

INTERVIEW

Exploring the Road to Character

David Brooks, New York Times

Interviewed by: Timothy M. Barbera and Christopher D. Miller

ABSTRACT

In 2015, New York Times columnist David Brooks published an introspective, compelling survey of towering examples of character: Augustine, Dorothy Day, Dwight Eisenhower, George Marshall, Bayard Rustin, A. Phillip Randolph, Samuel Johnston, and others. In *The Road to Character*, he describes their extraordinarily diverse stories in order to synthesize a map of the paths that led them to praiseworthy character. Brooks himself notes that he “wrote it because I wanted to shift the conversation a bit. We live in a culture that focuses on external success, that’s fast and distracted. We’ve lost some of the vocabulary other generations had to describe the inner confrontation with weakness that produces good character.” In the book, he concludes that the road to character in all cases is marked by profound internal struggle. Success in that struggle may or may not be extrinsically rewarded during the lifetime of the person involved, but “joy is a byproduct achieved by people who are aiming for something else.” In this edited and condensed interview with the Air Force Academy’s Cadet Wing Character Officer Tim Barbera and JCLI Editor Christopher Miller, Brooks shares further reflections on character and the society in which we live, and touches on the challenges university-aged young adults face today in developing the character they will need to lead and live meaningfully.

JCLI: *Having had some time to reflect on what you wrote in *The Road to Character*, what would you say differently now, if anything?*

Brooks: I would probably focus more on the role of emotion in shaping character. One study I’ve seen says that what mattered in developing the great leaders of WWII wasn’t IQ, and it wasn’t social status, and it wasn’t physical courage—the number one correlation was relationship with mother; the guys who had a model for how to love deeply were able to love their men and became good officers. We tend to downplay the emotional side of things...but beyond the emotional level of

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what's love and how to love well—there's the habits level, and being around coaches or on a field where you learn the small habits of self-control; and there's an exemplar level, being given role models to copy and inspire you. And then there's an intellectual level—talking about concepts like courage, honor, and what those possibly mean; and then perhaps an institutional or mentor-level. You get these different levels that all have to happen at once. But then, I think we would say a person of character has somehow brought all of those different levels into focus, usually through one formative experience, and so as a result, they are integrated, whole and can be counted on. That's sort of a *précis* what I've been thinking.

The book is much too individualistic, and what I emphasize in the book is combating your own sinfulness, the internal struggles. But when you look at the character, characters—the people in the book, they all are capable of making amazingly strong commitments to something outside themselves. And it was really the promises they made to things outside themselves that solidified themselves within. It wasn't just an internal thing. And so my next book is about commitment making, and I've come to believe that to have a fulfilling life you make four big commitments: to a spouse or family, to a community, to a location, and to a philosophy and faith. And your life is determined by how you choose those four things, and then how well you execute them. So I'm much more communal than I was in that book, which was too individualistic. I'm a little more emotional than I was in that book, because I was too cognitive. And then I would say I'm maybe a little bit more spiritual, or maybe more moral, relying on moral drives, rather than just 'being utilitarian is what you need to do well.'

JCLI: *In today's world, do we still have exemplars like George C. Marshall that we can point to? Would we*

recognize them if we did? Do we value them like we did in the past?

Brooks: If you look at the social science research on this—the nature of who is admired most, that's changed. If you ask the question: "name the five people in public who you admire most," it was, people would name the president, and they would name some generals, or a figure like Einstein, or Thomas Edison, and now it's LeBron or Tom Hanks. Now it's actors and athletes, and so there's been a "celebritification." Political figures are almost never on there. Military figures, I would say, would be there in times of conflict. I always ask students in my commitment and humility course to list people and to write about people they really admire. And you'll get a mixture. Sometimes they write about a professor they had, but sometimes they'll write about Mother Theresa, and so I still think people still find exemplars. We are admiring creatures. In general there has been a shift toward celebrities, but if you ask people to name someone in their own private life, I think pretty much everybody could do that.

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JCLI: *With the velocity of information today and the number of different perspectives, could any of those historical exemplars survive today's spotlight?*

Brooks: Everyone has severe problems. Marshall almost doesn't. He would have survived, because he was perfect, except for maybe being too emotionally stiff, but here's where I think, whether you're religious or not, is where a biblical background helps—because the exemplars in the Bible are all amazingly flawed, and so it introduces a little moral realism into "who you are."

JCLI: *You talk a lot in one of your columns about the current state of higher education, and how one finds their personal road to character and builds their moral compass. How do you reconcile building your own moral compass in a higher education institution where you're supposed to 'find yourself,' when you may then go into a working environment where that compass may not necessarily always align with the people you're working with?*

Brooks: Well, one of the things you can do in a higher education setting to lay down character is to absorb a moral ecology. Our history has left us with all these different moral systems. There's a Greek and Roman system that's based on honor, which is prevalent in the military. There's a Christian system based on surrender to grace. There's a Jewish system based on obedience to law. There's a scientific system based on reason and thinking your way to truth and goodness. And there are Buddhist and other systems—one of the things you can do in college is to sample them, and figure out which one seems true to you. We tell students to come up with their own worldview, and if your name is Aristotle, maybe you can do that. The rest of us cannot. It's better to borrow somebody else's. I think doing that is super important.

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And second—this, Plato emphasized—is studying things of beauty. He said one of the ways we climb to higher moral status is by chasing what's beautiful. In his ladder of beauty, if you find somebody who has a beautiful face, you begin to appreciate the beauty of the face; but then you realize there is a higher beauty, which is the beauty of an idea. And then you realize that there is a higher beauty, which is the beauty of a great institution. Then there is a higher beauty which is justice. And then there's higher than that, which is eternal beauty from which nothing

can be attracted or subtracted. And so if you just follow beautiful things, they sort of lift you up. That can be done reading a poem, or at a concert or whatever. So I do think that's something else that can happen in higher ed.

Another thing is just finding things to fall in love with. I do think the cultivation of emotion is something that doesn't happen naturally. You have to either fall in love with friends, or find a subject you fall in love with. Finally, and increasingly important to me, is the ability to see the world accurately. It seems automatic, you just look at the world—but if you look in this town (D.C.), people look and they see very distorted and weird things. There's a great quote from a literary critic named John Ruskin who said, "The more I think of it, the more this fact occurs to me, that the elemental human trait is the ability to see things clearly and to describe what you saw in a clear way." And he says, "A thousand people can talk for one who can think, and a thousand people can think for one who can see." And so, being around, especially writers, who see things clearly and then describe them clearly, is to me one of the things that higher education can do, whether it's a Tolstoy or George Orwell or whoever. Some people like Jane Austen are just very crystalline seers. If you don't see it clearly, everything else just falls apart.

So for me, what you do in higher ed is just lay down some kindling that will serve you when you get out. It's when you get out that everything changes and life gets a lot harder. I think that must be true at the Air Force Academy. It's certainly true where I teach that for students, everything seems structured in their lives, and people like me have been paid to listen to what they say and to give them loving attention, and when they get out here, nobody gives a damn and there's no structure around their friendships and suddenly they get surrounded by romantic breakups, which is what happens when you're twenty-four and twenty-five...and they really struggle.

JCLI: *Building on that, do you think it's possible to build a capital "T" Truth or a capital "C" Character that everyone should aspire to? And does that matter?*

Brooks: Well, I think there is some core of truth—more than we acknowledge. Some things are relative, but when you get in an argument, you find that you're always appealing to a standard. You couldn't argue if you didn't have a standard unconsciously. You find often enough, that people are appealing to the same standard, which they interpret differently. Like, what's courageous behavior?

There's never been a society on earth where men are admired for running away from their buddies in battle. We have just some standards we don't even think about. There's never been a society where, when someone's cheated on a spouse people say, "oh, that's fantastic." No one ever says that. We have certain standards of honesty and we have more than we care to admit in our society, and we're a little embarrassed to say no, this or that is actually true. That doesn't mean that you have to be self-righteously punitive to anybody who violates it, but understanding our frailty, I do think we have more standards than we let on.

JCLI: *In a society that has differing interpretations of truth and affirmatively values diversity in perspective, how do we re-crystalize some of these kinds of societal anchors?*

Brooks: I keep going back to my class as a frame of reference—there were 25 students in one group, we had 2 Nigerians, a Ghanaian, 2 Brazilians, a couple Koreans, and a Chinese student. I thought, they're going to have totally different values and the conversation may not flow. We were reading everything from Dorothy Day, who's in [Road to Character], other pieces not in the book, and yet I found that they were amazingly coherent. The conversation was just as if it had been 99% American. There was one difference, between a big preppie kid, a

superstar student from a very fancy school in LA and a woman from Ghana. Both of them were very brilliant; he was very individualistic and she was very communal. At a flash point, he and I had a little back and forth when I told a story about somebody I'd spent that week with and he said, "Oh, stop name-dropping Brooks." He didn't call me Professor; he just called me "Brooks." We traded some pointed remarks and it was fun for me, but he had a little edge to him. And the woman from Ghana finally interrupted and said, "no—you do not talk to your professor that way." She had a certain standard of how you show respect. I stopped the class and asked who agreed with their Ghanaian classmate, and who agreed with the kid from LA. It turns out the whole class agreed with her; it showed me there's a community, there's a certain set of routines and rituals and they all wanted those respected, even in our supposedly relativistic, open, casual world. They want that respected. Those things are more universal than we think.

JCLI: *Does technology and the increasing accessibility of information increase our ability to come toward the same truth on the world stage, or do you think it encourages people to surround themselves with an echo chamber?*

Brooks: I guess both. Obviously, there's an echo chamber effect. There are two kinds of social capital: bonding and bridging. Bonding is the kind you build with people like yourself, and I think we've done pretty well at that. Bridging is with people unlike ourselves, and I think we're relatively poor at that. First of all, I don't believe technology determines it—it's what you bring to the technology. If you're super friendly, Facebook is a tool for you to be super friendly. If you're lonely, Facebook masks your loneliness. It's not the technology itself; it's how you use it. I note this phenomenon, that we have more connections in our lives than before, but we're lonelier than before, and the number of people who have intimate

friends has gone down, the number of people without intimate friends is going up. The number of people who say, “I can trust most of the people I know” is going down, and this generation has the lowest levels of social trust on record. And so there’s a weird amount of connection, without trust and intimacy. And I think the social media and texting even, like when we’re talking we’re not really in control of what the conversation is, but when we’re

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texting, we can sort of control that. There’s a contact, but it’s hands off. I find that, especially amongst my students who are so rarely in romantic relationships in college and even among the twenty-somethings I know around here. There’s much less romantic involvement. Everyone says they’re so busy, but there’s not as much complete intimacy, a lot of fearfulness, and that’s made accessible by the technology, which allows a little push off.

JCLI: *Beyond your writing on character, you’ve talked about “leading from the edge of inside.” Can you expand on that idea?*

Brooks: The thought came not from me, but from a guy named Richard Rohrer, who is a Catholic monk out in New Mexico. In every organization, there are people at the core, totally surrounded by the organization, or even a group, a community, whatever. And then there are some people sort of on the edge who are not quite in the inner sanctum. They feel like a part-member of the group, but they can be a critic of it. They see it from sort of an outside perspective, and they’re really good at dealing with the outside world from within the organization. Those people, I think, have perspective and creativity. They’re less likely to have the group think problem that the people at the

core have, and they’re good at building bridges. I find that pattern in my life all the time. It has an advantage: you get to be around other people who are unlike you and sort of introduce them. It has the disadvantage that you’re never really at the core of the core. You don’t get the comfort and the security and maybe even the power and influence you get if you’re at the core of the core, a total team player, but some people have that disposition.

JCLI: *This would seem to put you in a position to be one of the people that you were talking about earlier who actually “sees” things. Are there still identifiable groups in Washington where you think that balanced perspective, the seeing of things from both sides, happens on a regular basis?*

Brooks: I think so. For example, we’re surrounded by think tanks here. There is one liberal think tank that is sort of at the core, and they want to guard what they say so they won’t offend the administration¹, because they’re part of the team. And they have a lot of influence. Then there’s another, which is probably a bit more center-left, and they’re a little more independent. They may have less influence, but with them you feel like you’re getting opinion based on evidence, not based on the cause of the moment. We all have different gradations toward the center, and I’d say, even in my experience with the military, this was true of Marshall, let alone today’s players. Yet Marshall, when he took over Leavenworth for the Military Training Academy, was a radical; he seemed like such a boring guy, but intellectually was sort of a radical, and was pushing things in a very radical, fast direction. You can be very much institutionally committed, but be a radical at the same time.

JCLI: *At all of the service academies, the student body is likely to be relatively predisposed to the idea of*

¹ Reference is to the U.S. administration in 2016.

service. There is a recurring concern that with a fully professionalized force, with a fairly stringent value structure, we risk increasingly insulating those who come through that system from the broader society. Is that an accurate diagnosis, and where are the linkages that we should consciously be trying to keep alive?

Brooks: Based on knowing military friends and students, it's easy to fall into an us-them mentality if you're in the military—that “we're doing the work and they're not,” or “they really have contempt for us, they don't approve of what we're doing.” Online anecdotes can feed an attitude which is both a little superior mixed with a little victimology. Victimhood is always to be resisted—it never leads to something good. There is, sometimes, a big divide between the 99 percent who don't serve and the 1 percent who serve, there's no question. Yet I always have six or seven active military in my class and the differences don't seem that great. They bring a perspective, because they either served abroad or bring a maturity because they're older, but their lives are not dissimilar. The things they talk about and worry about and how they deal with them are normal. And I would say, when I go to the Pentagon, it feels very much like a workplace to me. There's a huge “service” component obviously—people aren't making a ton of money—but there's a lot of professional jockeying, too, as there would be in any gigantic organization.

JCLI: *Your book explores individuals who have demonstrated a commitment to something larger than themselves, and an ability to find virtue. Many seem to have epiphany moments where their calling becomes clear. Do young people need to seek out that epiphany moment, or is there a certain foundation they need to be laying so they're ready when it comes?*

Brooks: I would say seek it out. A horrible bit of common advice is “find your passion.” 80 percent of people

graduate from university or college and don't know what their passion is. Passion is something that comes after you've been doing something, and after you've been doing well at it. Then you become passionate about it, but not beforehand, it's not something that just springs forth. I quote in my book Viktor Frankl's advice, “don't look within, look for a problem that needs to be solved.” Finally, when you ask somebody older than 40, what were the events that really shaped your life, no one ever says, “I had this amazing vacation in Hawaii.” No one says that, it's not a good event. Usually it's a bad event, and how they dealt with it, that matters. So the question is, should you seek out suffering? And my advice is, don't worry, it'll come. You don't have to seek it out. That is different from seeking out hardship. My son told me “I need to do something hard before I really become an adult.” And so he joined the Israeli military, and he just got out after two and a half years after being in action almost every day. He knew he needed some hard thing, not just for its own sake, but also to accomplish something.

JCLI: *As you look at American society broadly, what are leaders doing nowadays that is exemplary, and what are not helpful trends?*

Brooks: What's better about society, than with most of the people I wrote about in the book from the 1940s and 50s, is that we're just more emotionally open than they were.

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They were very emotionally closed. That meant they could be brutal toward each other, or just did not know how to express their emotions, and I think we're definitely better at that. And we're definitely fairer across diversity lines, and gender roles are more equal. What they had that we don't have, I think, is that they had a consciousness of responsibility of being the elite. They knew if they were senior military or senior law firms, or in Congress, they

were “the establishment, the elite,” and with that comes a certain code of behavior to live up to. I’m thinking of a case in Britain from the late 1800s where British politicians Disraeli and Gladstone were locked in a bitter contest. One of them got some personal letters sent to him that the other had written, and while they could have been used to destroy the opponent, he declined to read them, saying “that’s not what a gentleman does.” There were certain standards of how a leader behaved and if you tore away those standards, you were really tearing away the leadership of the country. Now I don’t think we have anyone who thinks, “Oh, I’m part of the establishment, I’m part of the elite.” Rather, it’s more common to be against the establishment, an outsider, a renegade. And so when you have that attitude, you don’t have a responsible leadership attitude.

JCLI: *We often talk about the fact an officer’s commission essentially means, whether you’re a lieutenant or a lieutenant general, you should be trusted and trustworthy. It seems like you’re talking about a code that helped make people in those days worthy of trust that people put in them.*

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Brooks: Yeah, to me trust is repetition coded by emotion. And sometimes the things that are done over are not the “official” things to do. I’m reminded of the kids’ video “Thomas the Tank Engine”. One of the engines says, “It isn’t wrong, but we just don’t do it.” There are certain things that we just don’t do. And that consistency is part of building trust.

JCLI: *As you have studied character and people’s lives, is there a consistent kind of thing that makes us realize*

that we have both the ability and the responsibility to be effective; that “agency moment” that you have written about?

Brooks: The word character has migrated in an unfortunate direction in my view. I differentiate between a résumé virtue and a eulogy virtue. Character used to be a eulogy virtue, but now when you see it in public discussion, whether it’s in a management or leadership seminar or whether it’s in K-12 education, it more often refers to traits that make you good at your job. Things like self-control, grit, resilience, being able to really focus on your homework. All those are important, you know, we all want to be good at our jobs. But that’s not exactly what character used to be, which is a set of virtues that sometimes made it harder to be good at your job. And I can’t remember if I put it in the book, but I used to talk about a guy I met who hired a lot of people. He would always ask them in interview, “name a time you told the truth and it hurt you.” He just wanted to know that they put truth above being good at their job. Another problem is that leadership courses list these traits, which we all try to nail down, but no one is honest for the sake of being honest, or no one is courageous

for the sake of courage. You’re honest because you’re serving a certain thing, like you’re serving a certain country, a specific country, or you’re defending a specific family, or you’re fighting with a certain set of men and women. I think it’s a mistake to think that we can do it

without knowing what the end is. It’s the ideal that inspires the behavior, and so if we don’t focus on the ideal, and we just try to instill all the traits without an ideal, then it’s not really going to affect people. Traits are means to an end, and we don’t focus enough on the end.

JCLI: *We are very interested in helping define a compelling identity that people can feel attracted to and part of; yet the military has a very diverse workforce that does many*

very specialized things. How do we focus on the “end” as you suggest?

Brooks: That’s a society wide problem. Even in broader society, we have an ethos of what it means to be a steel worker or a farmer or a cop, but there are a lot of people around here who are IT specialists in some company. They don’t have a distinct identity, so they go home and buy a pick-up truck and you don’t need a pick-up truck to deal with traffic here, but pick-up trucks are super popular because it carries a certain machismo. That’s a problem that the broader society faces as we shift to an information age economy. One of the things that distinguishes the military from everything else is that there’s violence involved. There’s a corrosive effect of being trained to exert violence. Dealing with that would, it seems to me, be difficult without losing your sense of humanity.

JCLI: *Right...in the Air Force we have a wide swath of people, some of whom really get up close with exactly the type of thing that you’re talking about, and some of them who are one, two, three levels removed from it. Yet everybody in the chain has to have the right perspective to do what they do. But there’s no denying for the people at the pointy end, it’s difficult.*

JCLI: *You have written about “four pillars of commitment.” One that you talked about was location; is that a very specific concept, or a more fluid one? This is important for a military that moves often.*

Brooks: I very much believe in physical space. And of course, as I understand it, when you get to a base, there’s an immediate community, there’s a structure, how you welcome people, how you join. But one of the things I know, during this election season I’ve been traveling all around the country trying to understand. One of the

things that I find is that while there’s a lot of dysfunction and a lot of towns that are just falling through the cracks and opiate abuse and all that, there are also a lot of “community healers”—I find this wherever I go. The examples are everywhere: a 24-year old woman from Bard College who went to Houston, set up an after school program, and takes care of 1500 kids every day. And she’s a community healer in some random neighborhood in Houston. A couple came from Minnesota and settled down in New Mexico to run a drug treatment program for the Navajo Reservations. Another guy in Southeast DC, who works as a consultant, opened a home for guys who just got out of maximum-security prisons. There are fifteen of them and they live together and they try to start companies. These people and those places are everywhere. I do believe in creating those physical, good spaces, it’s super important. We can’t live in the virtual.

JCLI: *Any parting thoughts about character?*

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Brooks: A lot of what’s needed is just clarity, and the other thing that I think is hard to express, especially in military institutions, might be that emotional piece. It’s hard to talk about. Who’s building character today? Many of the people who support character building think it has to be tough, like “integrity” and “courage.” But I’m a believer that we’re primarily led by our loves—by what we really love. And you have to emphasize that. It’s the things that are soft and squishy that are most difficult; if it’s all cognitive or if it’s all willpower, it’s not real, it’s the old 19th century version.

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