

David Brooks's 5-Step Guide to Being Deep

A manifesto against America's 'happiness' and 'resume' cultures



David Brooks



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ASPEN, Colo.—David Brooks doesn't subscribe to the Pharrellian school of life. It's not that he begrudges Pharrell for being happy. It's that he believes American culture is too centered around attaining happiness, at the expense of "a different goal in life that is deeper than happiness and more important than happiness."

We're not only obsessed with happiness. The *New York Times* columnist argues that we focus on accumulating power, material wealth, and professional achievements instead of cultivating the

kinds of qualities that will be discussed at our funerals. As Brooks phrases it, we emphasize "resume virtues" over "eulogy virtues."

Brooks's objective is to establish a "counterculture" to our happiness culture and our resume culture. It's to fashion a path to "inner depth." In a talk at the Aspen Ideas Festival, which is sponsored by the Aspen Institute and *The Atlantic*, he did just that. Expanding on a [column he wrote in March](#), Brooks wove together various philosophical, theological, and biographical threads to define what it means to be "deep," and how to lead a life of depth.

As Brooks sees it, resume virtues and eulogy virtues represent two sides of human nature. In a [1965 essay](#), the American rabbi and philosopher Joseph Soloveitchik developed a dichotomy to capture this phenomenon. He distinguished between "Adam I" and "Adam II."

"Adam I is the external Adam, it's the resume Adam," Brooks explained. "Adam I wants to build, create, use, start things. Adam II is the internal Adam. Adam II wants to embody certain moral qualities, to have a serene inner character, not only to do good but to be good. To live and be is to transcend the truth and have an inner coherence of soul. Adam I, the resume Adam, wants to conquer the world.... Adam II wants to obey a calling and serve the world. Adam I asks how things work, Adam II asks why things exist and what ultimately we're here for."

(Brooks didn't get into this, but Soloveitchik [actually conceived](#) of Adam I and Adam II as a way to reconcile the fact that Genesis offers two accounts of how God created man. As an Orthodox Jew who believed in the "divine character" of the Bible, Soloveitchik didn't accept the explanation that the stories sprang from different authors and sources. Instead, he argued, they existed to illustrate "dual man." In the first account, in which man is created "in the image of God," Adam is tasked with "filling" and "subduing" the earth. In the second account, in which man is created out of dust and God's breath, Adam is charged with "serving" and "keeping" the Garden of Eden.)

"We live in a culture that nurtures Adam I," Brooks said. "We're taught to be assertive and master skills, to broadcast our brains. To get likes. To get followers."

Being deep doesn't preclude you from being, well, shallow, he added. "Some days we want to be externally successful, some days we want to be internally good. The question is whether your life is in balance."

So how do we nourish Adam II—the deep Adam? For that matter, what does it even mean to be deep?

"I think we mean that that person is capable of experiencing large and sonorous emotions, they have a profound spiritual presence," Brooks said. "In the realm of emotion they have a web of unconditional love. In the realm of intellect, they have a set, permanent philosophy about how life is. In the realm of action, they have commitments to projects that can't be completed in a lifetime. In the realm of morality, they have a certain consistency and rigor that's almost perfect."

Deep people also tend to be old.

"The things that lead you astray, those things are fast: lust, fear, vanity, gluttony," Brooks observed, in religiously inflected language. "The things that we admire most—honesty, humility, self-control, courage—those things take some time and they accumulate slowly."

Albert Schweitzer, [Dorothy Day](#), Pope Francis, Mother Teresa. These are deep people, according to Brooks.

What qualities spur us to plumb the depths of our being? Brooks outlined five:

1. Love

The love Brooks has in mind is of the transformational, unconditional variety. "It could be love for a cause, usually it's love for a person, it could be love for God," he said. Love issues the humbling reminder that "we're not in control of ourselves," and also "de-centers the self"—a "person in love finds the center of himself is outside himself." It "complicates the distinction between giving and receiving, because two selves are so intermingled in love that the person giving is giving to him or herself." Brooks cited the French writer Michel de Montaigne, who, when asked why he had such strong affection for a friend, replied, simply, "because I was I, and he was he."

2. Suffering

"When people look forward, when they plan their lives, they say, 'How can I plan ... [to] make me happy?'" Brooks noted. "But when people look backward at the things that made them who they are, they usually don't talk about moments when they were happy. They usually talk about moments of suffering or healing. So we plan for happiness, but we're formed by suffering." Like love, suffering exposes our lack of control over our lives. But it also encourages deep introspection and equips people with a moral calling. "They're not masters of their pain, they can't control their pain, but you do have a responsibility to respond to your pain," Brooks explained. He gave the example of Franklin Roosevelt, whose character was forged through his battle with polio.

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3. Internal struggle

"Here, I don't mean the struggle involved in winning a championship, starting a company, or making a lot of money," Brooks cautioned. Those who have depth are "aware that while they have great strength, great dignity, they also have great weakness. And they are engaged in an internal struggle with themselves." Consider Dwight Eisenhower, who constantly tangled with his bad temper. "Internal struggles are the logic by which we build character," Brooks said.

4. Obedience

Brooks took aim at the common message in commencement speeches that students should turn inward to discover their passion and vocation. "If you look at the people who are deep, often they don't look inside themselves. Something calls to them from outside themselves," he said. They obey

a cause. Brooks mentioned Frances Perkins, who watched in horror as people leaped to their deaths during the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911, and then devoted her life to workers' safety (she eventually became FDR's labor secretary).

5. Acceptance

Brooks also calls this "admittance," seeking to shake the word's association with exclusivity (think a nightclub or college). He likens the concept to the religious notion of "grace." It is "unmerited, unearned admittance"—belonging to "some sort of human transcendent community." Whereas Adam I wants to "work" and "sweat," Adam II "simply accepts the fact that he's accepted. Adam II, the spiritual side of our nature, stands against the whole ethos of self-cultivation, which is the resume side of our world. The ethos of scrambling, working, climbing." Just as the journalist and activist Dorothy Day brimmed with gratefulness after the birth of her child, acceptance energizes the accepted. "They want to honor the people who gave them that gift and they want to pass on the gift that they didn't deserve," Brooks said.

What's perhaps most interesting about Brooks's schema is how it inverts the reigning culture of self-help in this country. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* this is not. Rather than suggesting depth-seekers take control of their lives, Brooks is urging them to surrender control to external forces, at least to a degree. With the exception of "internal struggle," we can't readily act on his advice. We don't necessarily choose when we fall in love, or whom or what we fall in love with. We don't decide when suffering is visited upon us. Obedience and admittance, by Brooks's definitions, cannot be willed into existence. The most we can do is accept invitations to a more meaningful life, whenever and wherever they arise.