

Building a Legacy of Character

Based on the book, “The Road To Character” by David Brooks



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Today's Presentation...

▶ References

- ▶ “The Road to Character” by David Brooks
 - ▶ NY Times Columnist and Best-selling Author
- ▶ “When Generations Collide” by Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman
 - ▶ Lynne - A baby boomer and corporate communication consultant
 - ▶ David - A generation Xer and roving reporter for CBS radio and cutting edge work in communications

The Résumé Virtues and the Eulogy Virtues

Résumé Virtues: The skills listed on your résumé; the skills that contribute to external success.

Eulogy Virtues: The virtues that get talked about at your funeral; the virtues at your core; what kind of relationships you form.

How do we build character?

- ▶ “Example is the best teacher. Moral improvement occurs most reliably when the heart is warmed, when we come into contact with people we admire and love and we consciously and unconsciously bend our lives to mimic theirs.”
- ▶ *Reading* - e-mail response to the author’s column expressing frustration about how hard it is to teach how to be “good” in a classroom.

Generational Differences

The Traditionalists - Born between 1900 and 1945

- Thoughts and values are:
 - Be skeptical of your desires
 - Be aware of your weaknesses
 - Be intent on combatting the flaws in your own nature
 - Strong social sanction against blowing your own trumpet
 - Don't get above yourself; don't get too big for your britches
 - No self-promotion

Then came the rest of us...

- ▶ Baby Boomers - Born between 1946 - 1964
- ▶ Generation Xer's - Born between 1965 - 1980
- ▶ Millennials - Born between 1981 - 1999

“For the first time in history, we have four separate and distinct generations working shoulder to shoulder and face-to-face...”

▶ “Generational misunderstandings happen all the time on the personal level, and they can be extremely painful.”

▶ “Each generation shares a common history. The events and conditions each of us experiences during our formative years determine who we are and how we see the world. This becomes the *generational personality*”.

We all have the same life stages, don't we?

- ▶ We're born
- ▶ We get educated
- ▶ We find work
- ▶ We find a partner
- ▶ We create a family
- ▶ We age
- ▶ We retire

Yes, we all have these life stages in common, but...

- ▶ We don't approach them in the same way.



The Traditionalists vs. Everybody Else

- ▶ Traditionalists say, “Nobody is better than me, but I’m not better than anyone else.”

vs.

- ▶ The rest of the generations say, “Look at me and recognize my accomplishments. I’m pretty special!”

Life after 1945...

▶ There was a shift in our culture to...

- ▶ “I am the center of the Universe”
- ▶ “I am special”
- ▶ “I trust myself”
- ▶ “I’m going to be true to myself”
- ▶ “I am wonderful”
- ▶ “Follow your passion”
- ▶ “Don’t accept limits”
- ▶ “I’m going to do great things because I am great!”



Why the shift?

- ▶ “By the fall of 1945, people had endured 16 years of deprivation - first during the Depression, then during the war. They were ready to let loose, to relax, to enjoy. People rushed to the stores to buy things that would make life easier and more fun. People wanted to escape from the shackles of self-restraint and all those gloomy subjects like sin and depravity.”

- ▶ “People were ready to read any book that offered a more upbeat and positive vision of life and its possibilities.”
- ▶ Books on the New York Times bestseller lists were:
 - ▶ 1946: *Peace of Mind* by Rabbi Joshua Liebman
 - ▶ 58 weeks on bestseller list
 - ▶ 1952: *The Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peale
 - ▶ 98 weeks on bestseller list
- ▶ “Soon there were IALAC posters on school walls everywhere - I Am Lovable and Capable.”
- ▶ “The self-esteem movement was born.”
- ▶ “The shift in the 1950’s and 1960’s to a culture that put more emphasis on pride and self-esteem, which had many positive effects; it help correct some deep social injustices.”

What's life been like from 1945 to present?

- ▶ “During the past 60 - 70 years, we’ve been a product of a *competitive meritocracy*.”
 - ▶ We have...
 - ▶ Spent our lives trying to make something of ourselves
 - ▶ Tried to have an impact
 - ▶ Tried to be reasonably successful
 - ▶ Had a lot of competition
 - ▶ Put a lot of emphasis on individual achievement
 - ▶ Did reasonably well in school
 - ▶ Tried to get into the right college
 - ▶ Tried to land the right job
 - ▶ Always moved toward success and status

What does this mean?

- ▶ “We’ve spent more time, energy and attention on the external climb toward success and we had less time, energy and attention to devote to the internal world of ourselves.”
- ▶ “The *self* is more a vessel of human capital. It’s about talent, tasks, and accomplishments, not character.”
- ▶ “Work becomes the defining feature of a life. Each acquaintance becomes an opportunity to advance our status and professional life project.”

What have we become?

- ▶ “We’ve become a culture in which people are defined by their external abilities and achievements. We have now a cult of busyness where everybody frantically tells each other how overcommitted they are.”
- ▶ “This has become a tradition of telling you how to do the things that will propel you to the top, but it doesn’t encourage you to ask yourself *why* you are doing them.”
- ▶ “It encourages us to be approval-seeking machines, to measure our lives by external praise.”

What is the result?

- ▶ “Many of us have no clear idea how to build character.”
 - ▶ We are more materialistic
 - ▶ We are more individualistic
 - ▶ There is a steady decline in intimacy
 - ▶ People used to have 4 - 5 close friends, now they have 2 - 3
 - ▶ Thirty-five percent of older adults report being chronically lonely
 - ▶ This is up 20% from a decade ago
 - ▶ Social trust has declined
 - ▶ People have become less empathetic

The questions we need to be asking are:

- ▶ “Toward what should I orient my life?”
- ▶ “Who am I and what is my nature?”
- ▶ “How do I mold my nature to make it gradually better day by day?”
- ▶ “What virtues are the most important to cultivate and what weaknesses should I fear the most?”
- ▶ “How can I raise my children with a true sense of who they are and a practical set of ideas about how to travel the long road to character?”

To demonstrate several character virtues, research was done on the following individuals:

- ▶ Frances Perkins - The Summoned Self
- ▶ Ida Stover Eisenhower and her son Dwight D. Eisenhower - Self-Conquest
- ▶ Dorothy Day - Struggle
- ▶ George Catlett Marshall - Self-Mastery
- ▶ A. Philip Randolph - Dignity
- ▶ George Eliot (a.k.a. Mary Ann Evans) - Love
- ▶ Augustine - Ordered Love
- ▶ Samuel Johnson - Self-examination

The Humility Code

A coherent image of what to live for and how to live

1. We don't live for happiness, we live for holiness.

- ▶ “As John Stewart 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.”

2. How one defines the goal of life.

- ▶ “This begins with an accurate understanding of our nature.”
 - ▶ The core understanding that we are all flawed creatures
 - ▶ We all have an innate tendency toward selfishness and overconfidence
 - ▶ We pursue things that are shallow and vain
 - ▶ We rationalize our weaknesses and failures
 - ▶ We know less than we think we do
 - ▶ We give in to short-term desires even when we know we shouldn't

3. Although we are flawed, we are also splendidly endowed.

- ▶ We have the capacity to recognize and overcome sin.
- ▶ We are both weak and strong, bound and free, blind and far-seeing.
- ▶ We suffer torment, yet stay alive and grow stronger.

4. Humility is the greatest virtue.

- ▶ “Humility is having an accurate assessment of your own nature.”
- ▶ “It’s awareness that you are an underdog in the struggle against your own weakness.”
- ▶ “It’s awareness that your individual talents alone are inadequate to the tasks that have been assigned to you.”
- ▶ “It’s a reminder that you are not the center of the universe, but you serve a larger order.”

5. Pride is the central vice.

- ▶ “It blinds us to the reality of our divided nature.”
- ▶ “It blinds us to our own weaknesses.”
- ▶ “It misleads us into thinking we are better than we are.”
- ▶ “It makes it hard for us to be vulnerable before those whose love we need.”
- ▶ “It makes coldhearted-ness and cruelty possible.”
- ▶ “It makes us try to prove we are better than those around us.”

6. The struggle against sin and for virtue is the central drama of life.

- ▶ “Contending with weakness often means choosing what parts of yourself to develop and what parts not to develop.”
- ▶ “It doesn’t matter if you work at a hedge fund or a charity serving the poor - there are heroes and schmucks in both worlds.”

7. 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.”
- ▶ “If you behave with habitual self-discipline, you will become constant and dependable.”

8. The things that lead us astray are short-term: lust, fear, vanity, gluttony.

- ▶ “The things we call character endure over the long-term: courage, honesty, humility.”
- ▶ “People with character have scope. They are anchored by permanent attachments to important things.”
- ▶ “They have a set of convictions about fundamental truths and have a permanent commitment to them.”

9. No person can achieve self-mastery on his or her own.

- ▶ “Everybody needs redemptive assistance from the outside.”
- ▶ “If you are to prosper in the confrontation with yourself, you have to put yourself in a state of affection.”
- ▶ “We wage our struggles in conjunction with others waging theirs.”

10. We are all ultimately saved by grace.

- ▶ “The struggle against weakness often has a U-shape - advance, retreat, advance.”
- ▶ “We get knocked off course, we admit our need and we surrender. This is when grace floods in. Then we know we are accepted.”
- ▶ “We just have to accept the fact that we are accepted.”

11. Defeating weakness often means quieting the self.

- ▶ “Only by quieting the self can you mute the sound of your own ego and be open to the external sources of strengths you will need.”



12. Wisdom starts with knowing that you don't know everything.

- ▶ “We are generally not capable of understanding the complex web of causes that drive events.”
- ▶ “We are not even capable of grasping the unconscious depths of our own minds.”
- ▶ “A humble person understands that experience is a better teacher than pure reason.”
- ▶ “Wisdom is knowing how to behave when perfect knowledge is lacking.”

13. 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 you.”
- ▶ “What problem is addressed by an activity you intrinsically enjoy?”

14. The best leader tries to lead along the grain of human nature than go against it.

- ▶ “The leader recognizes that he, like those he leads, is likely to be sometimes selfish, narrow-minded, and self-deceiving.”
- ▶ “The best leader prefers arrangements that are low and steady to those lofty and heroic.”
- ▶ “The best leader prefers change that is gradual and incremental versus change that is radical and sudden.”
- ▶ “A wise leader is a steward for his organization and tries to pass it along in slightly better condition than he found it.”

15. Maturity


- ▶ “The person who successfully struggles against weakness and sin may or may not become rich and famous, but that person will become mature.”
- ▶ “Maturity is being better than you used to be.”
- ▶ “It’s earned by being dependable in times of testing and straight in times of temptation.”
- ▶ “A mature person possesses a settled unity of purpose and has moved from fragmentation to centeredness. The confusion about the meaning and purpose of life is calmed.”

There are many ways to chart your own unique path to building character.

- ▶ Here are a few commonalities found among the individuals researched for this book:
 - ▶ “A deep vulnerability and a lifetime of effort to transcend that vulnerability.”
 - ▶ “Each person over the course of their lives was redeemed by their particular weakness. Each person struggled against that weakness and used that problem to grow a beautiful strength.”
 - ▶ “Each person traveled down into the valley of humility in order to ascend to the heights of tranquility and self-respect.”

Key reminders from the author...

- ▶ “We are all flawed...and that’s okay.”
- ▶ “Sin and limitation are woven through our lives.”
- ▶ “The beauty and meaning of life are in the stumbling - in recognizing the stumbling and trying to become more graceful as the years go by.”
- ▶ “Each weakness becomes a chance to wage a campaign that organizes and gives meaning to life and makes you a better person.”
- ▶ “We lean on each other as we struggle against sin.”
- ▶ “We depend on each other for the forgiveness of sin.”
- ▶ “The stumbler has an outstretched arm, ready to receive and offer care. He is vulnerable enough to need affection and is generous enough to give affection at full volume.

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- ▶ “The stumbler requires a community. His friends are there with conversation and advice.”
 - ▶ “We repent and are redeemed, and we try again. It’s a process that gives dignity to our failing.”
 - ▶ “There’s joy in a life filled with interdependence with others, in a life filled with gratitude, reverence and admiration.”
 - ▶ There’s joy in that feeling of acceptance, the knowledge that though I don’t deserve their love, others do love me; they have admitted me into their lives.”
 - ▶ “People do get better at living, at least if they are willing to humble themselves and learn.”

- ▶ “Joy comes as a gift when you least expect it. At those fleeting moments you know why you were put here and what truth you serve. You will feel a satisfaction, a silence, a peace - a hush. Those moments are the blessings and signs of a beautiful life.”



Thank you!

