happens in our whole body. The emotional part is in the heart, but the soul, I don't know where it is. It transcends our whole being, but it is the part of us that is moral, that wants to lead a good life, that feels bad, that feels injustice, and that feels admiration for acts of spiritual goodness. And just for example, I have a friend named Jonathan Hayes who told me a story. He's a very famous social psychologist, and he told me a story about a group of people that were driving home one day. I forget from what. And it was snowing. And there was the driver dropping each person in the car off at their own homes. And it's snowing and they drive by and they see an old lady shoveling her driveway, and one of the guys in the backseat of the car said, you don't have to drive me all the way to my house. You can just drop me off here. And they drop them off. And one of the women in the back seat noticed he didn't go home. He walks back and he goes to the old lady and he says, let me let me shovel this for you. And this woman who was in the backseat sees this whole scene unfold, says, I just wanted to jump and jump for joy. I just wanted to hug him. His noble act. This little noble act. Shoveling the driveway for the lady. It just made her sore. And that's her soul soaring. It's not a cognitive thing. It's not really an emotional thing. It's a spiritual thing. And I think we all, we all have a soul that that exalts when we see somebody do something really generous.



01:19:31:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Why is tenderness so important?

01:19:33:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, tenderness is a concern for others. And I think all literature is sort of based on tenderness as an author saying, here's a character and. You may like what they do. You may not like what they do. But I want you to feel compassion and concern for what they do. And so every author, when they write a character and that could be a good character, could be a bad character. A good author is entering into the mind of that other person with some sort of sympathetic tenderness. And so, for example, I read a passage by the great novelist Zadie Smith, and it was in the New York Review of Books, and she was talking about girlhood. She says, when I would go over to people's homes, I would imagine what it would be like to never leave. That is to say, I would imagine what it would be like to live permanently in whatever my friend's home that I happen to be in. I would try to imagine what it would be like to be Guinean or Belgian or Dutch, or Armenian. And then I would concoct these stories in my head about what life would be like if I stayed there forever. And to me, that's just a. It's a great way to try to see other people and prepare yourself to see other people. It's a fantastic way to prepare yourself to be a novelist, but it's also just tender. It's a tender concern for the people who you're joining and seeing them for their foibles, seeing them for their virtues, and just the ability to enter into another person's life and imaginatively put yourself there. And I think it flows from great tenderness.





01:21:08:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And why is it helpful to steer people towards positive conversations?

01:21:12:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Well, how do we build our friendships? We build our friendships by appreciating things about each other and mostly by exploring things about each other. A good conversation is not two people making statements at each other. That's a bad conversation. A good conversation is exploring together. And so there was a guy named Arthur Balfour who was a British statesman two years ago or so, and he would take the hesitating remark of a shy person and he'd say, oh, that's very smart, what you just said. Let me expand on it. And then he would build upon it, and then he'd encourage the other person to build upon what he would just say. And so, as one of his friends said, people would leave lunch with Balfour walking on air because he made them feel like they had made a real contribution to human understanding. And that's what a good conversationalist does. They make you feel like you've said something really smart and they make you feel that together. We've taken a journey of discovery. And so I had a great conversation not long ago, and I asked a question that might seem a little pretentious at first. And the question was, how do your ancestors show up in your life? So we're all formed by our heritage. And so I asked this group, they were six of us having dinner together. How do your ancestors show up in your life? And so one of the couples at the table was Dutch, and they talked about Dutch culture and Dutch heritage. And there's this joke the Dutch tell about themselves. We're



part of the Pharaohs and chosen a little reserved. And so they talked about how Dutch culture had shaped the way they walk through life. Another couple at the dinner were black, and they talked about the African-American heritage and how the history of African-Americans in this country had shaped how they see the world and how they're treated in the world, and how for centuries of history shaped who they are now. And I talked about, Jewish heritage, which has 5000 years of Jewish history. Makes me probably a little more argumentative, makes me a little more bookish. And I talked about the fact that Jews were living in this marginal little place called Palestine. And they wrote, they have this Bible, this Torah that puts them at the center of the universe, God's chosen people. That's sort of audacious. And, so there's sort of an audacity in Jewish culture, but with it comes a responsibility to live up to the covenant. And so there's all this moral pressure in Jewish culture to, like, live up to the covenant. And I think it shapes the way I see the world. And so, like, I've written these books on moral formation. And I think the seeds of that are planted 5000 years ago in the history of Jewish culture, like moral improvement, moral improvement, moral improvement. And so I didn't create that. I just inherited a long heritage. And I live it out, and we all live it out in our own unique ways.

01:24:10:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

This one I found important recently for me. So I want you to talk more about it, which is the importance of being present and specifically to the present, meaning showing up.

01:24:19:00



DAVID BROOKS:

So sometimes you just have to show up for people and you don't have to say anything profound. You just have to be there. And I've learned over the course of my life that if at all possible. It may be inconvenient, but show up at a wedding. Show up at a funeral. Show up at a bar mitzvah. You may think they won't even notice if I don't show up. But they will notice if you do show up. And just the art of being present and saying, I will witness this major event in your life. And so I had a student, at Yale, named Jillian Sawyer. And Gillian's dad died of pancreatic cancer. And as he was dying, they talked about the fact that. He would probably miss some of the major events of her life, like winning. And so after graduation, she was invited to become a bridesmaid at a friend's wedding. And so she watches the father of the bride give a toast to his daughter and is very moved by it. And it came time for the father daughter dance at the reception. And she thinks this one I'll just skip. It's a bit too much for me. So she goes to the ladies room and she goes to have a cry. And when she gets out of this room, everybody from, I think, her table and the adjoining table, we're just waiting there in the hallway. And no one said a word to her, but they each in succession gave her a little hug and then went back to the table. And she said, nobody lingered and tried to validate my grief. They were just there for me and it was just what I needed. And so that's the power of presence. Just being there for somebody without any need to like, say anything. And I love that story because. Somebody at that table when Gillian went to the ladies room. Somebody at the table said, let's go in the hallway and be there for Gillian. And so somebody was aware of the power of presence. And it's just a beautiful example of said, this is what Gillian needs right now. Let's go. Be present.



01:26:25:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

You say that public failures can be good for you?

01:26:29:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. So I've had some public failures. And some of those are stupid things I've said or stupid things I've written. Or just general, callousness or whatever. And, you know, we rarely learn from our good moments. I've never met anybody who. When you say what, what experience really made you who you are. Nobody ever says, I had this fantastic vacation in Hawaii, and that made me who I am. Almost invariably, it's a tough time. And when you. It's your own fault. Then you have no choice but to have a little self confrontation. You have no excuse but to do a little inventory of what I am, sincerely? What are my flaws? And so sometimes my sins and flaws are, desire for popularity. And so saying the things that'll get me liked, or, maybe not being considerate to somebody or doing something that's just thoughtless and leaving out the feelings of another person. And because I have a role, I wrote a column for The York Times, I appear on PBS. And when you're in my job, when you stumble, there's a lot of people who leap on you. It's not like I'm a politician or, you know, a movie star or something like that. But there's a public out there that enjoys seeing public people fail, and especially in the political world, that I have a lot of people to my right and a lot of people to my left. And when you stumble, they're going to pounce on you. And so they are effectively good and make you feel humiliated. I've learned that, and a lot of people have hit you with emails or social media that attack you. These people are not unintelligent. They're very intelligent and they're very good at



knowing your insecurities and they'll say the things that wound you and that you can't get out of your mind. And so you have to develop some level of resilience and thicker skin, but not too thick. And you have to see. Well, you know, they were right about that. And some of them are just intellectual failures. And so, for example, the biggest mistake I made as a pundit was to be supportive of the Iraq War. And, you know, I thought I'd covered Central Europe. I'd covered the end of apartheid in South Africa. And I saw democracy breaking out all over. And I thought, well, now let's do it. Let's help it happen in the Middle East. And I didn't appreciate that democracy was not going to happen by invading a country. And so I remember roundabout 2005, 2006, I realized, obviously, how badly the war was going. And so I wrote a column really trying to reckon with my air. And I think it was the only time I really had a sleepless night. In between the time I wrote the column that night and when it would appear the next morning. And I really tossed and turned. And in part feeling bad for the earlier pro-war columns. I'd written, in part for the public reaction. And I learned from that that when you really apologize for a screw up, your friends are furious because you've left them. And your opponents see a moment of weakness and they jump on you even more. And so I don't have to get elected in anything. I just have to write my column. I get to keep my job. But if you're a politician, I learn why politicians don't apologize for mistakes because it infuriates their own party and it empowers the opposing party. And so they all say, you know, my chief weakness is I love my country too much. I care too much about all this crap. But, you know, the times I've done it, it's been hard reckoning. But hopefully I'm a little wiser.

01:30:36:00



TEDDY KUNHARDT:

You write about being a louder listener. What does that mean?

01:30:39:00

DAVID BROOKS:

A loud listener—I would invite people to watch an Oprah Winfrey interview with the sound of. And what you'll see is that she's reacting to everything the other person is saying. And if they're, their eyes are bright. She's, like, encouraging noises. And if they're saying something that's sad, she'll just sit there and she'll be quiet and she'll create space for them to talk about what's made them sad. And so she just has this highly reactive face. And that to me, is allowed. Listen to everybody and crouch when you talk to them. It's like talking to one of these charismatic churches. He's like, yes, yes, I agree, I agree. And it's just as a way to encourage people to be more active. And I will say when anybody is given public comments, given a public top will realize this phenomenon. And any audience there is going to be 8 or 10 faces that are just highly reactive. They're not just sitting looking at you, stone face. They're not. They're smiling. You can see they're just highly reactive faces. So I'm giving a talk in public. If my eye moves from I find highly reactive people and I look at them and I look at them and I look at them. And that way I can feel I'm not just talking to a bunch of blank faces, and I'm having a conversation. They're sending signals back to me with their facial expressions and they are allowed to listen.

01:32:06:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:



We've all experienced awkward silences. Why is it important not to fear the pause in the conversations?

01:32:13:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. So when we're having a conversation. And I learned this from a book called *You're Not Listening* by Kate Murphy. Then imagine my conversation starts here and ends here. And my comment at what point have you stopped listening so you can think of what you're going to say? You probably stopped here. And so you haven't heard the second half of what I said, because the same sort of part of the brain we used to listen to is the same part. We used to formulate our own speech. And so you're just not listening. And so in most conversations you don't want to pause. You just want to keep going. It's just casual. But if somebody says something really important and you really want to make sure you get it, then let me talk the whole way and you just listen the whole way. And then if you have to pause for a few seconds, then hold up your hand and say, I'm thinking about that, that was important. I'm thinking about that. And then you have a pause and then you'll have your response. And so apparently in Japanese culture, they are comfortable with an eight second pause in between somebody's comment and somebody else's comment. And we in American culture are not comfortable with that. We like the two second pause. Maybe, but I think the Japanese are right that you don't fear the pause, take in what the person said, think about it, and then respond.

[Long Pause]

01:33:39:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:



I'm not. I'm not fearing the pause. I'm just trying to—

01:33:41:00

DAVID BROOKS:

[Laughs]

01:33:44:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Is there a kind of honesty in children? Why aren't kids afraid to ask blank questions? And can we learn from them?

01:33:50:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. So kids are phenomenal. Question ask us. Kids ask thousands of questions a year. And so anybody who's kids knows. And so I have a friend named Naomi Way. And among other things she teaches seventh grade boys how to do social interaction. Really. She's sort of teaching journalists how to ask questions. And so the one of the first times she ever did this, she. I said, okay, I'm going to sit up here in the front of the class and you ask me questions and I'll answer them honestly. And so the first question one was from one boy was, are you married? And she says, no. Second question from another boy is, are you divorced? She says yes. Third question from another boy is do you still love him? And she's like, whoa! And her eyes filled with tears. And she says, yes. And the fourth question is, does he know? Fifth question. Do your kids know? And so the students are not afraid to go to awkward places. Do you still love him? And so they'll go right there. But then as we get older, we get a little inhibited. And we don't want to appear





intrusive and we don't want to appear dumb, so we don't ask questions at all. And so we get less good at asking questions. And to some degree, that's right that we want to respect someone's privacy. But on the other hand, I think we've aired too much on the other side of not asking questions or only asking the shallowest questions. And if you're going to actually get to know someone and have a great conversation, the question should be a question that's really personal. After you establish trust. And so in the beginning of a conversation with somebody, when I'm just getting to know them, I may ask them where they got their name. And that gets in talking about their ethnicity, about their parents or their family. I travel a lot, so I often ask people, where'd you grow up? And it's probable that I've been there and it gives them a chance to talk about their childhood. And I find people love talking about their childhood. And, it's a great way to begin to get to know someone. And then as you're knowing them a little better, you want to ask questions that are really fun. So I once asked an academic friend of mine, a theologian, what's your favorite unimportant thing about you? And I learned that this prominent theologian spends a lot of his time watching reality trashy TV. And so he said, that's my favorite unimportant thing about me. And I think my favorite, unimportant thing about me is that I liked early Taylor Swift better than later Taylor Swift. I like all the high school breakup songs. And so that's sort of unimportant. But it's a thing about me. And then as you get to know somebody really well. My favorite questions are what you might call 30,000ft questions, and they're questions that take you out of the normal rut of life and get you looking at yourself from 30,000ft. And so those are questions like, if the next five years are a chapter in your life, what's this chapter about? Or, what crossroads are you at? Usually we're in the middle of some life transition at some point. So what transition are you in the middle of? And then there's a guy named Peter



Block who writes about community. And he has some great and very, really profound questions. And you really have to know somebody well to ask this question. It's something like, what commitment have you made that you no longer believe in? Or what's the know or refusal you keep postponing? A lot of us need to say no to something, but we don't have that unpleasant conversation, so we postpone it. And then another of his questions is what's the gift you currently hold in exile? And so that's what talent are you not using? And when you look at retirees who are having great retirements, a lot of them, they left behind some talent. Maybe they loved doing musical theater in high school, but they became lawyers and they left that behind. And then in retirement, they go back and find the talent. And so you can have a conversation about that. And so kids are right to ask good questions and it doesn't hurt to ask. And if somebody doesn't want an answer they don't have to. But in my experience as a journalist and I've talked to a lot of conversation experts about this, I asked them how many times to somebody say, none of your damn business? And the answer is zero or almost zero. If you ask respectfully for somebody to tell you the story of their life. They're thrilled because no one has ever asked them.

01:38:12:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And why do we like talking about our childhood so much?

01:38:16:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Well, it's so formative. You know, we lead our childhoods twice. First, we live through it as kids, and then we go back and re-interpret our childhood to find



the meaning in it. And so if you look at great novelists, they go back, they go back and think about their childhood and they retell it and they really tell it and they retell it. There's a great novelist, Zora Neale Hurston, and she grew up in a little town in Florida called Eatonville, which was an all black town. And there was a store, I think, called Joe's Store. And the guys, the men of the town would hang out on the Porch Games store on the weekends, and they would tell stories and they would tell fables, and they'd make fun of each other, and they'd insult each other in mocking ways for fun. And all of her subsequent writing as an adult was really set back in Eatonville. And it was about the stories you heard and the voices and the characters. And she really discovered the community in Eatonville. She discovered the loss of the community of Eatonville. And so it was that there was the fertile ground from which her whole adult stories were told, because we're all trying to make sense of ourselves. And if you don't think about your childhood, then you're not trying to make sense of yourself. But if you go back and think about the people who were there and how you were shaped in those years where you're just like putty, you come to understand yourself and people. I have found love talking about their childhoods because they can talk about the games they liked, who they wanted to be, what their parents were like. I think people find it very rewarding to go back and we explore that sort of magical moment in life.

01:39:55:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And what does it mean to develop a meaningful philosophy of life during this time, or during this time and later in life?



01:40:03:00

DAVID BROOKS:

If you go to commencement exercises and you listen to commencement addresses, you realize that we give a lot of garbage advice. And one piece of garbage advice is to come up with your own philosophy. Come up with your own philosophy of life. And, if your name is Aristotle, maybe you can do that. But most of us can. We need somebody else's philosophy. We need it. People have worked out different ways of looking at the world. And so, for example, if there are a bunch of moral ecologies and moral traditions that have come through history, and some of them are like the Greek culture of honor, Achilles, I want eternal fame for doing acts of great glory for my city state. Or there's the Jewish tradition of obedience to law, or so there's the Christian tradition of trying to live in a more Christlike way, or as there's the enlightenment rationalist tradition of trying to have a philosophy based on science. And there are all sorts of moral traditions around the world Buddhism, Confucianism, all these different philosophies. And I was lucky enough to go to a place, for college where the teacher said, we're not going to tell you what to believe, but here are some great moral traditions. See which one fits you. And so we learned about them all. And I found a few that fit me. And one of them was classical conservatism, a guy named Edmund Burke, who was an 18th century Irish statesman. And he had this phrase, epistemological modesty. That means the world is really complicated. We should be careful how we try to change it, because we're likely to screw it up because we don't understand how complicated it is. So change should be constant, but incremental. And when I read that, at first I hated it. But as I got older and wiser, I can see he's right. The world is just way more complicated than we can understand. So we should change. Incremental but



constant. And so that gives me an orientation for the world. And so when I face a new circumstance, I have a worldview. I have a worldview to apply, and so I can take all the data that's coming in and I can make sense of it. Another of my heroes, for example, is Alexander Hamilton, who believed we should have a government that's limited but energetic enough to create social mobility so poor boys and girls could succeed. And I didn't create that philosophy of life. But that's my political philosophy that liberals believe in big government to enhance equality, and libertarians believe in small government to enhance freedom. But I believe in limited but energetic government to enhance social mobility. And so when Joe Biden comes along, when Nancy Pelosi comes along, when Barry Goldwater comes along, not that I was around for him, but, I know what I think. And so I know my basic orientation. And so my thoughts are not just a bunch of random stuff to change every day. It's a guiding set of principles. It's a set of true north. And then the hard part about having a meaningful philosophy is, the compass and the swamp problem. And this I got from the movie Lincoln, starring Daniel Day-Lewis. I don't know if Lincoln ever said this, but in the movie, he says this and he says, you gotta have a compass and know, oh, be aware of the swamps. So my compass, my point. True. North. But if I see a swamp in front of me, I'm not going to walk through north directly into the swamp. I'm going to try to walk around the swamp. And so the pragmatics of life being practical is knowing when to deviate from your compass and then go back. And so I've always found that useful. The compass in the swamp.

01:43:51:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:



When you meet someone with an incurable disease, what is the best way to show empathy and what should you avoid?

01:43:57:00

DAVID BROOKS:

One thing when you meet somebody with an incurable disease, well, the first thing is just to show up. And then the second thing I think is useful to do is to ask them their story. I was with somebody, a dear friend of mine. I probably shouldn't name him, but I'm in his hospital room, and it turned out to be about 3 or 4 days before he died. And what was interesting being with him is that in my practice now, since I wrote this book, I tried to make a lot of my stories my. I try to make a lot of my conversations, storytelling, conversations. And so I tried to get people in a narrative mode. What was my friend? I didn't have to try to tell him stories and get him to tell me stories. He was just telling stories. He was going back over his life and he was days away from dying. And he said to me, I don't really regard myself as being particularly close to my mom, but it's funny how much she's on my mind now. And see that that bond is so powerful. And so we talked a little about his mom. And then he said, I really think about the times when somebody was kind to me in ways I didn't deserve. And then he talked about a few of the times that he was the beneficiary of somebody else's kindness. And then he talked to me about times when he held a very powerful job for a time in his life in government. And he said, I really regret how cruel power made me. And he wasn't particularly cruel. He was a wonderful guy. But there were moments where he felt he didn't. He wasn't kind enough to the people as he should have been. And so stories were just coming out of him. And the other thing I found in the times I've had conversations with people who are having incurable disease is.



They like to. They do like to talk about death. They're not shy about talking about this. It's on their mind. And sometimes I have a friend named Kate Bowler who has a disease. Cancer, which seemed incurable, but unfortunately, it's she's had or she was diagnosed with this years ago and she's I don't know if she's perfectly healthy, but she seemed perfectly healthy to me. And she says what she wants when people talk to her about cancer is people who give her compliments. That doesn't sound like eulogies. And she says, but mostly she wants people who will say, you know, there's usually something fun to do, and every day there's something fun to do and let's have some fun together. And so I think she teaches that sometimes, even in a sad circumstance with somebody with cancer, it's just another bright day. Let's have some fun.

01:46:43:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Can you talk about the death of your friend Mark Shields and how it affected you?

01:46:48:00

DAVID BROOKS:

You know, it's surprising I found that. I've read a lot about grief when a member of your family dies or, you know, when a kid dies. But I hadn't read a lot of literature on when a friend dies. And I was. I was surprised by how much Mark Steph hit me because he was 85. So he lived a wonderful life, a long life with a great marriage, a great family and a wonderful career. You got to like, manage campaigns. You got to work on Bobby Kennedy's campaign, the careers of columnist and the TV pundit with me. And yet I think what you



feel when a friend dies, especially a friend who you've known for years, is they've become part of the furniture of your life. And so when you lose a friend, you've had, for many years, it's like, as if you went back to Montana and there were no mountains there. It's like suddenly the world doesn't fit your mental models. And so when Mark died. It just felt disorienting. And so I was surprised by how much it hit me. But the nice thing is, I can't tell you how many times somebody comes up to me and wants to talk about Mark shields. It's like daily. And so a guy who can lead such a beloved legacy. That's a well-lived life. And so I take great comfort from how many people come up to me and say, yeah, I really miss Mark. And so, that's a sign of a well-lived life.

01:48:22:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

You wrote a perfect story about the tsunami in the book. Can you talk about that example and what we can all learn from that story?

01:48:30:00

DAVID BROOKS:

So the story comes from a French writer named Emmanuel. Career and Emmanuel career. And his girlfriend Helene, and their two kids had gone to Sri Lanka on vacation. And it wasn't a very good vacation because career and his girlfriend were feeling split apart and they had thought maybe they would marry, but they were realizing this was the end and the mood was so sour and their little party that they decided not to go take a scuba diving lesson that they'd signed up for. And that turned out to be a significant decision, because that was the day the tsunami hit. I think the year was 2000. And if people remember, there was this devastating phenomena that hit across the





Pacific. And a couple of days before the tsunami, they met another French family who was also vacationing there, and it was, two parents and then a little girl, Juliette. And Juliet was playing in the waves that morning, and the two parents were away. And, she was being supervised by her grandfather, who was reading a paper on the beach. And the grandfather is reading the paper and suddenly he feels himself getting swept up in a wall of black water. And he's pushed inland. And he has two thoughts. The first is that I'm going to die. And the second thought is Juliet already has. And, he swept inland and then the water started receding and he's about to be swept up in the Pacific Ocean. But he gets pushed against a tree, a palm tree up high, and then he gets pinned to the tree by some fence piece of a fence that is pushing against him. And he survives. And so he climbs down. And bloodied and bruised, and he realizes the true horrors have just begun because he has to go into town and tell Juliette's parents that their daughter is dead. So he goes into town. He sees them across the square where the town has been unaffected by the tsunami. And he looks at them and realizes they're having their last moment of pure happiness. And he goes up and he tells them about his career, writes in the book, the mom screamed and the dad just held her and had a thought in his head, which was, I can't do anything for my daughter. So I will say my wife. And so in the ensuing several days career and the couple spend meals together. And the mom, whose name is Delphine, is shaking. She's not saying anything. She's just in shock. And he says she is barely eight, but when she did, her hand would shake as she tried to get some rice in her mouth. And so they spent weeks together, and they're trying to. His girlfriend Helene has, is one of those people who's really good in a crisis. So she leaps in action. They're trying to find Juliette's body. They're arranging with the insurance, arranging the flights home. She's. Helen's taken care of it all. She's like



superwoman. And my career feels pathetic. He's doing nothing. He just feels hapless. And so they spend day after day together and their meals are weirdly rowdy because Juliet's father is trying to keep his mother, her mother with him so they don't drift off into catatonia. Don't disappear on us. Stay here with us. Like, just stay. And she's in shock and they're trying to pull her out. And so the father during the meals is like serving drinks. He's telling jokes. Anything to keep her spirits alive. And career looks at him and he thinks, wow, there's a guy who really loves his wife. There's nothing more beautiful than that. And then a couple of weeks go by, they find Juliette's body and. Over the course of those weeks. He looks back at telling the woman he's about to dump. And he thinks, if there's anything I can do in this life, it's to be with her. This long relationship with her has to last. I have to marry that woman. And Helene remembers that moment is the time they truly came together, and they then go on to have their own daughter and get married. And so the point of the story is, first, that we each encounter an experience through the perspective of our own lens. As Aldous Huxley said, experience is not what happens to you. It's what you do with what happens to you. And so when the wave hit and Juliet was killed, the father had one experience. I need to save my wife. The mom, Delfin, had another experience. I just need to survive the blow. Helene, his girlfriend, had one experience. I'm going to. I'm going to take care of this situation. And Carriere had another experience, which is. I'm pathetic. But then what? The story also shows how careers' whole consciousness changes, and in the normal course of life, our consciousness changes slowly. It evolves day by day, but in shocking moments it can change all at once. And so my career went from a guy who was self-absorbed, unable to love anybody, to a person who was able to enter into the lives of other people and really experience what they're going through.



And he wrote a memoir about it called *Lives Other Than My Own*. So he came out of his shell and was able to see others and enter into their lives. And his consciousness about how went from an aloof distance. I don't I can't love or I don't love or I don't love anybody to total love. And this happened in the course of a week or two. And so it shows how we see the world through our own consciousness, but how that consciousness can change gradually or all at once. And so I think the lesson I take away is we don't see the world with our eyes. We see the world our entire life. And if I want to know you, then I'm not. I don't want to know what happened to you. But really, I want to know how you made meaning out of what happened to you, how you interpreted. What's your subjective layer of reality? How are you seeing this? What story are you telling about this? And so it's, it's a lesson that we are all creating our own world. We're all constructing our own realities. By trying to make sense of things. And so that's why when I'm trying to get to know another human being, I'm focusing on the subjective sphere. Not what happened, Harry? What story are you telling? How did you experience what you experienced?

01:55:28:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

You have learned a lot about death. Can you tell me about the process of grief?

01:55:33:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. I went through the first 50 years of my life, almost unfamiliar with death. I lost, I guess my grandparents. But they had rich, full lives, and I never really confronted it. And then quickly, when my mom died, when I was in my



mid 50s, and then, I lost in succession three friends, in rapid succession, I guess. Now, four friends in rapid succession. And so grief is, is one of the first striking things about grief, is how uncontrollable it is. And so you have a certain model of reality, and your model of reality involves this other person. And suddenly they're not there. And it's completely disorienting. And I quote a woman in the book. In the book, she has lost her husband, and she's walking down the street shortly thereafter. And another woman who she knows, a neighbor who had also lost her husband, screams across the street at her. You think you're sane, but you're not. And she's saying you are more disoriented than you know yet. And it turns out the woman who lost her husband was in the CVS. And she overheard on the sound system. You'll all be home by Christmas. And she realized her husband wouldn't be home by Christmas. And she starts screaming at the CVS employees. She's like, it's insane behavior. But it's like she was so disoriented. And so grief is a process of disorienting because the one of the anchors of your life is gone. And then but your mind is always working to recreate itself. And so it's trying to build models to the new realities. And C.S. Lewis said that grief is like a river. It's always flowing, but it's also repetitive. So it's always coming back to the same spots. And there's all this intrusive thinking, and, like, I was out to lunch with a friend of mine, recently, and he lost his wife, and we had a great lunch. We'd been talking about this and that, and then he found himself thinking as he left the restaurant. Can't wait to tell my niece about this. But of course, she's gone. And so grief is like your mind is reaching out for somebody who's not there. And so it's super disorienting, and it takes a process. But I think for most people, the process is one of integrating a new reality. And the people who suffer long term effects of trauma, of grief are the people who try to keep their old mental models and just add the death onto their old mental models.



And the people who recover are people who create new mental models in which death is part. And so it is that process of disorientation and then remaking your models, that just takes a long time, and you don't control it.

01:58:33:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

How have you been remaking your own model with the death of Mark Shields and your friend Pete?

01:58:38:00

DAVID BROOKS:

I think I would say I am obviously more appreciative of friendship. I think I've got to the point where I have I have, you know, you know, I think this is a cliché, but I got to the point where I will focus more on the good times we had together, more than the pain of the loss. And so I look back on specific moments with my friends who are gone, with way more appreciation than I would have. Like in the weeks after they were, they died.

01:59:11:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Are people misled when they believe that life is controllable?

01:59:15:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. I think we overestimate how much we control our lives. And if you go back and read Greek tragedy. This is one of the core messages of all Greek tragedies that we think we can control our destinies. But life is going to hit



you sideways. And so in the classic Greek tragedies like Oedipus, he's king. He's like, okay, I've got it all. I've got power here. And. And then it turns out he commits this crime that had been foretold. And he's ruined. And so the guy who had it all suddenly became powerless and blind. We have to be prepared for the fact that we really can be blessed and think we can control our lives, but eventually something will come along. And the only question is what you make out of that. And I once was telling some of my college students about it. How to grow from suffering. And one of my students said, you know, I have really suffered a lot in my life. What should I do to get some suffering in my life? I was like, don't worry, darling, it'll come. Don't worry. You don't have to search that thing out. It'll come find you. And so you hope, wisdom can come from those moments of suffering.

02:00:29:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Most people are involved in some sort of struggle when you meet them. Was important. You recognize this?

02:00:35:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. I think when we meet somebody, we're aware of 5% of their life, and then we get to know somebody and we're all aware of maybe 20% of their life. But you have to be aware that unless they're a close friend, there's probably 80% that you are completely unaware of, that you're doing a business deal with them and they look totally put together. But maybe there's alcoholism at home. Maybe one of their kids is in real trouble. And I find nobody gets out a life without some real thing happening. And so I look at



their lives. I've got a friend who's started successful businesses. He's got a wonderful wife. You look at his life and you think, that's perfection. That guy's perfection. But he's, you know, he. He's had serious health issues, which I didn't know about. He's had years where he was basically incapacitated. And so he's got to deal with all that. He's had parents who were not the greatest. And so even a life that superficially seems perfect on the outside has got the same stuff that we've all got. And somebody told me I was just in Dallas yesterday, and somebody told me about a friend who was, a star athlete, phenomenally rich, and suddenly, out of the blue, took his own life. And, my friend said he had everything. He had absolutely everything. And so you never know. And so it's nice to treat each other with a little tenderness, because you never know what's going on back there until you really get to know somebody and ask.

02:02:18:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

I mean, look at Robin Williams.

02:02:20:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, you look around Williams. You look at Anthony Bourdain. Kate Spade and there was that spade of celebrities. They took their life and they thought, wow, who wouldn't want to be Kate Spade or Anthony Bourdain?

02:02:33:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:



So many people's ultimate question is, do you like me? Why does this question reflect a bad way to think about your life?

02:02:40:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Well, it's not in your control and b it makes you a people pleaser. And so when I'm talking to college students, I say you're not thinking. As much as you should about the deep, intimate relationship to your life. And the question to ask to choose who to be, who to be really friends with, or who'd marry. It's not. Do you like me? It's. Do I admire you? Because love comes and goes, but admiration stays. And so if you marry someone you really admire, or you make an intimate friend, someone you really admire, the odds are they're going to screw up, of course, but the odds are you'll still admire them. And that admiration is a very sound foundation for a relationship in the way the passing fancy of your emotions is not. And if you, think Do you like me is going to be the center of your life, which is sort of what most of us do in adolescence. Then you're perpetually at the whim of popularity, and it'll make you a conformist because you want to do whatever you can to be liked. It'll make you extremely converse, conflict averse, because you don't want to do anything that'll piss people off. And then if the person you want desperately wants to like you doesn't like you back. You'll find that everything is ripped away and you have no internal structure of your own identity. And so I think most people at the end of adolescence think, well, populism is in everything for me. And so when you make that decision, it's not going to be all about popularity for me. Then you develop your own internal core and then you can have. It turns out you can have relationships on a more healthy basis because it's it's gift of love and it's not need love. And this is a serious distinction that





gift lovers I have something I want to offer to you need love. I desperately need you. I need more, I need more, I need more. And that's Lewis as a very voracious kind of love.

02:04:52:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

And talk about what parenthood teaches people?

02:04:56:00

DAVID BROOKS:

I think in general, parenthood makes us less egotistical. You know, the, you know, I think, you know, before you become a parent, you on the weekend, you want to go see, play golf. And that's fine. Do you like golf? And then you have a kid come along, and suddenly you want to do stuff for your kid, and so you don't play golf. You push the key in the stroller, you take it to the playground. And so I think parenthood teaches you to be a little more centered. And I think most people are improved by parenthood. Or any kind of deep relationship, even marriage. I think Oscar Wilde said anybody who's not married is a bat. It's an amateur life, which is that he wasn't married, but, that's a more complicated story. But, and so once you incur obligations to others, you not only have to serve them, but you really want to serve them. And so I think it makes you more servant oriented, to become a parent, or at least it should.

02:05:55:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Do you fear death?



02:05:58:00

DAVID BROOKS:

I fear death. And I would say mostly for the effect I think it would have on the people I leave behind. And I would say, you know, I've had a wonderfully blessed life. And if I die tomorrow or if I was given a cancer diagnosis, I really don't know how I would react. But I think I would say. You know, I've had so many blessings in life, I really can't complain. But I have a wife and five kids. And I, I hope and think it would be hard on them. And so, frankly, when I go to the gym, I just read this book about how to live longer, and it was all about muscle mass and bone density and stuff like this. And the one thing I hate in life is, I don't mind, cardio workout, running and walking and bike riding. I like that, but, but, lifting weights, I find it intensely boring. But I now go to the gym. You wouldn't know it to look at me, but I go to the gym like five days a week, and I do. I do weights, I do weight machines, I do free weights. And it's two, so I'll have muscle density, and, and the hopes it'll make me live longer. And I think I do it because I love my wife and I love my kids, and so I don't. I don't think I have. I have that fear of death that makes some people feel better. I may be wrong if you tell me tomorrow I have cancer, suddenly I may be terrified.

02:07:26:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

What are life stories and why are they important?

02:07:29:00

DAVID BROOKS:



Well, we all tell life stories and you can't know what to do unless you know what story you're a part of. And so, I think one of the nice things about asking people about their lives, it gives them an occasion to tell their life story, because none of us, or very few of us, sit around thinking, well, that's my life story. But when somebody asks us, then we start telling the story of our life, and in telling somebody else, then we realize it. We're telling it to ourselves as well. And so when I, I'm always asking people about their life stories. And there are different ways to do that. There's Dan McAdams, a northwestern professor. He says, tell me your high points. Tell me your low points. Tell me your turning points. And people tell those points and they talk about different episodes of their life. And when I hear people's life stories, I listen to a few things. The one is, who's the hero here? So what? In what sort of way do people pick themselves? What role do they have? And so I recently read Viola Davis' memoir, which is really powerful. And you can tell the hero here is a fighter. Viola Davis wrote when she was a kid. She and her sisters are like a little platoon. They were walking down the street and they were going to take over the neighborhood. And she said, well, I want a spelling bee. I made sure everybody knew because they had to know what a force I was. And so she's a fighter. Other people tell a story in which they're a healer or their teacher, or some other role, but everyone's got a role for themselves. And then the next thing to think about is, what's the plot here? What's the shape of their narrative? And most of us pick a narrative from around our culture. So some people tell their life story as rags to riches. I sure grew up poor. I made rags to riches. Other people tell a story. Overcoming the monster. I had an abusive parent, abusive parents. But I overcame it. Or I hope I'm an alcoholic. The monster was alcohol and I battled against the monster. A lot of people tell a story, especially a lot of Americans. The story they tell is. Is. I started out okay.



I suffered, but I came back better. And that's a redemption story. And I think that's basically the story I tell about life. And so if you want to understand somebody, you, you say, what's the plot? Who's the hero here? And so you can learn a lot about people, and people need a life story because any pain can be born. Isaac Tennyson wrote the novel, if it can be put into a story. And so people say, you're a marine and you go to Parris Island to boot camp. It sucks to be in boot camp. But you can say, well, my story is, I'm the guy who endured boot camp so I could be a marine. And so you can realize this moment in boot camp is just a moment in time. It's just a moment as part of a larger story, and therefore you can endure the pain that is involved in becoming a marine.

02:10:30:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

You said, have compassion, have compassion, have compassion. Why is compassion so important?

02:10:36:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, I got this from Lori Gottlieb, who's a therapist who wrote a book called *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone*. And so Lori had a patient named John, and he was an arrogant jerk, and he was a classic narcissist. And he came to her and he was a screenwriter. And it's very prominent in his attitude toward the world was, I'm surrounded by idiots. I'm awesome. I'm surrounded by idiots. And her first instinct is to give him a diagnosis. Narcissistic personality disorder. But she said I didn't want to lose the person under the diagnosis. And so she didn't want to just label him. And he's a total jerk to her, as his



method of coping is just to be a jerk to people. And so he would call her his hooker because he paid her by the hour and she's kind of insulting. And he would bring a sandwich into therapy so he could eat and do therapy at the same time. He wouldn't bring anything for her. I think he would, like, clip his fingernails in the toenails in the middle of her like he's a total jerk. And so her instinct is any human instinct would be to say, this guy's a complete jerk. And I said, she said to herself, have compassion, have compassion, have compassion. Usually when people are jerks like this, it's because of some hidden pain. And so Lori says that what therapists are, their story editors, people are telling a story about themselves that's not working. And her job is to pull out the parts they're hiding to meet so they can tell themselves an accurate story. And so they're in therapy for a long time. And he's talking one day, and he said, he's telling us something about turmoil at home. And he says, yeah. And Gabe was getting so emotional. She says, wait, who's Gabe? We've been talking for months. You've never mentioned any Gabe. And he stormed out of the office. And then he comes back weeks later and he says, Gabe was my son. And it turns out that he had been driving the family, I think, to Legoland, this park in LA, California. And he was driving and he got a call and he looked on his phone, and he was going to take the call, and his wife and he got in an argument about him like, my phone ruined their lives. And he looked down, and when he looked down, an SUV hit them. And Gabe was killed in the crash. And so, he doesn't know if the person looking down was partly responsible. And so he had cut Gabe out of his story. So this guy who was on the surface, a complete jerk was carrying around this thing. And so the fact that she was able to not to label them and not to dismiss them, but to say, has compassion, have compassion and has compassion, it let that truth



out. And he was able to, like, include Gabe in his life story. And I think it made him slightly, at least slightly less of a jerk.

02:13:34:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

How does one show love?

02:13:36:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Openly and aggressively? You know, I think, people need to, I think in many ways to show love. Some of them are, by giving up gifts. But I think that the purest form of love is attention. And I remember when I realized that I loved my wife. I just couldn't stop thinking about her. And I, I used to, I think, wow, I'm. I'm getting a PhD and and, and so, like, I just wanted to learn about her. I want to think about her alone and think about her. But then you have to turn around and show that, and so there's a lot I love to use, but mostly it's a lot of attention. And, I think, I mean, we've all, you know, we've all got our love languages and it's a pop up. It's easy to make fun of, but I find it's kind of true. And some people really are words of affirmation. And some people really are acts of service. And so, I find that book sort of useful in thinking about, well, what's your love language? And apparently millions of other people find that bookshop, as that book has sold more copies than there are human beings on the face of the earth. So understanding another person's love language strikes me as part of being in love. But I do think, being reticent about love is generally a mistake. I mean, once you're in a relationship, one when you're starting you on a tiptoe, but once you're actually in a relationship, and I think, you know, when you, your kids come along, then you discover a love that you



didn't even know existed. That's just a whole nother layer. And then it's. And I remember I would, I just wanted to be there with them all the time. And, of course, I professionally wanted to do my job and succeed and all that kind of stuff. And so I had a little trick when somebody would ask me to go on a trip to give a talk or go to a conference or do some reporting. I would think if I leave me, leaving, especially if it's on a weekend, is going to cause pain to my kids because they'll miss their dad. And so I think, okay, in my mind, before I accept this invitation, I'm imagining this person punching my kid in the arm. And if I want to do the trip enough so I'm willing to let this guy punch my kid in the arm, then I'll do the trip. But most of the time I think, no, it's not worth it if you don't punch my kid. And so that was a little mental trick that you did to determine whether I was going to go on a trip, especially over the weekend or not.

02:16:11:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

I'm going to ask you to assess yourself honestly. What are some of your weaknesses you still face and going through, you know, in the process of writing this book and what have you learned and improved?

02:16:21:00

DAVID BROOKS:

I spent four years writing a book on how to know another person, how to show up for people in conversation, and how to be present with people. And so you'd think by now I'd be a regular ol Sigmund Freud, so I'd be able to laser you with your eyes and see into you. And I have to say, sometimes I'll go to a dinner party, and I'm going to go on sick. I'm really going to be present



for people. I'm going to ask people about things. I'm really going to get to know them and make them feel heard, seen and understood. And then I have a glass of wine or two, and suddenly I'm blabbing funny stories about myself, and I'm all in performance mode. And I think that's just the flow of ego and hell. I'm a political columnist, and one of the columnists, weaknesses were paid to be bloviating. And so, I think that's sin. And then there's still an emotional reserve that's just woven into my nature. And so at the end of the book, I wanted to think, how good am I at this after all these years of thinking about it? And that day I had had two conversations, one with a young woman who had used to work at the time and was going off, she said, to find herself. And she said that at lunch. And later I realized I just let her say. And then we moved on to some of the topics. Later, I realized I should have paused the conversation when she said, I want to go traveling to find myself. I said, what do you mean by that? Like find yourself how? What are you searching for? What are you curious about? What's going on? And I think that skill, the ability to pause the conversation and say, let's dwell here for a second. That's a skill that I think I have to work on and say, okay, let's. It's a skill of saying, okay, we're now going to talk about this. And you don't want to be that blunt about it, but be curious at that moment. And so I think I still have just some built in social anxiety or social aloofness that makes me like, skate over and not be fully conscious when something important has been said and to go deeper. And so that's like a very practical thing that I'd like to work on. And, you know, I have the same sort of weaknesses that anybody has, which is a normal selfishness, a normal egotism. And it's compounded by the fact that I'm on TV and I write for the New York Times, and it's very easy to walk into a room thinking you're the center of attention. And so you always have to combat that. And when my kids are young, it was easy when people would





come up to me and want to talk about politics or something. My son, when he was, like, eight. So, you know, they come for you, but they stay for me. And so kids are, like, not putting up with any bullcrap about that kind of thing. And so now I've got to remind myself. Just another guy.

02:19:15:00

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Do you have a clear sense of moral purpose? And do you know what kind of person you seek to be?

02:19:21:00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, well, in the current language of this book, I seek to be an illuminator. And I think we all grow up trying to be ourselves for others. And I think I also have found that as you get older, you define what really gives you some sense of moral joy a little more precisely. And so if you ask me, at age 30, you know, I want to be a great writer who can give knowledge to the world. Now, I realize I'm actually more of a teacher than a writer. So what I really like is when I read something that's really smart and helpful, and I can share it with others. So if you look at my books, I shove them, I stuff them with quotations. And one of my favorite sayings about being a writer is we writers are beggars who tell other beggars where we found bread. So if I read something by George Eliot or some wise person Tolstoy, I'll put that quote in the book because I found it useful, and I think other people may find it useful. And if I'm giving a talk and I learn something, and then I say it to others and I see them write it down, that's like one of my best rewards. So I'm not a writer. I'm



a bit of a teacher. I just take other people's knowledge and pass it along. It's a humble role, but it's very, very rewarding. It's a thing I like.

END TC: 02:21:16:00