

## THE BIG IDEAS

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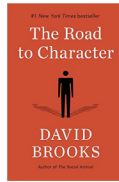
Live for holiness.

### Your Weakest Point

The hero become strongest there.

### Building Up the Soul

vs. Building up the Big Me.



# The Road to Character

BY DAVID BROOKS · RANDOM HOUSE © 2015 · 320 PAGES

“We live in a society that encourages us to think about how to have a great career but leaves many of us inarticulate about how to cultivate the inner life. The competition to succeed and win admiration is so fierce that it becomes all-consuming. The consumer marketplace encourages us to live by a utilitarian calculus, to satisfy our desires and lose sight of the moral stakes involved in everyday decisions. The noise of fast and shallow communications makes it harder to hear the quieter sounds that emanate from the depths. We live in a culture that teaches us to promote and advertise ourselves and to master the skills required for success, but that gives little encouragement to humility, sympathy, and honest self-confrontation, which are necessary for building character.

This is a book about ... how some people have cultivated strong character. It's about one mindset that people through the centuries have adopted to put iron in their core and to cultivate a wise heart. I wrote it, to be honest, to save my own soul. ...

I wrote this book not sure I could follow the road to character, but I wanted at least to know what the road looks like and how others have trodden it.”

~ David Brooks from *The Road to Character*

In today's world, the road to *character* has a much less defined map than the road to external success.

In this thoughtful, penetrating book, *New York Times* op-ed columnist and author [David Brooks](#) walks us through the evolution of our culture away from a character ethic toward a society all about what he calls the “Big Me.”

And, of course, he shows us the way back to character.

David is explicit that the book isn't a “7 point program” to build your character. Rather he shares stories of moral exemplars (ranging from Dwight Eisenhower and George Marshall to Frances Perkins and Dorothy Day) to inspire us to be a little better today than we were yesterday.

It's a deeply inspiring read and I highly recommend it. (Get a copy [here](#).) Of course, it's packed with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share a few of my favorites we can apply to our lives today, so let's jump straight in!

## RÉSUMÉ VIRTUES VS. EULOGY VIRTUES

“Recently I've been thinking about the difference between the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues. The résumé virtues are the ones you list on your résumé, the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are deeper. They're the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being—whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed.

*“Some people seem to have been born into this world with a sense of indebtedness for the blessing of being alive. They are aware of the transmission of generations, what has been left to them by those who came before, their indebtedness to their ancestors, their obligations to a set of moral responsibilities that stretch across time.”*

~ David Brooks

*"As the theologian Lisa Fullam has put it, 'Humility is a virtue of self-understanding in context, acquired by the practice of other centeredness.'"*

~ David Brooks

Most of us would say that the eulogy virtues are more important than the résumé virtues, but I confess that for long stretches of my life I've spent more time thinking about the latter than the former. Our educational system is certainly oriented around the résumé virtues more than the eulogy ones. Public conversation is, too—the self-help tips in magazines, the nonfiction bestsellers. Most of us have clearer strategies for how to achieve career success than we do for how to develop profound character."

Résumé virtues vs. eulogy virtues.

Although most of us would say that the eulogy virtues are more important than the résumé virtues, most of us spend WAY more time figuring out how to polish our résumés and get ahead in life than we do slowing down and thinking about who we are truly committed to *being*.

David connects this perspective to a book written by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik called *Lonely Man of Faith* in which Soloveitchik describes the two creation stories in Genesis as Adam I and Adam II.

Adam I is all about external success.

Adam II is all about internal success.

Résumé virtues vs. eulogy virtues.

This metaphor of Adam I and Adam II is a theme throughout the book as David challenges us to explore our road to character and not slip into a "self-satisfied moral mediocrity" where we grade ourselves on a "forgiving curve" and, "in the process you end up slowly turning yourself into something a little less impressive than you had originally hoped. A humiliating gap opens up between your actual self and your desired self."

It's time to hold ourselves to higher moral standards.

Let's shine a brighter light on our eulogy virtues.

## WHAT IS CHARACTER & HOW DO WE GET IT?

*"People with character are capable of a long obedience in the same direction, of staying attached to people and causes and callings consistently through thick and thin."*

~ David Brooks

"Character is built in the course of your inner confrontation. Character is a set of dispositions, desires, and habits that are slowly engraved during the struggle against your own weakness. You become more disciplined, considerate, and loving through a thousand small acts of self-control, sharing, service, friendship, and refined enjoyment. If you make disciplined, caring choices, you are slowly engraving certain tendencies into your mind. You are making it more likely that you will desire the right things and execute the right actions. If you make selfish, cruel, or disorganized choices, then you are slowly turning this core thing inside yourself into something that is degraded, inconstant, or fragmented. You can do harm to this core thing with nothing more than ignoble thoughts, even if you are not harming anyone else. You can elevate this core thing with an act of restraint nobody sees. If you don't develop a coherent character in this way, life will fall to pieces sooner or later. You will become a slave to passions. But if you behave with habitual self-discipline, you will become constant and dependable."

Character.

The word comes from the ancient Greek *kharaktēr* which literally meant "a stamping tool."

The word evolved to mean "a distinctive mark" and from that it evolved into "a description of a person, especially of a person's qualities," and finally to today's sense of "distinguishing qualities."

But I think it's helpful to imagine the original meaning.

Your character is a stamping tool. Your character makes an imprint on EVERY single moment of your life.

And, every single moment of our lives gives us an opportunity to slowly reshape the dimensions of our stamping tool. Our character is engraved by a thousand small acts as we rewire our brains and essence and become a more noble version of ourselves.

Here's to making our stamping tool a work of art.

## WHAT DOES LIFE WANT FROM YOU?

*"Your ability to discern your vocation depends on the condition of your eyes and ears, whether they are sensitive enough to understand the assignment your context is giving you."*

~ David Brooks

"In this method, you don't ask, What do I want from life? You ask a different set of questions: What does life want from me? What are my circumstances calling me to do?"

In this scheme of things we don't create our lives; we are summoned by life. The important answers are not found inside, they are found outside. This perspective begins not within the autonomous self, but with the concrete circumstances in which you happen to be embedded. This perspective begins with an awareness that the world existed long before you and will last long after you, and that in the brief span of your life you have been thrown by fate, by history, by chance, by evolution, or by God into a specific place with specific problems and needs. Your job is to figure certain things out: What does this environment need in order to be made whole? What is it that needs repair? What tasks are lying around waiting to be performed? As the novelist Frederick Buechner put it, 'At what points do my talents and deep gladness meet the world's deep need?'"

That's from the first chapter called "The Summoned Self."

The first step on the road to character is to answer the summons from the world. To slow down long enough to LISTEN to what the world is asking of us and have the perspective and humility to see that it's not all about getting precisely what we want every single moment of the day.

David shares the stories of Viktor Frankl and James Stockdale.

After losing his wife, mother, and brother in the horrors of concentration camps, [Viktor Frankl](#) tells us (see Notes on [Man's Search for Meaning](#)): "It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual."

[James Stockdale](#) spent seven and a half years in a North Vietnamese prison camp. Here's how he puts it in [Courage Under Fire](#) (see Notes): "Epictetus turned out to be right. After a very crude operation, I was on crutches within a couple of months, and the crooked leg, healing itself, was strong enough to hold me up without the crutches in about a year. All told, it was only a temporary setback from things that were important to me, and being cast in the role as the sovereign head of an America expatriate colony that was destined to remain anonymous, out of communication with Washington, for years on end was very important to me. I was forty-two years old—still on crutches, dragging a leg, at considerably less than my normal body weight, with hair down near my shoulders, my body unbathed since I had been catapulted from the Oriskany, a beard that had not seen a razor since I arrived—when I took command (clandestinely, of course, the North Vietnamese would never acknowledge our rank) of about fifty Americans. That expatriate colony would grow to over four hundred—all officers, all college graduates, all pilots or backseat electronic wizards. I was determined to 'play well the given part.'"

*"No good life is possible unless it is organized around a vocation. ... A vocation is not found by looking within and finding your passion. It is found by looking without and asking what life is asking of us. What problem is addressed by an activity you intrinsically enjoy?"*

~ David Brooks

Frankl and Stockdale would \*never\* have deliberately chosen the roles they were asked to play. But, when summoned, they responded.

What does the world need from YOU?

*"If you act well, eventually you will become good. Change your behavior and eventually you rewire your brain."*

~ David Brooks

Are you answering the call?

Remember this is our first step on the road to character.

P.S. Note: Our eyes and ears must be open and receptive to the summons. If we're always manically chasing our next goal and constantly (!) blowing ourselves up with stimulation and notifications and entertainment, it's very (!) easy to miss the call and feel that hollow sense of falling short of who we are capable of being but not quite sure why. Unplug. Go deep.

## STEP 2: CONQUER YOURSELF

"In 1877, the psychologist William James wrote a short treatise called 'Habit.' When you are trying to lead a decent life, he wrote, you want to make your nervous system your ally and not your enemy. You want to engrave certain habits so deep that they will become natural and instinctual. James wrote that when you set out to engrave a habit—say, going on a diet or always telling the truth—you want to launch yourself with as 'strong and decided an initiative as possible.' Make the beginning of a new habit a major event in your life. Then, 'never suffer an exception' until the habit is firmly rooted in your life. A single slip undoes many fine acts of self-control. Then take advantage of every occasion to practice your habit. Practice a gratuitous exercise of self-discipline every day. Follow arbitrary rules. 'Asceticism of this sort is like the insurance a man pays on his house of goods. The tax does him no good at the time, and may possibly never bring him a return. But if the fire does come, his having paid it will be his salvation from ruin.'"

That's from the second chapter on "Self-Conquest."

After we answer the summons, we must master ourselves. We must have the humility to see our weaknesses and the courage to confront them.

In [Habits 101](#) we walk through a nearly identical set of Ideas that James presents in his treatise.

Step 1? We need a Why-powered 100% ALL IN commitment. We need to kick off our new habit with as "strong and decided an initiative as possible."

*"The purpose of the struggle against sin and weakness is not to 'win.' Because that is not possible; it is to get better at waging it."*

~ David Brooks

Then? We want to start super strong AND we don't just want to be a hero in the beginning. We must "never suffer an exception." We must NEVER miss a day. (And, if you do, make SURE you never miss two days!!)

Spotlight on *you*: Are you following those basic principles of creating awesome habits?

If so, #highfives. What's the next habit you're going to install? If not, how can you optimize your habit-building process a bit more and what habit will you apply it to?!

Here's to conquering ourselves in service to our summons—the second step on the road of character.

P.S. Check out a free online version of William James's "Habit" [here](#). It's awesome.

## DON'T LIVE FOR HAPPINESS; LIVE FOR HOLINESS

"We don't live for happiness, we live for holiness. Day to day we seek out pleasure but deep down, human beings are endowed with moral imagination. All human beings seek to lead lives not just of pleasure, but of purpose, righteousness, and virtue. As John Stuart Mill put it, people have a responsibility to become more moral over time. The best life is oriented around the increasing excellence of the soul and is nourished by moral joy, the quiet sense of gratitude and tranquility that comes as a byproduct of successful moral struggle. The meaningful life is the same eternal thing, the combination of some set of ideals and some man or woman's struggle for those ideals. Life is essentially a moral drama, not a hedonistic one."

*"The safe and general antidote against sorrow is employment. ... Sorrow is a kind of rust of the soul, which every new idea contributes in its passage to scour away. It is the putrefaction of stagnant life and is remedied by exercise and motion."*

~ Samuel Johnson

That's from the final chapter of the book in which David shines a spotlight on the practical Ideas he touched on throughout the book and outlines a "Humility Code."

The 1st (of 15) principles in that Code? *"We don't live for happiness, we live for holiness."*

Our lives are more of a MORAL drama than a hedonistic drama. It's not about how much wealth, fame and hotness we can accumulate during our lives but rather how much virtue, character and holiness we can generate.

As John Stuart Mill tells us, we have a RESPONSIBILITY to become more moral over time.

And, when I see the word "tranquility" these days I'm reminded of [Ryan Holiday](#)'s wisdom in [Ego Is the Enemy](#) (see Notes) where he tells us: *"According to Seneca, the Greek word euthymia is one we should think of often: it is the sense of our own path and how to stay on it without getting distracted by all the others that intersect it. In other words, it's not about beating the other guy. It's not about having more than the others. It's about being what you are, and being as good as possible at it, without succumbing to all the things that draw you away from it. It's about going where you set out to go. About accomplishing the most that you're capable of in what you choose. That's it. No more and no less. (By the way, euthymia means 'tranquility' in English.) ..."*

*So why do you do what you do? That's the question you need to answer. Stare at it until you can. Only then will you understand what matters and what doesn't. Only then can you say no, can you opt out of stupid races that don't matter, or even exist. Only then is it easy to ignore 'successful' people, because most of the time they aren't—at least relative to you, and often even to themselves. Only then can you develop that quiet confidence Seneca talked about."*

Why do YOU do what you do?

Answer your summons, conquer yourself and focus on holiness + service—letting the happiness and tranquility be a by-product of that commitment to something bigger than yourself.

## THE HERO BECOMES STRONGEST AT HIS WEAKEST POINT

*"It was said in Greek times that Demosthenes was not a great orator despite his stammer; he was a great orator because he stammered. The deficiency became an incentive to perfect the associated skill. The hero becomes strongest at his weakest point."*

That's from a chapter on "Self-Examination" in which David profiles Samuel Johnson who tells us *"The first step to greatness is to be honest."*

If we want to live with character we need to be willing to look at what's not working.

And then, ideally, turn that weakness into one of our greatest strengths.

We touched on this theme in [David and Goliath](#) where [Malcom Gladwell](#) describes it as *"turning disadvantages into advantages."* (See the Notes for more on that.)

For now, let's do some self-examination.

Where are you weakest? How can you turn that into a strength?

I am weakest here: \_\_\_\_\_.

I will strive to turn this into a strength by: \_\_\_\_\_.

For me? There's no doubt that my struggles with inconsistent moods has catalyzed my growth. More recently, I became aware of my tendency to pursue too many big creative visions. I am excited to turn that weakness into a strength by focusing on ONE Thing and channeling all my best energy in a sustained direction.



Remember: *“The deficiency became an incentive to perfect the associated skill. The hero becomes strongest at his weakest point.”*

## BUILDING UP THE SOUL VS. BUILDING UP THE BIG ME

*“The genius of this conception is that as people become more dependent on God, their capacity for ambition and action increases. Dependency doesn’t breed passivity; it breeds energy and accomplishment”*

~ David Brooks

“The answer must be to stand against, at least in part, the prevailing winds of culture. The answer must be to join a counterculture. To live a decent life, to build up the soul, it’s probably necessary to declare that the forces that encourage the Big Me, while necessary and liberating in many ways, have gone too far. We are out of balance. It’s probably necessary to have one foot in the world of achievement but another foot in a counterculture that is in tension with the achievement ethos. It’s probably necessary to reassert a balance between Adam I and Adam II and to understand that if anything, Adam II is more important than Adam I.”

As you may have noticed and we’ve been discussed throughout this Note, our culture is ALL about building up the Big Me.

Of course, it’s important to have a strong sense of self but, in a world of the ubiquitous Selfie, it’s safe to say we’ve taken that *just a bit* too far.

We need to balance the power of trusting and expressing ourselves with the time required to build up our SOULS and remember that, ultimately, THAT is a way more important project and, in fact, is the engine to the external success as well.

Let’s join (and help create!) the counterculture of virtue.

From my soul to yours, I’m sending love and gratitude as we take the next steps on our roads to character.

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Chief Philosopher*

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## About the Author of “The Road to Character”

DAVID BROOKS



David Brooks is one of the nation’s leading writers and commentators. He is an op-ed columnist for *The New York Times* and appears regularly on *PBS NewsHour* and *Meet the Press*. He is the bestselling author of *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement*; *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*; and *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always Have) in the Future Tense*.

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## About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at [brianjohnson.me](http://brianjohnson.me).