

“Character and Public Life”**Dr. James Davison Hunter**

University of Virginia

David Brooks*New York Times*

March 2016

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Ladies and gentlemen, our session now, is on Character and Public Life, and one of our speakers, is David Brooks. He has written a bestselling *New York Times* book now, called *The Road to Character*. But before that book came out, James Davidson Hunter, a sociologist at the University of Virginia, wrote a book on character called, *The Death of Character; A Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil* that came out in the year 2000.

Professor Hunter is most well-known for his earlier book over 20 years ago, called *Culture Wars*, where he diagnosed the battles that were coming and occurring in American culture. And so we’ve had James here before, talking about *Culture Wars*, but now we have him, going first, to talk about this question of character and public life.

And we couldn’t have two better people to address the question for us, so we’re really grateful to have Dr. Hunter and David Brooks, joining us. James, you’re on. Thank you.

JAMES HUNTER: Thank you, Michael. I’ve said before that as an academic, coming to the Faith Angle Conference, one of the best seminars in America, that it’s like being invited to host Saturday Night Live —

(Laughter)

JAMES HUNTER: And you count the number of times you do it, and there’s a kind of status system, by being invited a lot. So this is my, I think, third or fourth time. So anyway, I’m very grateful to be here. Thank you.

I have been asked to reflect on David’s new book, *The Road to Character*, among other things. So I’ve been in academia too long, to assume that students ever fully prepare for

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my seminars, and given the busy-ness of your lives, I don't assume that all of you have read and fully digested David's book.

Now, I hope that David will correct me, and fill out, but to get us on the same page, let me just recap the very broad contours of his argument. *The Road to Character* is a book about the tensions between what he cleverly calls, "resume virtues" and "eulogy virtues," between the virtues of performance and accomplishment and the virtues of transcendence and enduring ideals.

The tension is not new, but ancient, and it is reflected in two sides of our nature; what Rabbi Soloveitchik called "Adam 1" and "Adam 2:" the active building creative vs the contemplative and more spiritual. This binary is not only old, but also deep, for it roughly maps onto other classical dualisms in Western thought: mind vs soul, materiality vs spirituality, the *vita activa* vs *vita contemplativa*, the sacred vs the profane, and as you got a foretaste this morning from my comments, or my question to Jamie, not insignificantly, again, for my own reflections here, the dualism between public and private.

The Road to Character is not an argument about the unimportance or meaninglessness of Adam 1 or resume virtues, but rather it's an account of the way in which Adam 1 virtues have come to displace Adam 2 virtues. In turn, it is an account of the insufficiency of the resume virtues, absent the guiding, chastening vitality of the eulogy virtues. Inevitably, this is a story about the impoverishment of life and sociality that follow in its wake in the Late Modern period.

This account is brought to life by the biographies of eight extraordinary people. The hardship they faced, the suffering they endured; their failure, disappointments, but also, their triumphs, all often enough hidden from public view. At the same time, it is a recounting of the reservoirs of humility, courage, and vision; in short, their strength of character that they drew upon to lead such exemplary lives.

The Road to Character is not without its implications toward practice, either; applications that David gestures toward in suggesting ways in which we might recover this older way of understanding and living. Despite a few snarky reviews from the literati, *The Road to*

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Character has struck a chord, no question about it. There is a palpable hunger for the moral depth and idealism he has written about, a hunger made all the more ravenous by the shocking debasements of public virtue by our political class.

For my own part, recognizing what I think are limitations to the book, it doesn't keep me from acknowledging that this is a beautiful book, a courageous book, a thought-provoking book, and at nearly every page, an inspiring book. Part of what makes *The Road to Character* distinctive, is that it is simultaneously an expression of personal yearning, an act of collective memory tinged with lament, an exercise in cultural analysis, and a work of self-help, filled with insight and wisdom.

The combination makes the book perplexing at times, but it also makes it rich and compelling. This combination is undoubtedly why it has struck a chord. At the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at UVA, we say that apart from the joys of inquiry and scholarship, pursuits that have their own integrity and that possess their own justification, the way you know you're succeeding in your work, is when you are changing the conversation.

Against the cynicism of some of his critics, David's book, along with so much of his other writing at *The New York Times*, has gone a long way toward changing the conversation about the nature and possibilities of the moral life in America at the start of the 21st century. This is long overdue, and I, for one, am most grateful.

My comments this afternoon are, at this point, not so much about David's book, but about the larger conversation he has helped to start. In the ways of a somewhat old-fashioned form of literary criticism, I would like to use *The Road to Character* as a jumping-off point for thinking about the nature of the predicament he talks about and that I agree we are in. My reflections are not only, but they're mainly about language.

So let me launch in by talking a little bit about the nature of the predicament, and I want to begin with a story. I taught a graduate seminar this past fall on culture and morality, and at one point at the beginning of a seminar, I laid out this scenario. This is actually a scenario that comes from some research I did a few years back: I'm from a tough and impoverished neighborhood and I'm selling drugs, some of them to kids.

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And so I asked the class, "Tell me, is this right or wrong?"

And the class, of course, in unison, said "Yes."

And I said, "So tell me, why is it wrong?"

And one student pipes up and said, "Well, it's against the law. You'll likely get caught."

I said, "Okay. That's a utilitarian logic. I get that, but let's say I respond, and say 'I don't care, my life is shit. I'll take my chances.'"

Another student said, "Well, then how does it make you feel when you do this?"

Playing the role, I said, "Well, actually pretty good. It gives me money, influence, and respect."

And the student came back and said, "Yes, but it's harmful to people."

And I, continuing to play the role, said, "Sure. Maybe so, but we live in a free country. People have the right to choose. If they choose to buy this stuff, it's not my problem."

And then there was silence.

On another day, I asked a question: "Is it wrong to disparage people on the basis of their race or gender?"

And the class, of course, said, "Yes. Of course it's wrong."

And I said, "So tell me why."

And I think they were taken aback by the question. And a student finally said, "Well, it just is. It's obvious."

And I said, "No, no, tell me why it's wrong."

And the student said, "Well, it's unfair."

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And I said, "Well, explain. How is it unfair?"

There was silence. And then finally a student said, "Well, how would you like it if you were treated this way?"

And I said, "Well, so that's an ethic of reciprocity based on empathy."

"But, then I could say, 'Well, I wouldn't like it at all, but I'm in a position of power and privilege, so it doesn't matter how I would feel.'"

"Tell me why it's wrong now. Give me a compelling reason."

And again, silence. But then, just as the conversation was trailing off, a Catholic kid from Louisiana, who rarely said anything in class, yells out, "It's wrong because all people are made in the image of God. People of other races and genders are our neighbors and we will be held to account for how we loved them."

I said, "Okay. Now, that's interesting. We'll come back to that."

Both of these exchanges reflect something important. It isn't as though there is no morality at play in our culture. Conservatives are wrong when they speak about our culture being "amoral." They're just wrong about that.

You could hear moral logics at play: a utilitarian logic, a therapeutic expressivist logic, the logic of empathy based upon reciprocity. Moral judgments are made all the time, and they were here, as well. Rather, the problem is that our moral languages are thin and the moral resources that we have to draw from, to make sense of the moral complexities of life are sparse.

David says on page 15, and I quote:

"We are morally inarticulate. We are not more selfish or venal than people in other times, but we've lost the understanding of how character is built."

I agree. And the consequences of this are as problematic as he says they are.

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As individuals and as a society, the moral language available to us is simply not adequate for the challenges that we face. But leading into this observation, David says something that I did balk at. He says, and I quote:

"My general belief is that we've accidentally left this moral tradition" — what he calls, quoting — "the crooked-timber moral tradition, behind. Over the last several decades, we've lost this language, this way of organizing life."

But my question, is and sort of the lead into what I'd like to say, mainly like to say, is but is it accidental? Are we culpable for losing this language? Now, I don't want to make too much of that sentence or that word "accidental," except to use it as a rhetorical hook for the major point that I want to make.

I think that the story is more complicated. Later on in the book, Chapter 10, the chapter entitled "The Big Me," David talks about the turn toward narcissism, as embedded in the cultural shift from moral realism to moral romanticism. That this cultural shift was reinforced by economic and technological changes, communications, social media, self-referencing, and information environment, the meritocracy and so on.

This is entirely true. No disagreement here. But it is on this point of how we got here, that I'd like to push the argument and suggest that the problem goes deeper; that the road to character is actually much more arduous, particularly under the conditions of modernity and late modernity.

In putting forth this suggestion, I'd like to frame the problem in light of some theoretical considerations. Okay. I apologize. This is sort of the academic dues that you have to pay to hear this. This may seem like a descent into jargon, but I promise you it's not.

So I want to begin with something about the nature of institutions. Now, there's lot's to say about this, but I want to begin with a philosophical anthropology that underwrites a theory of institutions. Human beings are distinguished from other species by virtue of the fact that we are instinctually deprived.

Now, there may be other things as well, but this we know: unlike other species, we are instinctually deprived. Birds know how to fly, fish know how to swim; giraffes know what

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to eat, what not to eat. We humans, by contrast, don't know the things we need to survive; we are unfinished at birth.

It's against the backcloth of our biology that we see the significance of institutions. You see, institutions, which are merely deeply embedded patterns of thought, behavior, and relationship, are human constructions that provide for us what our biology does not. Institutions function like instincts, in that they pattern individual conduct and social relationship and our thinking in a habitual and socially-predictable manner.

Not only do they establish behavior with a stable pattern, but institutions also provide human experience at the cognitive level, with intelligibility and a sense of continuity. By living within the well-defined parameters of an ecosystem of such institutions, we humans need not reflect on our actions. We can take our social world for granted.

In this sense, they exist as a background against which a foreground of deliberation, thought, and choice can occur. I just want you to have this image in your mind. Basically, what I'm arguing, is that the human experience at some level, is divided between foreground and background. Okay?

The background is that part of human experience that is embedded within institutions. This is part of our world, our experience that is taken for granted. We don't have to think about it. It seems natural to us.

So when I stick out my hand, Michael and David, they don't think I'm attacking them. They probably don't think I'm asking them for money. They know immediately what to do. They reach out and shake my hand.

It's the way, we in the West, greet each other. Right? It's taken for granted. It's not thought about. And they never saw a YouTube video about how to do it. They were socialized into it. It has become part of the background of their experience. Think about clothing. When we wake up in the morning, we don't think gee whiz, I wonder if I'm going to get dressed this morning.

It's awfully hot in Miami, maybe I won't wear a thing. Of course you're going to get dressed, and the only real question is what, are you going to wear, and that deliberation

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happens in the foreground. So foreground and background, I'm going to come back to that in a minute.

So how is this relevant? Let me make three observations, more of a historical nature as it bears upon our contemporary moment. The first observation is this. To make a long story short, under the conditions of modernity and late modernity, the background of stable institutional patterns is receding, and the foreground of choice is growing.

So under the conditions of modernity and late modernity, the realm in which we have to deliberate, think about, choose, is expanding. That area that is taken for granted in the background of our experience is receding. Okay. This is what social theorists call "deinstitutionalization."

Now that does sound like jargon, but it's useful, and it's certainly not referring to the mainstreaming of mental patients, for example. Deinstitutionalization. Things that were in the background that we used to take for granted, are now matters of choice and deliberation.

But here is an important qualification. The foreground expends primarily in the private sphere. The realm of personal identity, intimacy, sexuality, courtship, marriage, parenting, religious belief, consumption patterns, and to the point of our conversation this afternoon, it extends to the realm of the language of morality, of virtue, of the good, and thus of character.

All of these things have been radically deinstitutionalized. Deinstitutionalization spills into the public sphere, but it's mainly operating in the private sphere. What this means, is that the moral inarticulacy that David speaks of, and is not so much a function of moral failure or forgetfulness, but rather it is built into the very nature of the contemporary world.

Now, please it's really important here in this qualification that you not hear a story of decline. This phenomenon that I'm describing is double-edged. Deinstitutionalization of rules and habits surrounding race and gender, is liberation that all of us would celebrate.

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But deinstitutionalization is also, as a general rule, confusing, especially as it bears on identity and the moral life. So that's my first observation that deinstitutionalization is a structural characteristic of the modern age. It is built in to the world that we live in. We have to think about, deliberate, and choose, in ways that we didn't have to, and that's both good and bad.

The second observation is this: that if deinstitutionalization mainly takes place in the private sphere, what of the public sphere? Well, you got a flavor for, a foretaste from my question this morning. The public sphere, the sphere of massive bureaucracies of government and law, business and commerce, labor, education, health care, communications, and sometimes religion, is defined by a culture of instrumentalization, utility, efficiency, what Max Weber called "functional rationality."

Indeed, one of the ways in which elite higher education distinguishes itself is in the extraordinary refinement of this kind of instrumental rationality and practice. The meritocratic elite is reproduced by virtue of the fact that it understands that culture and operates within it better than others. This is the "organizational kid" that David has written about.

Thus, the dilemma of late modernity takes shape as a familiar duality. On the one hand, you have a powerful public sphere, organized around a culture of instrumental and technical rationality, which on its own terms is largely incapable of providing individuals with meaning and purpose.

On the other hand, a relatively private sphere, which is sometimes distressingly under-institutionalized, and which is structurally unable to provide the reliable guideposts for meaning, purpose, identity, moral direction. So that's my second observation.

The third observation is this, and it adds one more layer of complication. When stable institutional patterns, habits, routines, are rendered implausible or inconceivable, when older moral codes can no longer be taken for granted, what do we do?

We moderns have no choice, but to turn inward, into our subjectivity. In other words, if there are no longer reliable guideposts out there that are institutionalized and repeated by others in the social world, what do we do? We have to turn inward to find the

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answers. To reflect, ponder, and probe our newfound choices. This is what is called "subjectivization." A mid-century German theorist called this phenomenon, "permanent reflectiveness."

In short, subjectivization that is the turning inward to our subjectivity, to find answers to life's most important questions necessarily follows deinstitutionalization. And subjectivization cannot help but foster subjectivism within the culture, an orientation marked not so much by vanity and egoism, as it is by an incessant preoccupation with the complexities of one's individual subjectivity.

Subjectivism then, is an orientation built into the late modern world. These constitute some of the deep structures of late modernity. It is on top of these historical dynamics that we find a philosophical and political liberalism that celebrates the autonomy of the individual and the authority of their intuitions, and ideologies of market rationality that celebrate the freedom of individuals and other actors, to initiate, build, consume, as market actors.

So if this is correct, it's not at all an accident that we find ourselves in the spot that we are in vis a vis character, and it is not merely forgetfulness that we have experienced for which we simply need to be reminded. A transition David talks about, "from the culture of humility to a culture of the big me," is not merely a matter of moral failure.

But the quandary David talks about instead, is in fact built into the nature of the modern world we live in, and it is reinforced by the ideological dynamics of late modernity. And those larger historical and structural forces operate in ways over which the individual has little knowledge and less influence.

I want to give an illustration that has been fairly close to home, about how some of these things all come together. In a controversial illustration, I think it helps to illustrate the moral impoverishment, the impoverishment of our language that David calls our attention to. And it plays out, both in public and private life.

This is the case of sexual assault—something that has been on the minds of many of us at the University of Virginia in the last couple of years. Needless to say, the dynamics of

sexual assault operate in a larger cultural context, one in which the dynamics of instrumental power pervade public, and to a large extent, the private spheres.

At the heart of this culture and at the heart of sexual assault, is an implicit anthropology that conceives of human beings as objects for instrumental ends. When we see human beings as mere objects that have more or less utility, we cannot help but use them, consume them, instrumentalize them, in the ways that we consume, use, and instrumentalize other objects and experiences.

While objectification and instrumentalization and the anthropology that underwrites them are far from cultural novelties, they are, as I have said, pervasive in the public sphere. They are embedded in the most powerful institutions of our society. The market economy, first and foremost, but not least, the university.

Indeed, as I said, one of the ways in which elite higher education distinguishes itself, is in the refinement of this kind of instrumental rationality and practice. So if it's true that anthropology rooted in objectification, and given expression and instrumentalization pervades our public, and to a certain extent private culture, then it has three implications.

First, the crime of sexual assault is an extreme, violent, and criminal extension of the very logic that plays out in the university and in late modern culture. It is a logic that we professors and our students share and perpetuate in practice, even if we repudiate it in theory.

Second, it's essential that there be some minimum standard for determining what is lawful and unlawful with regard to human sexuality. The language of consent has become such a standard. No matter the context, sex can never be forced.

Yet sexuality is historically and cross culturally one of the most symbolically freighted phenomenon of human experience. Against this, our public vocabulary for making sense of it and determining what's right and wrong, good and bad, healthy and unhealthy, about it, tends to come down to that single word. It's a word that bears a lot of weight.

When activists chant, "Yes, means yes" and "No, means no," we're giving political articulation to that concept, to that boundary. Now, believe me, something is better than

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nothing at all. At least the language of consent and non-consent is a moral boundary. But we should recognize that the consent is by itself, absent anything else, a rather impoverished concept; one that is incapable of accounting for nuance, depth, and complexity in human sexuality. What about beauty? Intimacy? Commitment? Not to mention covenant?

What's most problematic about the language of consent, is that it's the language of transaction, of contract. That means the language of consent is also of a fabric with a larger culture of instrumentality and utility, and therefore incapable of offering an alternative to the very thing it claims to resist.

The final irony, often times tragic, is that even the moral vocabulary of consent, as simple and as straightforward as it sounds, turns out not to be so straightforward in the actual encounter of two people moving toward an intimate sexual encounter. It turns out consent has no clear application. This word also has been deinstitutionalized.

So at this point, I just want to say that I think that the problem that David has laid out for us that we live in a moment when our moral vocabularies are impoverished and that we are inarticulate about the most important questions of our day, is exactly right. The practical question for parents, for educators, for citizens, for all of us, is what we do about it. For me, this is less a question of individual will, as it is a question of space and resources.

I'm fond of quoting Charles Taylor on this point, and he says, "The issue is what sources can support our far reaching moral commitments to benevolence and justice?"

As I've said, the public sphere, dominated as it is, by instrumental rationality and utilitarian ethics, provides the thinnest of moral languages. It's something, but it's relatively thin. There are few resources there. Its own impoverishment is reinforced by a tendency to deny particularity in community and creed, and its tendency to deny sacredness. The private sphere is the only place at this point where there's a possibility of deepening the resources for the cultivation of eulogy virtues, of thickening the moral languages and practices that make for good character. But here too, the instrumentalism of the public sphere encroaches.

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It does so in many ways, but not least in our consumerism and in the educational establishment through the utilitarian ethics of positive psychology. What we end up with, is not again the absence of morality, but a thin, mostly bland generic morality that in my view, cannot carry the ethical burden of a world like ours and the existential and ethical burdens we carry as individuals.

The title of David's book, *The Road to Character* is reminiscent of another book about a road to moral improvement, "Pilgrims Progress." We may or may not be heading toward the celestial city, but like Bunyan's pilgrim, we encounter enumerable difficulties and challenges in our effort to live a good life. We invariably come upon the "Slough of Despond," of "Hill Difficulty," the "Wicked Gate," the "Valley of Humiliation," and are tempted by a considerable expanded "Vanity Fair."

But unlike Bunyan's pilgrim, we have to find our way through the "Labyrinths of Modernity." The path to the celestial city, or if you will, the road to character, is still possible, of course. It's just a hell of a lot more difficult than we imagine. Thank you.

(Applause)

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Thank you, James.

Well, you all have known David for a long time; you're friends. And if you've never met David, or don't know him, the bio is in your packet. But as you heard from James, he's just written a very important book called *The Road to Character* that's become a bestseller, and I highly recommend it to you. We're delighted that he is here today.

One of our favorite participants at the Faith Angle Forum, is David Brooks. Now, not just a participant, but a speaker. So David, thank you for fitting us into your very, very busy schedule. David, you're on.

DAVID BROOKS: Thank you. I may not be cogent, but I will be vulnerable. I didn't know my book would play such a central role here. I wrote a book about commitment so I could be the center of attention, though; so whatever.

So of course I agree that there is social chaos. My students, I teach at Yale, their social lives are anarchy and brutal and so, I drew on that. I also agree about the moral inarticulacy and the poverty of our language. But I'm a journalist not a sociologist, so I guess what I'm going to respond with, is first that individuals have the agency to find their

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way out of this problem. That we have wisdom of the heart that is still latent within us, and that if we educate our emotions we can find our way home.

Essentially, we still have the power to pick our own background and we don't have to be turned inward into subjectivism. We can commit outward to something real and transcendent. Souls are not saved in bundles, we do it individually and we can receive salvation. So that's going to be my core optimistic argument: the way out of this predicament, individually.

So I'm just going to tell you quickly the journey to the book. And actually my critique of the book is much more comprehensive than James'. So the book starts with moments and they are emotional moments they're not cognitive moments.

I was driving home from the News Hour. I do this thing called "Shields and Brooks" with Mark Shields. We wanted to call it "Brooks Shields," but they didn't go for that.

(Laughter)

And I'm coming home on a Sunday night, and this was really one of the gestations of the book. It was about 10 years ago. And I drive into my driveway in Bethesda, and I pull around the side. And I look in the backyard.

And my kids, who were then 12, 9, and 4, are in the backyard with one of these balls you get at the supermarket. And they're kicking it up in the air, and they're running across the yard, and they're chasing it down, and they're tumbling all over each other, and they're laughing, and they're having the greatest possible time. And it's just a perfect summer evening; the sun is through the trees, the grass looks perfect.

And I'm just confronted with this scene of perfect family happiness. And at moments like that, you know life and time seem to be suspended. Reality spills outside its boundaries, and you become gracious of the happiness you haven't earned. You become conscious of grace.

And so the first thing you want, is to be worthy of such moments. And the second thing that you want, is to have a desire for such moments, that you become aware of a higher

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joy than you get at work or in the normal course of life, and you want to stay longing for that thing, even if you can't really get it a lot. So you have that sort of a spiritual uplift.

The second thing that sort of occasioned the book was running into people who radiated an inner light. You run into some people who just radiate joy. And I'll tell this story:

I was at AEI of all places and I get a seat next to the Dalai Lama. And he's a guy who just radiates joy. And so he starts laughing for no apparent reason.

And so he's laughing and I'm sitting next to him. So I want to be polite so I start laughing. And then he laughs and I laugh. He laughs, and I try to insert some jokes to sort of rationalize the laughter.

(Laughter)

And so I'm nervous, so I say to him, "Do you have any" — he had the little canvas Dalai Lama bag and I say, "You got any candy in your bag?" And he starts pulling out all this stuff, he's got in the bag. And basically, it's everything you get in the First Class cabin on an international flight.

It's like a little razor, earplugs, eye patch, and a big Toblerone bar, but he radiated that joy. And so you say to yourself, or at least I did, "I have achieved way more career success in my life than I ever thought I would, but that I do not have." And you just want to get it, and in that moment — and this occurred to me two nights ago.

We were in D.C. with a guy named Richard Mouw who spoke after dinner so graciously and so beautifully about conversation and how to treat other people that I at once was inspired by him. I wanted to get that inner light. I was also humiliated at the same time at how far you fall from that.

And so all these things are pushing you in a direction of trying to achieve or long for a higher joy. And so you know I came across, this is Catholic theology, that there are four levels of happiness. There's material pleasure: good food, good sex; there's ego comparative pleasure: being better than other people at things; third: there's generativity, the pleasure you get from giving back; and fourth: transcendence and

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awareness of one's place in the cosmic order, a connection to a love that goes beyond the physical realm, feeling a connection to ultimate love and absolute truth.

And so one and two come naturally to us, three and four you have to work at. And yet, I think to get that inner light, you've got to hit four, you've got to have three and four. And so the book was an attempt to go from the shallowness of my life, to how people get to four.

How do they get to the inner life? How do they get to transcendence? And the basic argument of the book, is that to build character, to achieve inner tranquility, peace, and joy, you have to become strong in your broken places. You have to confront your core sin and defeat it.

And the story I tell, is of Dwight Eisenhower. He's 9, he goes out trick-or-treating — he wants to go out trick-or-treating, and his mom, who is an amazing woman named Ida, won't let him.

He throws a temper tantrum, punches his tree in the front yard and he punches it so bad, he rubs all the skin off his fingers. Ida sends him to his room, has him cry for an hour and then comes up to bind his wounds. And she recites a verse from Proverbs: "He that conquereth his own soul is greater than he who takes a city."

And 60 years later, when Eisenhower wrote his memoirs, he said that was the most important conversation of his life because it taught him, that he was broken. He had this problem, which is anger, and temper, and passion. And if he was going to be worth anything, he had to confront that.

And he did confront it for the rest of his life. He'd do little things. He was a big hater internally, and so he'd write the names of the people he hated on pieces of paper and rip them up and throw them in the garbage can, just as a tool for conquering his hatreds.

And he became a man of solidity, and we think of him now as this cheerful, garrulous, country club guy, but that was total creation. That was not him. And so I wrote about conquering your own soul, having humility, which is radical self-awareness, from the position of other's centeredness, to see your brokenness.

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And then the exercises that people went through to conquer their brokenness and to become whole. But then I came to realize that was too individualistic. That what I missed about my characters was (a) they all had amazing moms. Their dads were eh, but their moms were all amazing.

And I'm reminded of a study done after World War II. All these people are drafted in the Army, and some people rose up to become majors. Some people stayed privates. What trait correlated with those who rose?

It wasn't intelligence. It wasn't physical courage. It was relationship with mother. They had good relationships with mom.

And those who could receive vast floods of unconditional love could then give it to their men. So that was one thing they had. The second thing they had was an amazing capacity to make commitments, to choose backgrounds, which they then could anchor themselves in.

So we talked about Dorothy Day earlier. She was the young woman, who, when she read novels, she couldn't just read them, she acted out the characters she was reading. And unfortunately, she read a lot of Dostoyevsky, and so she, like drank a ton, carousing, sleeping around, had two abortions, two suicide attempts. But then she had a moment, which transfigured her, which was the birth of her child.

And she wrote an amazing essay, which was in the New Masses about what it felt like to give birth. And it ends with this sentence: "If I'd written the greatest book, composed the greatest symphony, painted the most beautiful painting, or carved the most exquisite figure, I could not have felt the more exalted Creator than I did when they placed my child in my arms. No human creature could receive or contain so vast a flood of love and joy, as I felt after the birth of my child."

With that came a need to worship and to adore. She needed somebody to thank. She found God.

She became a Catholic. She founded the Catholic Social Worker Movement, homeless shelters, soup kitchens. She spent the next 50 years of her life not only serving the poor,

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but living with the poor, along obedience in the same direction, a total commitment to a whole system of belief; not only the Church, but the practice of poverty.

And so when you go back — and I didn't realize it at the time — when you look at my characters, they were all capable of that; choosing a background, making a covenant, making a promise. And I came to believe that character is really the outcome of the promises we make and the covenants we make.

The kind that Ruth made to Naomi: "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God; and where you die, there I will be buried."

Our inner nature is formed by the promises we make. Our very identity is formed by these commitments and these promises.

She wrote: "Without being bound to the fulfillment of our promises, we would never be able to keep our identities. We would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction, in the darkness of each person's lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocality's."

So I came to see — and this is not original at all — that we make four big commitments in life: to a spouse and family, to a location, to a philosophy or faith, to a community. And achieving the highest level of joy means making those commitments well, and then living them out faithfully.

Now, we live in a culture — in here James and I are on the same ground — that makes commitment making phenomenally hard. First, there's the Internet. How do you make a decades-long commitment when it's hard to control your attention span for 30 seconds? There's fear you're missing out, there's so many options for affluent people, you don't want to close them off.

There's worship in our culture of perpetual choice. There's a terrible fear of making bad choices. As Jamie Smith said, there's the valorization of autonomy as the ultimate value, which undermines commitment making.

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There's the definition of freedom, as freedom from, rather than freedom for. There's the definition of human nature as purely thinking creatures — this is Jamie's territory — that we're always making decisions rather than feeling, creatures. And the research university has such specialization it makes it very hard to step back and look at your life as a whole.

And then the culture, as James said, is inarticulate about level four. It's easy to forget the highest joys, just because it's not in the common currency a lot. And so we're very individualistic.

But I do think it's possible, and one sees around one all the time, people who make commitments. And to me, a commitment means falling in love with something and building a structure or a behavior around it for those moments when love falters.

And so I began thinking since the book came out, about, what is commitment. How do you do it? What's the content of it?

The first thing to say about it, is that it's a really hard thing. It's what a philosopher I read calls a "vampire problem." Suppose you were asked, "Would you like to become a vampire? You could live forever, you could fly around, you wouldn't have to drink human blood. You could drink donated cow's blood or something, and it would be cool."

But the problem, is once you make the commitment to become a vampire, you can't go back. And you don't know what your future vampire self will feel like. So you have to make a decision as a human about, whether you want to be a vampire, something you are not, and which you know nothing about.

And she said that a lot of the problems we make are vampire problems, we're trying to imagine a future self, which is different. So when you get married, you turn into a different person. When you go to the Marine Corps, you turn into a different person. I guarantee you, when you have kids, you turn into a different person.

These are all vampire problems. How do you make that commitment? And my belief is you can't think your way through it. The only way you can do it, is by loving your way through it, by falling deeply in love with something.

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And so what love does, it humbles you, it reminds you, you're not in control of your own brain, you have obsessive thinking. It opens up new and hard ground, opening up the crust of your life, and revealing soft flesh below. It decenters the self, or it reminds you, your riches are another thing not in yourself, and it unifies, it binds you so that you are unity with the thing you love.

There's a passage in a novel called "Captain Corelli's Mandolin," by Louis Devergie, where there's an old guy talking to his daughter about the marriage he had with his late wife. And he says:

"Love itself is what is left over when being in love has burned away. And this is both an art and a fortunate accident. Your mother and I had it. We had roots that grew toward each other underground, and when all the pretty blossoms had fallen from our branches, we found that we were one tree and not two."

It's that union with a person, or a cause, or a belief system. That's what love does, it binds. And it binds over the long-term, a period of particularity and damage and realism.

There is, like the first phase of love, which is the Taylor Swift phase, but then there's the second, love for people who are older and broken, and damaged, and have to deal with real life as it actually happens. And I love this quote from a friend, of a lot of ours.

This was Leon Wieseltier at Samantha Power and Cass Sunstein's wedding, and he describes this enduring realistic love:

"This love" he wrote "is private and it is particular. Its object is the specificity of this man and that woman, the distinctiveness of this spirit and that flesh. This love prefers deep to wide, and here to there, the grasp to the reach.

When the day is done, the lights are out, there's only this other heart, this other mind, this other face, to assist in repelling ones demons, or in greeting ones angels. It does not matter who the President is, when one consents to marry, one consented to be truly known, which, is an ominous prospect.

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And so one bets on love to correct the ordinariness and the impression, and to call forth the forgiveness that is invariably required. Marriages are exposures. We may be heroes to our spouses, but we may not be idols."

So the first thing that only motivates you to get across the threshold of a vampire decision, is the capacity, done by education and by poetry and by art, to be vulnerable and capable of great love. But when we look at people and (inaudible) it's not just love, it is love that has been morally ratified.

We need to feel that our commitments, that the things we fall in love with are not just because they make us feel fluttery, but they serve some good. We have a yearning for meaning, we have a moral imagination and so we have you know what the Greeks used to call "Eros." I think Jamie makes this point in his new book that Eros, we now think of it as sex and pornography, but originally it meant this yearning for excellence.

And we don't have a word for that, that yearning for ultimate meaning. Dorothy Day, she chose the word "loneliness." Loneliness wasn't solitude for her, it was the yearning for God.

C.S. Lewis used the word "joy." Joy wasn't the fulfillment of desire for joy; joy was the desire you want to have, for Lewis. And so it has to be morally ratified.

And so a love affair, is never just about itself. It's to serve some moral purpose, whether it's any of those four commitments. I hope some of you have read Tim Keller's book, "The Meaning of Marriage," which is, to me, religious or secular, the best book on marriage. And he says:

"A marriage is not just about itself, it's for something. It serves some cause. It could be you love your partner in a way that'll bring out his or her loveliness."

In the course of a marriage, you have to regard your own selfishness as the key problem in the marriage. That you're going to want, you have a tendency to regard your partner's selfishness as the key problem, but the only selfishness you can control, is your own. And so it's about a marriage as sanctification.

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And so to me, the things that motivate us to make these big commitments, even though they cause a problem, are first the love, and then the desire for, the yearning for righteousness and for meaning. And that's what motivates us; these commitments, and it's not a natural thing. It's a thing of the heart.

But then when we think about commitments, it's not just gushy yearning. It's also discipline and resilience. And so then I started asking myself, well what disciplines our commitments?

The first thing, is truth and honesty, the ability to see our world clearly and be brutally honest about it. As I mentioned, humility is radical self-awareness. It's radical honesty, and pride is radical dishonesty. And so the ability to see comes in many forms, but to see clearly is very hard.

We're all in this business, and most people see through filters. John Ruskin, this 19th Century art critic said:

"The more I think of it, I find this conclusion more pressed upon me that the greatest thing a human soul ever does, is to see something and to tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see."

And so when we think of the people who have been really good at our business, they have this ability to see clearly and to express it clearly. I think of George Orwell, or C.S. Lewis, or my hero, is Tolstoy. He really could just see crystal-y, purely.

So that's the first thing that disciplines us. The second thing, is craft. Every commitment, and every activity involves a craft. Surgeons have their tools, musicians have their scales, and we in our business, have a craft.

There's discipline to writing a story. My friend, Fred Barnes, used to say "The best quality a piece can have, is the quality of 'doneness'." Turning it in on time.

But for me, my craft, is — I have a really bad memory, so I take — I write everything down. And then for each column, I'll get 100 or 200 pages of research and data and

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notes. And then, since I can't keep any of it in my mind, I lay it out in piles on my living room floor. And so for an 806-word column, I'll have 14 piles; each pile is a paragraph.

And so if you look at my floor, there are 14 piles stretched across there. And so to me, the writing process is not typing it in the keyboard, it's crawling around on my floor, laying out my piles. And that's the discipline and the craft, it's the organization of the thing.

And sometimes when it's going well, and like the thoughts are coming in, and I'm writing furiously, it's like prayer. It's like the best moment of my job. And so we're disciplined by our craft.

And then the final thing I think we're disciplined by, is community, the people we're doing the commitment with. And Jamie already mentioned Rod Dreher. Before he decided to drop out of society, and become a monk — no, I'm just kidding — he wrote a beautiful book about his sister, Ruthie, called "The Little Way of Ruthie Leming."

And Ruthie was one of these remarkable people that teach you, touched a lot of lives, who sadly died, I think in her early 40's or maybe in her 30's. And it was a little town, and I don't know, maybe there were 600 in the town, but there were 1200 people at the funeral.

She just touched a lot of people. And she was the sort of person who liked to go barefoot, so the firemen — her husband was a fireman — they carried her casket across the lawn barefoot. And one of the things she did, was she, to serve her community, one of the many things she did, is on Christmas Eve, she thought the dead should be remembered.

And so she would go to the cemetery, and she would put a candle on every gravestone, a lit candle on every gravestone on Christmas Eve. And so she died just before Christmas Eve, and Rod was at home, and he said to his mom that night, "You know, should we do what Ruthie did, put a candle on every gravestone?"

And his mom said, "You know maybe in future years, I'll do it. This year, is just too tough. I just can't do it."

And so they didn't do it, but they drove to another family member's house for Christmas Eve. And they drove past the cemetery, and somebody else in the community had taken

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a candle and put it on every gravestone. And so that's community laying a standard, which other people then pick up, and that's how we're nurtured by these commitments.

And so, to me these commitments, making these four commitments are made gradually through life. And you do them one-by-one. You get married, you get a job, you find your vocation, you know you try on things, and then something occurs to you.

But it seems to me there's a point often, in people's lives, and especially the people we really admire, they find a point in the middle of their life, where everything becomes ferociously into focus. And maybe they got hit by life. One of my characters, Dorothy Day, watched the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, and was so angered by the death of those seamstresses that her life came into this ferocious focus.

Sometimes they're just encaptured by *en joie* and they're so plagued by fragmentation *en joie*, they physically and spiritually rest their way into focus. I think Augustine is an example of that. And sometimes history descends upon them, Abraham Lincoln. And suddenly, they have what is called "the call within a call," that you're doing your thing, but then something happens, which turns your call into a ferocious commitment, or you're work with anybody, you'll do anything, and you become single-minded, and your life all comes to a point.

And I ran across a piece of how to think in that moment, when your four commitments come into one single unitary integrated piece. And the things to ask, he said: (1) "Is it big enough; is this problem big enough for me to devote my life to; (2) Am I uniquely positioned in the entire world, to deal with this problem; (3) Has God or history thrust me with this responsibility, and does it keep me up nights?

And you see, in those people — Lincoln, you know, he was a Whig. He had this weird semi-religious belief. He had a family, he had these professional gifts; and suddenly, history thrust him into this moment, where his whole life was opinioned around saving the Union and ending slavery.

And we tell our kids, college students, to discover your passion, but as many people have written, passion doesn't come first, before the vocation. Passion is a product of the vocation. And so telling them to find their passion is just crazy.

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And when people find that final midlife integrating moment, they try to pare everything back, so they can focus on this one obsession. And that process of paring and renouncing, is often a brutal process, and that's what happened to Augustine in the garden. He was in the process of, not really a conversion, but a renunciation for a higher love.

You can't beat a desire by saying no to it, you can only find a higher desire. And then the people who do that, I think, they're the ones who achieve what we would call "character," or "tranquility," or "joy." My favorite scene in Augustine's life, is his final conversation with his mom. His mom was Monica, a helicopter mom to beat all helicopter moms, and she's like bugging him all his life. Here's who you can talk to; here's who you can't. Here's what you can believe; here's what you can't. Here's who you can marry; here's who you can't. He leaves North Africa to run away from her. She's screaming at him. She takes the next boat over, tracks him down in Italy. And then at the end of her life, she basically says — I think she's in her 50's — and she says, "You know, all my life I wanted you to be a certain kind of Christian, and you are right now," and basically, "I'm ready to go," and she dies nine days later. And he describes their final conversation as this tranquil moment of harmony after all the conflict, and he has this sentence where he says, "The sound of the trees was hushed. The sound of the birds was hushed. The sound of our breathing was hushed. We rose into a realm of pure spirit." And that's sort of the peace and tranquility we're sort of shooting for. And we can be surrounded — Augustine's culture was in the middle of the collapsing Roman Empire. Our culture is not that bad.

And so I agree with all the cultural critiques and I make them, but I do think the path out, is through this process of awesome commitment making. And then when you do that suddenly you're surrounded by all the things James talked about: the institutions, the standards, the belief, and you get redemptive assistance from outside. You aspire to have what we would call "character." Thank you.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Thank you, David.

(Applause)

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Okay. Paul Edwards, pull the mic over.

PAUL EDWARDS, *Deseret News*: Well, thanks to both of you. This has been very inspiring. And we've gone much further than where I raised my hand in the queue.

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But I was interested in the book, David, about how, you talk about these supportive, you know, institutions. And you talk a bit about friendship, as a particular source of strength. And C.S. Lewis has this great book on the four loves.

And has a long chapter in there about friendship. And it's occurred to me that this is somewhat under-theorized in our modern life. I mean we have shows like "Friends" on television. But we don't have a rich account of how to put together friendships somehow in the same way.

There are lots of advice books about marriage, right. There are lots of seminars and things to prepare one in that way. We think about family life, but friendship seems sort of serendipitous.

That we don't prepare ourselves for it somehow. I just wonder if you have any thoughts about how we can do a better job of making friendship a part of the formation of our character.

DAVID BROOKS: Well, I would say, if you want to get my students talking, there are two subjects set them off. One is vulnerability and how hard it is, they find, to be vulnerable, and the second is friendship. Where they sort of know it's important, but they don't have the skills or time to deal with it.

One of my students said, "My life is about putting out fires. And a test is a fire, a paper deadline is a fire, the LSAT is a fire, sometimes my girlfriend's a fire, my friends are never a fire and so they get left behind."

And in the last three months of senior year, they discover, oh, my God, I need my friends. And that's when they turn to it. And they really are, the first five years out of college, really suck: Bad bosses, unemployment, romantic breakups, and you need your friends, and they're under-institutionalized in thinking about that.

The thing I like about the Lewis essay about friendship, is what he ripped off from Montaigne. Montaigne has a beautiful essay on friendship. He was in love with a guy, I'm about to butcher his name, Estienne de la Boetie, somebody better educated than me, and he had this perfect intimate friendship, where he says:

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"And, how can I explain how this friendship formed?" And he said, "There was not one thing, it was not five things; it was not 500 things. It was a thousand intimacies; and I would trust him to make decisions about my life, more than I would trust myself."

And he says, "Friendship illuminates the distinction between giving and receiving, because I am so much one with him, when I give to him I have more pleasure than when I receive a gift, because I'm giving to a piece of myself."

And Lewis steals that without attribution.

(Laughter)

But then he's still a friend. And this is the beauty of friendship. And as Lewis says, "Friendship serves no biological purpose." And so he's talking about la Boetie's death scene.

And the family all gathers, and la Boetie is making these beautiful speeches to each of them about what they meant to him. And then Montaigne says, "They were incredibly beautiful speeches. They went on a little too long."

And so even with a friend, you can be honest.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Naomi, on this point?

NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY, *New York Post*: I mean there are all sorts of forces that would explain the lower levels are less interested in commitment to all these other things, but why do you think the friendship component has diminished so much? I mean what are the forces that are preventing one from committing, your students, for instance, to committing to friendships as much as they might have done in the past?

DAVID BROOKS: Well, first let's not over exaggerate. I mean people have done studies, does Facebook ruin friendship? And as I understand the evidence, you may know better than me, it doesn't have a big effect. It's not what Facebook is doing.

The people who are friends use Facebook to augment their friendship. The people who are lonely use Facebook to mask their loneliness. But the number of friends has not risen or declined particularly.

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But for my students, I mean I teach at Yale, so it's a little unusual, but everything is about time management. Their whole life is time management. I often ask them, I teach them the last class of their senior year, so the final college class they'll ever have.

And I say, "What book has meant the most to you that you've been assigned here in the last four years?" And they say, "You've got to realize we don't really read that way" — they're just trying to get through — "and so no book has really meant much to me in these four years."

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: This is at Yale?

DAVID BROOKS: Yes. When they think of learning experience, they don't think of books. They think of travel and service. They think of experiences. I'm very struck by that.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Okay. Will Saletan, and then Carl.

WILL SALETAN, *Slate*: So James, I felt like I wanted to pushback on you, but I'll ask it this way. Listening to you, I had, I loved what you had to say, but I also felt a kind of rationalist terror of this institutional background. And it's probably based somewhat on particularities of growing up in this era, but it's also based on some understanding of history.

So what I'd like to ask you about, is sort of the limits of this institutional background morality and how do I identify them. How do I identify when something should be in the foreground? So you mentioned a couple of obvious examples: racial segregation, the hierarchy of men and women; although even that is under debate in a lot of Christian circles.

But you also picked out the example of a sexual assault, and you were citing that as an example of the impoverishment of the rational utilitarian morality. The obvious rejoinder would be that however bad things are right now, in the old, institutional morality, women were chattel. And you know there wasn't even a question about consent, because you didn't have two subjects.

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Last night, some of us were talking about, man, he's going to kill me for bringing this up again, but Elton John and his partner are raising kids. So Naomi writes a column about the old-fashioned values, with which they raise the kids, a sense of responsibility and limits and all that.

In the background, totally uncommented on, is the fact this is a same-sex couple. There are people at the table who disagree with that. You say, "Well, you can love the sinner, but still hate the sin, and that is a sin."

So that's a live question, which 30 years ago, 40 years ago, was just part of the background. It wasn't questioned. And now, we would say, "Darn tootin'" you know, a lot of us would say, "Well, that should have been brought into the foreground and questioned." So the general question here, is how to identify when, which things should be brought into the foreground, when they should be brought into the foreground.

In the political discourse, we have Donald Trump saying, "Let's make America great again," and there's a huge debate about he means by that and what his supporters mean by that. Whether it's a good ways, a bad ways. But forget Donald Trump.

Marco Rubio says, "I'm speaking for people who don't recognize their own country anymore." A lot of people, like me wonder what the heck does that mean? Are these people who are you know, they just want Hollywood to stop shoving its values down their throat, as Rubio says.

Are they people who feel like the (inaudible) decision was an encroachment on a good o'l way of life, and is that a statement of religious liberty, or just a statement of let's go back to keeping people in the closet. So I guess what I'm asking for, is kind of a, "should version" of the Serenity Prayer.

When we look at that diagram, how do we, you know what gives us the guidance to know, which things you know — we need the serenity to accept the things that should be in the background. We need the courage to challenge the things that should be in the foreground and we need the wisdom to know the difference. So where is that wisdom? How does that fit in with your theory?

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JAMES HUNTER: It's a great question and I don't know how to answer it. I mean, I think that I did make the point, and I hope it was heard clearly that the kinds of dynamics that I'm talking about historically here, this is not a story of decline.

These are dynamics that have some extraordinary, liberating consequences, and justice has been served through many of these dynamics. At the same time, it has also brought about confusion. I mean that's part of the nature of a rapidly changing world.

Part of the problem, as I see it, is that these types of changes are, again, happening at the level of what I would call, the deep structures of our culture, but when they make it into public discourse, they tend to be politicized. And when they become politicized, the deeper, richer conversations that we need to be having about what does justice mean in a pluralistic society, tend to be truncated into slogans, aphorisms, clichés, then become symbolically important, but largely meaningless.

So I mean, look, the politicization is inevitable, but I think it behooves the leadership classes, political, academic, journalistic, and others, to make sure that these conversations remain as thick, as rich, as possible. And I don't see that happening in our public discourse.

Again, David says this, we live in an overly politicized culture, but an under moralized culture, and I think that's part of what I'm getting at. I think, in other words, that the line — and particularly in a democracy, has to be engaged publicly and pluralistically. That's not happening. We don't seem to have a political class, anyway, that rises to that, or is able to rise to that right now.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Okay. It looks like you have a thought, but David is going to reply also.

WILL SALETAN: I was just going to ask David a version of it, which is, I think, David, when you spoke of people making these commitments, at some point you used the word "choice," and so I'm curious about how that choice is made, how that decision is. First of all, from your empirical study, how do people make that decision, and then any thoughts you have about how they should, given the fact that it's radical if it's outside (inaudible).

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DAVID BROOKS: Well first, do you remember Francis Fukuyama, he wrote "The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstruction of Social Order"? I don't know if you remember. It came out like 20 years ago. I don't know how long. So basically, the argument which I basically buy, the narrative is that we had these codes and we had — you know, there was another great book by Alan Ehrenhalt called "The Lost City," about life in Catholic Chicago, which was you didn't have a choice.

If the priest tells you what to do, you did it. If the political boss tells you what to do, you did it. And so there were these institutions, strong communities, and strong structures, but they were based on racism, they were based on sexism, they were probably based on too much limitation of individual freedom.

And then we went through a period of chaos, what he calls "The Great Disruption," and high crime, and moral relativism, but now we're moving out of that. The molten lava is beginning to harken to a different system. Now, not in all elements.

In social life for young people, there's no order at all. It's all still chaos. But I think morally, we're beginning to harden into something else, and there's my version of what it should be, which is not what it is. But I chose commitments because it tries to reconcile choice.

We're never going back to deference and obedience. It reconciles choice to membership and covenant. That's what a commitment is, it's a modernization of covenant, but you've got to include individual choice in there, and so that's why I think that's the right way to think of life.

But to me, what's interesting about the new moral system that's coming to formation, and this is an idea that was really clarified for us by Andy Crouch, who edits Christianity Today. He says it's a shift from a guilt/virtue culture, to an honor/shame culture.

That social media is so everywhere that the big fear is being excluded, or your group does not get recognized. And so the moral continuum is not between virtue and guilt. The language is exclusion versus inclusion.

He wrote this last year, and that rings true to me. There is sort of a new moral vocabulary coming into being, and a lot of the big controversies on campus or their society, in large,

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are about exclusion/inclusion. And online it's respect my community. If you don't respect my community I'm going to go after you, and that some of their system is coming into being, and we'll see how it develops.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Carl Cannon?

CARL CANNON, RealClearPolitics.com: — been talking about the Donald Trump phenomenon. I don't know if you — so now we know the problem, why he's not like Eisenhower. So Mrs. Trump, Donald's mother, is the problem here.

(Laughter)

Do I understand this right?

DAVID BROOKS: That's on the record.

CARL CANNON: Blame all the women in his life.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: No, just this one, because Ike's mom did good, right? Okay.

CARL CANNON: I just wanted to get you on the record on it.

(Laughter)

CARL CANNON: So I actually, I used to live in one of his dad's old buildings, but I don't know anything about the mom, but somebody can —

DAVID BROOKS: There's a story for you, Carl.

CARL CANNON: Yeah.

DAVID BROOKS: I expect to see six links on your blog tomorrow morning.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Oh, Mrs. Trump. Is that your question, Carl?

CARL CANNON: That's my question.

(Laughter)

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Thank you. Dan and then Kathleen and Abdullah. Dan Lippman.

DANIEL LIPPMAN, *Politico*: Thank you, David. I was just wondering, are there aspects of any one’s personality or character that when they’re starting their adult lives, or even you know when they’re in middle age, and they want to get better, become a better person that make it easier to have the virtue to start to adopt the virtues and live by them — virtue is easier, an easier way.

DAVID BROOKS: Personality types?

DANIEL LIPPMAN: Yeah. Just not, like you know anything about a person’s personality (inaudible) you know the, whatever the scale ends, but yeah that’s my question.

DAVID BROOKS: Well, I guess the first thing I think of, is Myers-Briggs, which is like 60 percent BS, by the way, because they have this thing, like feeling, which is thinking, but people who score high in feeling, also score high in thinking. But the big five personality types that’s real, and you know the evidence, there’s a lot of social science research on this. People who are agreeable do well in life.

People who are neurotic struggle. And so, like kindness doesn’t seem like super important, but it is super important, just general agreeableness. But my personal belief is that character is made not born into. It’s a combination of instillation by family, by culture, by faith, by belief, but it’s powerfully made by the people.

The people in my book, if you had met any of them at 24, you’d have thought “pathetic.” They were pathetic. They would not have been Ivy leaguers. George Marshall was a very unimpressive student. Augustine, he was ambitious, he was successful in an orderly sense, but he was a mess inside. Stealing pears, what could be worse?

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: They’re all late bloomers.

DAVID BROOKS: They were late bloomers, yes. And so, like I think one of the things they did — and again, I go back to what Jamie Smith and Augustine emphasized, was they educated their emotions. It wasn’t that they naturally got smarter.

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There are sort of two virtues. There's two of everything for me. You know there are two sorts of people in the world: those who divide the world into two sorts of people, and those who don't.

And so there are the ripening virtues, which all our college students have, which are to come early. Or no, the blooming virtues and then the ripening ones that come late. And they had the ripening virtues.

Well, to drop a name, Plato — He said you've got to thirst after beauty, and if you discover the beauty of a form, that'll lead you to believe that the beauty of an idea, the mental beauty is higher, and then justice is a higher beauty. And then it'll connect you to its eternal beauty, for which nothing can be added and subtracted.

And so that's like a lifelong ladder of beauties, and I would say that's the way people generally get better. They aesthetically and emotionally feel their way up.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: — you know, since you said that whomever you are surrounded by, in shaping your character. For people who are not surrounded by — if they're surrounded by bad influences, or if they're — I don't know, if they're all presidential candidates, how, or what do you say to those people, like should you just you know get away from those influences, find people who can be better examples, so you can — how you respond to that. Thank you.

DAVID BROOKS: I feel like throwing this over to James. I'll say two quick things. We're in a business that has moral compromises, like my first day on the job, I was at the City News Bureau of Chicago, and I had to get a quote out of a widow, whose husband had died that day.

A kid committed suicide. I had to call all the neighbors. Like we bust people's privacy and that's our moral challenge.

Politicians have moral challenges. They're always talking about themselves. And my joke is they talk about themselves so much they drive themselves insane, and they hollow out their inner lives, because it's all external. But I think every profession has that.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: James?

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JAMES HUNTER: Back to your question about personality, again, I agree with David. I just want to echo some points that he has made here. I don't think it is about personality or personality types.

I think at the end of the day, it is about great loves. And I think that people who finally distinguish themselves in the eulogy virtues, are ones who have just deep loves that carry them through extraordinary challenges and difficulties and so on.

And one of the risks of — one way one could read *The Road to Character*, is that this is a book about moral virtuosos. Right. That it is about extraordinary people, it's not about me. It's not about the average person.

Part of the reason why I took the tack that I did in my own comments, is because one of those central questions that we ask at the Institute and in my own current work, is a broader question about how — I think it's a question that a lot of people are asking — how do we raise good kids, virtuous citizens, and wise leaders?

This is a broader problem. It plays out individually, just as David says. But part of our responsibility as scholars, as journalists, as politicians, other public people in philanthropy, is to think about our republic. To think about the larger common good.

And so in that light, we try to ask this very simple question. I think it's a question in the vernacular. How do you raise good children? How do you encourage virtuous citizenship, and then wise leadership?

And so I listen to David and I hear him through the lens of that question, and I want to say, "How do we democratize this? How do we make those kinds of resources? How do we, to come right to the point, how do we cultivate the right loves among children, among citizens, and among our leadership class?"

That is a really big, tough question and I don't think it is — I mean that kind of question transcends personality because the world is made up of a lot of different kinds of people. But if we can create context in which children learn to love the most important things, I think that their own individual stories can take shape in ways that we'll never see be written about in a book like this, but nevertheless, demonstrate that kind of moral heroism.

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MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Before I go to Kathleen, and Abdullah, and Miranda, and Sarah, David, for people who haven't read the book, could you quickly tell the people who may not have heard your distinction between the resume virtues and eulogy virtues that's at the beginning of your book, just define those terms.

DAVID BROOKS: Thank you. I'm not sick of talking about that at all.
(Laughter)

DAVID BROOKS: The distinction is, the resume virtues are the things that make you good at your job, like whether you're a good journalist, or accountant, or teacher. And the eulogy virtues are the things they say about you after you're dead: whether you're honest, brave, courageous, capable of great love. And the basic thesis of the book, is that we all know the eulogy virtues are more important, but we live in a culture that emphasizes the resume virtues. And so a lot of us are clearer on how to build a great career than build a great character.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Right. Okay. Kathleen Parker?

KATHLEEN PARKER, *Washington Post*: So my question, is sort of connected to what Dr. Hunter was just saying, but first, David, I just want to let you know, I do have an extra table in storage, and you're welcome to it.
(Laughter)

KATHLEEN PARKER: It might be a little easier when you're laying out your paragraphs. So I'm going to try to simplify this question, if I can, but we understand the importance of commitment, but we don't witness it much in our daily lives, and this has to do with how do we democratize this idea that commitment is important. And I'll just tell you a little bit about myself, because I'm a good example of what I'm saying, meaning that I grew up with five mothers. My mother died when I was very young. My father became a serial husband.

But I knew nothing about lasting commitment, because children see, you know they learn from what is modeled for them.

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MICHAEL CROMARTIE: So you had four stepmothers?

KATHLEEN PARKER: Four stepmothers. And you know I'm highly resilient and adaptable as a result, but I didn't know anything about marriage. And my own attitude going into my first one was well, if it doesn't work out, I can always get a divorce, you know, no big deal. And that's kind of the way I approached it.

And you know I'm one of these people who, at the birth of my son, had this transformational moment, and thereafter wanted to be the person my son believed me to be. And I wanted to model for him that life can look different than what I had known. I had this yearning for commitment, but I don't know if that's innate, or if that's learned.

And I wonder how you communicate as a society, how we communicate to the rising generations of young people, how important it is. And then how do you cultivate it, if all around you, you're not seeing it?

I was a very rare case when I was growing up. I knew no one whose parents were divorced. Now, you know there's a competition to see who's had the most mothers. I think I was at a table last night, where somebody cited seven.

I don't know, but anyway, it's not unusual anymore to have multiple, you know parents and stepparents and whatnot. So anyway, I'd like to hear both of your thoughts on that if I've made my question clear enough.

DAVID BROOKS: Well, I notice in young people, and the data reveals this, the surveys, a phenomenal percentage. I can't remember exactly, just don't believe in marriage. I think it's in the 40's something like that who just — excuse me?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: More than half.

DAVID BROOKS: More than 50 percent. And so they've lost faith in the institution. Now they'll get older and they'll get married. But the commitment is down.

And then, just the huge levels of social distrust. You probably know the data on that. Most people used to trust their neighbors, but now can you trust people around you most of the time?

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The numbers have just plummeted. And the generation that has the lowest social trust, is the millennials and the older people have the highest. And so there's a deep loss of faith in institutions, but on the other hand, there's a huge advice industry on how to sort of do marriage, or do anything.

And you know you go online and there's just a million pieces on how to do it. I think people, essentially do get married and want to know how to do it, but they want a realistic version. One of the pieces I recommend — this didn't help in my own marriage, God knows, but it's smart and realistic, is *15 Ways to Stay Married for 15 Years*. And one of the pieces of advice was, don't even think about getting out. Like don't even open that door.

The second piece of advice was, brag about your spouse, and have them overhear you bragging. And then the third piece of advice, I remember off the top, was you know they say never go to bad mad?

Sometimes you've just got to go to bed. And wake up, cook breakfast, you'll feel better. And so, like I do find this industry of marriage self-help, but you compare it to Aziz Ansari's book — I don't know if anybody's seen this book, "*Modern Romance*," which is a very revelatory and horrifying story about the brutality of the market, the dating market, and so that really undermines that level of commitment.

KATHLEEN PARKER: Well, I guess I wanted to know if you know your talk could have been a premarital advice essay.

DAVID BROOKS: Yeah, to myself.

KATHLEEN PARKER: Well, to yourself, yes. We write the books we need to read, right?
(Laughter)

KATHLEEN PARKER: But when I did get the counseling for the marriage that has lasted for almost 30 years now, the advice from the minister was four words: "There's no way out." And if you think that way, you will behave better than you would otherwise.

DAVID BROOKS: Yes.

KATHLEEN PARKER: That's certain. But I just wonder if you think there is this yearning for commitment or is that something that society imposes?

DAVID BROOKS: I find so many people for whom the word "home" is a big loaded word. They want a home. They want to feel at home. And that can be mentally, emotionally, spiritually, physically.

JAMES HUNTER: Yeah. They absolutely do want commitment, but I think people are longing for those kinds of commitments. The problem is the commitment is always double-edged you know, it's like community. Community is a wonderful thing, but communities can also be oppressive.

They impose their wills on us. And commitments are similar; they challenge the kind of autonomy that we sometimes want to have. Part of the problem, is that we don't see that level of commitment modeled.

I mean my view of the moral life, is that you don't teach the moral life. Learning how to live morally, is like learning a language. You don't teach the moral life, by teaching rules of grammar.

What you do, is you listen and you observe, and you learn to imitate. And you're initiated into a speech community by practicing. And you know the argument that I would make, and will continue to, I mean I made it in the initial book, but I'm really building this out in the work I'll be doing in the next couple of years, is that we are formed morally in community, in a kind of moral ecosystem.

This is part of what's wrong with something like positive psychology, as taught in schools. It's a kind of technology of the self. We come up with techniques for dealing with certain kinds of issues, but every parent knows that a child is formed by parents and grandparents and friends and neighbors and schools and other adult authorities.

And one of the things that we do know, is that children who do best are raised, and are formed in a context of loving adult authority, a web of adult authority, in which no one falls between the cracks.

KATHLEEN PARKER: It is what you know. I figured all that out.

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*(Laughter)***KATHLEEN PARKER:** It’s all turned out really well.**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Abdullah, you’re up next,**ABDULLAH ANTEPLI, Duke University:** Some of the questions confirm my belief that if you articulate certain human struggles so eloquently, you come across as if you figured it out. People start asking questions and advice. It’s very interesting.

Whenever I share my personal struggles in my sermons, the student demand to my pastoral counseling just goes all the way up. And people say, “Give me that magical formula.” I have a confession.

The confession, is I was waiting for my neighbor to finish reading the book, so I can read it for free, but I just ordered it, so I’m really looking forward to it. I’m inviting David to be, like a critical observer of faith and religion.

In what ways today, in our society, religion is a helpful conversation partner in this road to character? That organized religion is teaching, paving the road for that character building. Or in what ways it is a detriment, it’s a hindrance, it’s a stumbling a block, do you think?

The second. One of the most exciting things happening in our society, especially with the age group that I work with, is Nones. People who, I think it’s —

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: N-O-N-E-S.**ABDULLAH ANTEPLI:** Right. People who, religious or not, spiritual. I think these growing numbers in this camp, is putting up an incredibly healthy and welcoming challenge to organized religions. They are basically saying, “Do I have anything meaningful, inspiring to tell me without demanding membership?” “Can I learn anything from Islam, Judaism, Christianity, without signing the membership form?”

Which I’m hoping will save religion from itself, hopefully. So in terms of character building, what do you think? Can this Nones contribution, potentially be helpful?

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DAVID BROOKS: Well, the first thing to say, is that writing a book on character does not make you a better character, and reading a book on character does not give you better character, necessarily, but buying a book on character...

(Laughter)

DAVID BROOKS: This conference is totally working for you already. So the first thing, though, the role of organized religion, I'll say one thing, which I think is symptomatic of a larger contribution that religion does offer. So I spent a lot of time, while I was on a book tour, going to colleges.

And I teach at a college. And we teach at a college where we treat our students, as Jamie said, as "brains on a stick." And we have the research ideal, we super-specialize, we give them lectures and download information to them.

And as a colleague of mine wrote, named Tony Kronman, "The soul is behind the curtain," and the heart is behind the curtain. And so when I would do my book tour, and I've talked to secular colleges on you know eulogy virtues, and I talk about grace and I talk about redemption and how you turn suffering into a source of transcendence. It was like sprinkling water on a desert.

People were like wow, this is amazing. Then I would go to Christian colleges, and they were like, yeah, we do this every day.

(Laughter)

And so what is nice about the Christian schools, is, and I use this as symptomatic for organized religion, is they treat the heart, the spirit, and the brain together. And they speak a language that is morally, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually infused. And I do think that's what organized religion offers us.

And that's when I'm talking about poverty, that's when I'm talking about inequality or about injustice, it's a complex awareness. And it's an awareness of sin. I mean, in the book there's a chapter on the civil rights movement.

Martin Luther King, they arrest him. Philip Randolph had an acute awareness of their own sinfulness even as they felt the need to pursue their righteous cause. And so there's a certain organized language that religion comes with inherited over thousands of

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years. The downside, to me, is — and Michael's heard me on this, and this is especially true of Christianity, and especially true of Evangelical Christianity.

There's a mixture of an intellectual inferiority complex, combined with a spiritual superiority complex. And so intellectually, the standards in a lot of Evangelical circles — Mark Noll wrote this a long ago — are not what they should be, because everybody's too busy trying to be nice to each other. And at the same time, there's often a spirituality superiority conflict that I know what to do and I'll intrude in your life because you don't, and so I can go on and on about this merger of two things.

Finally, on the Nones, I think I'd be a little more skeptical of the Nones. The idea that you can pick out little pieces of different religions, I think ultimately, if you're going to get — and now I'm talking in utilitarian terms. I mean when you go into a religion, you either believe it's true or not.

But then, if you're going to get use out of it, if you're going to talk in utilitarian categories, I believe — well, I'll say two things. One, everyone can make this determination on their own, but I met a lot of religious people, who are completely wonderful, and a lot who are complete schmucks. And a lot of atheists were completely wonderful and complete schmucks.

And given all the effort that religious people put into being good, they should be a lot better than secular people, and they're not. So it's kind of a problem, but I think if you're going to get the full power of religion, one has to hold up the white flag to surrender, and surrender to God. And if you surrender to God, He will come and give you this regenerative power, and His love will course through you, and you will have empowerment through that love.

And if you treat Him as someone offering you a sales pitch, with a bunch of products, and you'll pick a few things off the grocery shelf, it seems to me, your emotional surrender to him is not there, and I would think they would get less out of it.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: David, before we go on, could you mention the story about that, you're on Charlie Rose, and you mention the word "sin" and what your publisher said?

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DAVID BROOKS: Oh, yeah. So it wasn't my publisher. It is about what a moral vocabulary has and what happens when we lose it.

So I was on Charlie Rose before the book came out, and I'm talking about the book, and I get an email from the man I think is the smartest editor in New York. He's at a publishing house, he runs a publishing house. He's a great, great editor.

Not mine. Not my publishing house, another one. And he says, "I really like the way you were talking about the book, but I wouldn't use the word 'sin.' It's so off-putting. Use the word 'insensitive.'"

(Laughter)

DAVID BROOKS: And so this was my test of my editor, so I sent him this other guy's email, and I said, "What do you think of this?"

And he wrote back, "Well, this is why you're writing the book." So he passed the test. But that word "sin" is a tough one for a lot of people.

And I actually spend a lot of time thinking about how do I present the concept of sin to a New York Times audience, basically. And you can't talk about the Garden of Eden, and you can't talk about depravity, and so fortunately as often does, Saint Augustine comes along, and he's got this concept of disordered loves that we all love a lot of things, but sometimes we get our loves out of order.

So if a friend tells you a secret and you blab it at a dinner party, you're putting your love of popularity above your love of friendship, and that's wrong. We know friendship is higher. And so that way, you're not talking about something dark and negative. You're talking about a competition moving positive things and that's just a more easy way for secular audiences to hear.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Miranda Kennedy is up.

MIRANDA KENNEDY, NPR: On what Abdullah was asking, a little bit. So you talk about the un-institutionalizing of all these things, like friendship and character, and you're mostly focusing on individual ways that we can make that better. And I wanted to ask just about institutions, their role, the role that they play.

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And you talked a little bit about family, and a little bit about universities, but I'm most curious what you think about religious institutions, about — I mean, is the idea that because modern society has so firmly tilted away from institutions that you're looking outside of that and saying, we have to kind of turn inward? And no longer trust institutions, like our churches, our universities, our schools, to give that to people.

DAVID BROOKS: Well, I would state, first on a personalist level, I just observed that people react more powerfully to personalist approaches. One of the reasons Pope Francis is what he is, because he's relentlessly personal. And it's always the person, the individual, the particular.

And I think he's had this great power. I quote in the book, and this is one of the ways, as James was saying at the very end. This veterinarian, who just sent me an email out of the blue, and he said, "You know you can't lecture people on morality." He said, "What a wise person teaches, is the least of that which they give."

That what gets communicated is not what comes out of their minds, but the full totality of their being in the smallest gestures, the message is the person. And so when you think about the people who have influenced you, it's usually the people, you don't remember what they said, but you remember the way they were, and you mimic and imitate that.

And so I do think that's one of the reasons I start personalist. On the other hand, I highly recommend the book called "On Thinking Institutionally," by a guy named Hugh Heclo, I think.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Hugh Heclo of George Mason University.

DAVID BROOKS: And it's a very beautiful book on what the institutional mindset feels like. And you know we all are part of institutions, whether it's NPR, The New York Times, or something. You enter an institution, and when you walk in the door, it carries with it certain standards of excellence, certain standards of behavior, and it was here before, you know, some of them, like The Times was here before we were born.

They'll be here after we're dead. And we're just the stewards to the institution, and we're formed by it. And it teaches us in ways that we're not conscious of.

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You go to work at The New York Times, you become a narcissist blowhard. No, I'm just kidding.

(Laughter)

MIRANDA KENNEDY: I thought they only hired narcissist.

DAVID BROOKS: That's a good, whether it's nature or nurture. I don't know. But I do think that — well, again, I'm talking too much about colleges, but the different colleges at the same academic level, hire very similar sort of people, or admit basically we're the same demographic SAT score.

But by the time they come out, a Canyon (ph) College student is very different than a Princeton student.

Colleges leave a distinct mark, and you can't say what particular it is about the institution that left the mark, but the whole emergent system, the whole totality of being (inaudible). So I do think institutions matter a great deal. I would say it's really hard to change an institution.

I mean I could think of some institution changers. I went to the University of Chicago, Robert Maynard Hutchins changed the institution. And I guess we could all think of people who've done that so both are important I guess.

MIRANDA KENNEDY: But, I mean do you not expect that individual pastors or rabbis have the ability to have this kind of effect, or you don't want to rely on that in your search for character?

DAVID BROOKS: Oh, no. We can all think of people whose lives were transformed by Tim Keller, or Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. In my own life, I can think of a number of pastors and rabbis and people who have just had a huge effect. I mean I don't think organized religion, especially, it depends on where you go, but let me just tell two quick stories. There's two guys I've into on this book tour, and some I knew before, who you just see the magnetism of them. One of them is a guy who, at Boston College, named Father Michael Himes, a Jesuit, and he has married 900 of his former students. Not just the students, the couples, so that's 1800 students.

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And so he's a riveting personality, and so the students just flock to him and through him, through the Jesuit teaching, and the way of thinking. The one story he told me that radiated his empathy, he was ministering to his mom, who had Alzheimer's and he went to her, and said, "Do you know who I am?"

And she said to him, "I don't know who you are, but I know I loved you very much," which it was, like when he told that, it's the warmth of his heart and for her heart.

And then another guy who teaches at Wheaton College. Jerry Root is his name. He, too, has married more than 1,000 of his former students. And that's a great testimony to the power of men of the cloth to just alter lives.

And I will say, finally, on my book tour, after the talks, there would be a certain sort of extremely morally-earnest young person, who would come up to me and asked me a question. And when they would ask, this certain sort of morally earnest question, I would say "Did you by any chance go to Wheaton College?" And 60 percent of the time I got it right.

(Laughter)

DAVID BROOKS: So schools leave a mark.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: You want to add to that, James?

JAMES HUNTER: Institutions — We can't escape them. In every social order though, there are strong institutions and weak institutions. And right now, the institution of the family, the institution of faith, the institution of friendship, these are weak institutions. The institution of the state, of the market, these are very powerful institutions, and those things don't change very often, or very easily. You know I think part of what I puzzle about, in thinking about children, is a thriving character, a thriving moral life, a thriving life period, in large part depends upon a thriving community that surrounds them.

And we tend to psychologize the moral life. And we psychologize character. And there are certainly psychological dimensions to all of this, but the fact of the matter is that we are a reflection of the worlds that we inhabit, and we need to pay attention to that, and so things that can help strengthen weak institutions in ways that are genuinely flourishing, I think are things we need to pay attention to.

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I'll say this. I think one of the benefits of living in the world, and at the time that we do live in, is that we can choose to be a part of different organizations and there are costs and benefits to that. But overall, I think it is a benefit.

As I say, communities can be oppressive. And to have the freedom to leave and to attach oneself to others, is an extraordinary good. By choosing to affiliate or be a part of, or to be committed to, an organization or an institution, by definition means that it doesn't have the authority in your life because you always have the right of withdrawal. You always preserve that right to withdraw, and that means again that the institution doesn't carry the kind of authority that it did in the past.

But to me that's just the nature of the world that we live in, and I view that as a good. This pushes toward a meta point that I want to get to.

And it's this. That we talk about moral inarticulacy, the thinness of our moral language, and I see one of the important contributions of *The Road to Character*, as an effort to thicken. It provides resources in a thick language, and the language of sin is part of that particularity and thickness that I think we need.

Here's the meta point. We want things, we need things to be thicker, to raise good children, virtuous citizens, and wise leaders. We don't want it too thick, though.

ISIS is a thick moral community. Okay. Fundamentalism is a thick thick moral community. So in a pluralistic world, we have to find this way of speaking and of thinking that affirms particularity; that builds particularity; that encourages the strength of local institutions. But in ways that are not too hegemonic, too totalizing, in the ways that fundamentalism can be.

That I believe is one of the big puzzles of political theory right now. How do we thicken a public culture, and often a private culture that is paper-thin, but to do it in ways that are healthy and, at the same time, aren't too thick. That, I believe, interesting.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Okay. Sarah?

SARAH ROTHENFLUCH, Oregon Public Broadcasting: My question, I think, builds on Kathleen's a little bit. I'm talking about commitment, but taking it past marriage to

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society more broadly. You know as we as adults jump from job to job, as we encourage kids to go from activity to activity, as teenagers tell their whole story on snapchat, how do we encourage commitment on a societal level more broadly? And for journalists who tell their whole story in a tweet, perhaps, or in a 45-second news spot, what's our responsibility in that?

DAVID BROOKS: Well, I do think (a) Twitter does detract attention span. I'm not a technophobe by any means, but I do think the two ways technology is affecting us and changing our thought processes, is one this the shame culture, which I talked about, but I think there is definite evidence that it's hurting our attention spans.

I can't read a book. I check my email every three minutes.

SARAH ROTHENFLUCH: Right.

DAVID BROOKS: And I always keep my phone on vibrate. I'll have my phone in hand, and I'll feel the vibration on my leg. I now have phantom vibrations.
(Laughter)

DAVID BROOKS: And so it's like it's become monstrous. But hopefully, like in our business we turn out stuff. We turn out a lot of copy, but hopefully we have a sense of vocation. We have a sense that it all adds up to a few things, and so like I've — I mean I turn out 100 columns a year, like a lot of people in this room, but I've decided there are a few missions that I'm going to keep coming back to, and that I'm serving that calling. So for me, I'm serving a calling of representing a certain sort of political ideology, which is completely dead, but it's sort of the Whig politically (inaudible) Republicanism. And I'm doing a great job on that one.

(Laughter)

DAVID BROOKS: And then I feel called to, as I said, I think the culture is over politicized and under moralized, so I try to shift the conversation a little in the direction of moral discussion. And so even if I'm every day, I'm trying to write about Donald Trump again. Hopefully, it's serving some longstanding mission, and I think it's important for our sense of decency that we connect it to a vocation.

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And then the one thing, I saw this interview of Bruce Springsteen, aka, "God." And he was asked, "Do you ever feel satisfaction with the great body of work you've produced?"

And he said, "You've got to remember, if I stop writing music, I fall to pieces, so I've got to keep writing. I have no choice. And hopefully, we're writing to satisfy our own curiosity and to just, like stay together.

JAMES HUNTER: Very briefly, Christopher Lasch said that "Democracy is not the most efficient, or even necessarily the most effective form of government, but it's the most educational form of government."

And in this room, we are all educators and I think that the more we can educate, and resist the quick turnover of ideas, the better we serve that task.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Kirsten Powers, you are up next.

KIRSTEN POWERS, *USA Today/Daily Beast/Fox News*: Okay. This is for David. So you said that the commonality among all the people in your book, was the good mother. Is there any other quality that you saw that was common to all of them? That is one question.

And then the other question, is how often do you feel that you've run into people, in today's world, who have character, that kind of character that you talk about in your book?

DAVID BROOKS: That's a good question. First, on whether they had other things in common, this might, (a) is a sample size of (b), (b) they were chosen arbitrarily, and (c) you know I hadn't really thought about. The one thing that troubles me about a lot of them, is with the exception of Dorothy Day and Augustine, they were emotionally reticent. They did not express emotion.

And probably it's that era. Most of the people were alive in the 1940s. George Marshall was teaching at the National Defense University, and they called him in the middle of the lecture, and his aid watched him take the call, and then put his head on the table, and then he got up, and the aid said, "Is there something wrong?"

And Marshall said, "Well, Mr. Throgmorton, my wife, who was to have joined me here today, has just died."

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And even at that moment, he was emotionally controlled and remembered Mr. Throgmorton's name. And so —

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: He remembered what?

DAVID BROOKS: Mr. Throgmorton's name.

And they also had a great capacity for privacy. Again, part of that era, where they believe that to expose themselves in public was to trample fresh grass, because the insides are so intricate that if you expose yourself in the way we do, commonly, today, you would destroy something, and you'd turn yourself into sort of a bumper sticker inside.

And so that reticence and extreme sense of privacy, it was part of their culture more than our culture. And then I guess the final thing, James has in his book, "The Death of Character," he's got example, after example, of a culture that said, "Not about you. Not about you. Not about you." To like the Girl Scout Handbook, in your book, where "It's about you. It's about you. It's about you."

And so I told the story of George H. W. Bush, who was raised in a culture where you do not talk about yourself, you just did not. And in 1988, he's running for president, and his speechwriters say, "You've got to talk about yourself. You're running for president, you've got to explain why you're so great."

And so he put in one paragraph finally, about how wonderful he was. And his mother, who was still alive, called him up and said, "George, you're talking about yourself."

(Laughter)

DAVID BROOKS: And he chopped out that. And so they were products of that culture.

JAMES HUNTER: I would like to add this: I think that part of what I find problematic about Charles Taylor's analysis. I think that again, in the private sphere, there is this kind of multiplicity of religious belief, and expression, and so on. And people are willing to tolerate that mainly because tolerance is really indifference.

But as you move from private life, into public life; from personal discourse in the workplace, at the school, and so on, into public life, that plurality soon becomes duality. And this is the culture war that we talk about because what's at stake in the kinds

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of moral positions that people are committed to and live out of, are claims about the nature of the good society, claims about the nature of the good life. And they tend to be pretty exclusive, rather than inclusive, and so there are hypocrisies everywhere.

If you talk to people who are very conservative or very progressive, and you ask them, "Do you believe in the national motto *e pluribus Unum*?" And you'll get, on both sides, an affirmation. But their views of what is tolerable diversity, they draw those lines very differently.

So while everyone affirms pluralism, the *pluribus*, and affirms that it's good, again the boundaries of tolerable diversity are very different. And that is no less true at a place like Yale, or the University of Virginia, or Harvard Law School, than it is let's say in Tupelo, Mississippi.

I mean if the Harvard Law School really wanted diversity, they would hire a conservative Mormon. They have a certain kind of diversity that's wonderful, but of that moral, of the kind of moral differences that are rooted in competing metaphysical claims about the nature of the world, about the nature of the good, we are scared to death of that diversity.

And we don't know how to talk about it, and this is all the more reason why we need to thicken our language, so that we can be able to talk about it. This is the problem with character education. The subtext of the history of moral education in America, that is the effort over the last three to four centuries, to raise good kids, is the story of an effort to deal with pluralism.

Puritans raise their kids in a particular way, in a very particular creed. As America became more pluralistic, it was pluralism, in terms of Protestant denominations. And so the Puritans became a kind of common Protestantism.

And as Catholics immigrated, and as Jews immigrated, it became more and more inclusive. And then you reach, of course, the 20th Century with Dewey and James, and so on. We take this turn toward psychology, and today the dominant language of moral formation is the language of psychology.

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Now, why is that? Because it is the most inclusive language. The problem is this, in the effort to not offend anyone, and to include everyone, you end up emptying out all of the things about the moral life, and of moral language, that make it binding on the conscious and authoritative within community.

So Nancy Reagan, "Just Say No," you know. You end up with a generic morality that is inclusive at one level, of the moral differences, but ultimately can gain no traction. So again, I think we have a really big challenge ahead of us. I do think it is about figuring out how we thicken our languages, acknowledging the particularity of community, of creed, in ways that allow people to be fully who they are.

At the same time, to be tempered, and changed, and informed by that dialog, because we are constituted by our differences in this country. Pluralism isn't just something out there. We are constituted by those differences, and we've got to learn to deal with them more effectively. And the deepest differences are the ones that are rooted in competing metaphysical commitments.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Okay. So Mort Kondrake, you're next.

MORT KONDRAKE, *Roll Call*: Well, I found both of you particularly brilliant and challenging. The question that leaps to my mind, is an analogy to education reform. So there are all kinds of experiments, charter schools and stuff like it that work. And the question is always, how to bring them to scale right, because we have a lousy education system across the country.

So the question, is for both of you. I mean, David has been talking about achieving transcendence on an individual basis. It's an individual responsibility. James has been talking about the difficulties of the culture.

So the question, is and I don't expect a complete answer to this, but I'd like you both to address it. So how do we bring the eulogy virtues to scale, so that they affect the culture?

Now, you know, you're not going to be able to write down a full list, but even maybe a little bit of a list, as to how we begin.

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DAVID BROOKS: Well, I'd say two things. I mean we're in the culture making business and we all have some small effect on the culture. And so the two things we can do, is first to teach people about different moral ecosystems, so they can figure out which one to choose.

I mean we tell young people, find your own value system, and if your name is neat, maybe you can do that, but most of us can't do that. We've got to rely on something that's been inherited over the centuries, and so I think there's some virtue in teaching that.

But the second thing, is just a model of the certain sort of behavior, and this is about adverbs. It's about first of all, practicing humility, understanding that each debate is a competition between partial truths and that we only have a piece of the truth.

Then it's going against the trend in our politics, where political identity becomes your personal identity. And so I'm struck by that. I saw this poll: In 1970, Americans were asked, "Would you mind if your son or daughter married somebody of the opposing party?"

And in 1970, 5 percent would mind, and now 40 percent would mind, and that's because as ethnic and other identities have faded away, politics has risen. And once politics becomes a matter of identity, then compromise becomes dishonor. And so I think practicing a sort of public conversation that represents that.

And then finally, I just think you know hopefully, trying to uplift people and remind them of their moral natures, which you know I went on this book tour, I keep talking about it. And I would go, and you know in the book tour, I talk about George Eliot and how he fell in love, and it was super gushy you know, like it was super emotional, a lot of the speeches.

And I walk into these conference centers and part of the book tour, and there'd be a bunch of 62 year-old white male business executives, who had spent the last six hours talking about health care reforms and quarterly reports and the driest possible stuff you can imagine. And I'm going to go talk about George Eliot's love life.

And so I walk into these boring conference centers and I think, this is not going to go well. And yet, I found with one exception, that once you would start talking about this

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stuff, they would lock into you. And that there's a hunger in the culture for this kind of conversation because people have the yearnings without the vocabulary to express it

And so all you've got to do, it's like being a sprinkler in the desert, all you've got to do, is offer something. And we work in a very emotionally avoidant business, but if you offer that I just think there's this tremendous hunger. The only counter-example was, I was in Greenwich talking to a bunch of fund managers about all this stuff. And one of the guys came up to me afterward, and said, "Eh, you're making me feel guilty. I'm fine."

(Laughter)

MORT KRONDRAKE: So this is the Johnny Appleseed approach to scaling it up. In other words, all of us act and hope that the ground is fertilized.

DAVID BROOKS: I mean maybe, Mort, you've graduated into the organization building, but most of us, are in the word business.

MORT KRONDRAKE: No, that's a good answer. But what do you think about it? I mean you've been raising questions and talking about difficulty, and I just wonder whether you have any idea of how we begin to change the culture in a moral direction.

JAMES HUNTER: I think we can do all the things that David is talking about, but I think that we're not serious about changing the culture, unless we've got a 100-year picture. I don't think anything can happen in one year or three years of any substantial nature, at that scale. Again, I think we have to be looking out, at least a century.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Well, we'll be meeting here.

(Laughter)

MORT KRONDRAKE: Well, does that mean that we can't do it?

JAMES HUNTER: No. I think we need to be — I think this is where moral realism is very — we need to recognize. And part of the reason I focus on some of the things I focus on, I think we have to size up the situation that we're in as realistically as possible. We have to take the measure of the world that we live in, and the challenge that we face, in raising

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good children, virtuous citizens, and wise leaders. And we begin where we are. We don't pretend that we're somewhere we're not. And we start building the foundation. Think about some of the moments of great civilizational change. John Locke wrote is "Essay Concerning Toleration" at the end of the 17th century from exile in Denmark because he feared for his life. A century later, the world had completely changed. When Kant wrote "What is Enlightenment," again, the world was just a very different place, but a century later, it became different. When Luther nailed the theses on the church doors in Wittenberg, in the early 16th Century, it was unimaginable that the world would be different. But it changed. And so in spite of the fact that I have titles to my books, like "The Death of Character," and "Culture Wars," and "Before the Shooting Begins," and things like that, I'm actually a very hopeful guy, and very optimistic.

(Laughter)

JAMES HUNTER: I just think that we have to size up the situation that we're in, take its measure, and then start building a foundation for the long haul, and do what we can, make interventions where we can, where they're most needed, and for me, the impoverished areas of our cities, they are open to ideas and possibilities that other places aren't.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: And I've got five more people in line here, so I want everybody to be concise. Can you be concise Wajahat?

WAJAHAT ALI, Al Jazeera America: I want to go back to the Nones real quick. You know, David, and actually you and James, you know you mentioned the path toward character, individual right. Discipline — eventually you were trying to discipline the person — character and then they remerge to join the background.

So my question is with Nones, right — rising in numbers, especially with Millennials. When they rise on character, what can, we do? And number two they aren't enjoying the background. Well, they rejected the background in the first place. So what will the background say to these people and vice versa?

DANIEL LIPPMAN: Obviously they're usually living alone, there are more households with dogs than with kids in this country. They're unaffiliated to political institutions. They're widely unaffiliated.

But again, I go back to my great disruption theory that in their 20s and 30s, they're this wildly under-institutionalized space, but institutions are popping up to create new forms of community. So for example, there's firm called "We Work."

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Called what?

DANIEL LIPPMAN: We Work, which has a valuation of about \$9 billion right now. And basically, it's for all the people who were like doing startups in Starbucks, it gives them a shared office space with sort of a summer camp atmosphere. And that's a new institution.

General Assembly is a boot camp, a tech boot camp, for basically kids who major in liberal arts, and then they want to go and learn some skills so they can get a job. And so that started up, and so there are all these institutions that are starting up. People do not like to be alone. And so I just think we're at a transition moment toward another set of communal institutions.

DAVID BROOKS: There's a Robert Nisbet book called "The Quest for Community," that he wrote in the '50s and one of the sentences in there is "Multiply your associations and be free."

But it's also to make your life hard. And the problem with having one commitment, some people — we all know some people who have one commitment, but those people turn into ISIS. And so are the virtues of having multiple commitments, as they are in tension with another. Obviously the work family is in tension, faith and sometimes, you know success is in tension.

Vocation is in tension. And managing those tensions keeps you pluralistic, but it also keeps you moderate. And again, I'm recommending a lot of books, but there's a book called "On Moderation" by Harry Clor.

And moderation is not being mushy in the middle. It's being firmly committed to a lot of things that are in tension with one another, and trying to achieve balance. And life is about balance.

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MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Let me do this. Naomi and Carl, let me get your questions on the table, and then let them make summary comments

NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY: I wanted to ask about the decline of marriage. I mean one of the reasons that we have this long (inaudible) period that you've written about. The Odyssey years, I think.

Is that we have put off marriage, to a significant extent, and have asked people, and have sort of given people a kind of commitment-free period in their lives. And so it used to be that you know faith came along with marriage. You would put down roots in a community once you had attached yourself to one other person and started having children.

So I guess rather than the question of whether there are trade-offs my question is whether you would put some of these commitments before others. Maybe there are exceptions in these cases of moral heroes. But for, you know the average person on the street living in the United States, maybe marriage is supposed to come first.

DAVID BROOKS: Just first on the question about which commitments come first. I actually think, and this was a late in life realization that faith and philosophy come first. It's the lens through which you see everything else.

And if you don't get that piece right, then

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: The what, part, David?

DAVID BROOKS: The faith and philosophy comes first, having a world view.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Yes.

DAVID BROOKS: Then the marriage, your values, your commitments; your moral dedication falters and it's all chaotic. And the problem, is the owl of Minerva only flies at dusk. The wisdom comes late in life. And so, you know this is classic, you've got to look forward, but you think backwards

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But I do think putting emphasis on faith and philosophy, and coming up with that is the way. That's the first and most important of the commitments. Though I will say it again, I sort of gestured to this in my initial talk.

We have various agency moments in life, when we radically shift direction. And I to think there are times in midlife, either empty nest, or just some random moment where you already — your series of commitments, but maybe you come to a faith realization or a philosophy realization, and suddenly you want to radically alter your life.

There are countless examples, and some of the most admirable people that we read about are people who came to it, made a leap of faith, and then they radically altered their lives and dedicated it to something that came to them in their maturity. And so I do think the faith one steers all the others.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Well, that's a perfect way to end a discussion at the Faith Angle Forum. Ladies and gentlemen, you can tell a session has gone well when we go over time. Join me in thanking both of our speakers, please.

♦ END ♦

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