

# SUMMARY

## THE SECOND MOUNTAIN

DAVID BROOKS



# **Summary of The Second Mountain by David Brooks**

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David Brooks defines the four commitments that lead to a life of fulfillment.

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# Introduction

“If the first mountain is about building up the ego and defining the self, the second mountain is about shedding the ego and losing the self”. For Brooks the individualism encouraged by American culture is antithetical to a sense of community. That “We live in a culture of hyper-individualism,” and we need to rebalance our culture so that helping people can lead to a “deeper and more joyful life”.

Brooks advises us to take joy seriously, and to understand the difference between joy and happiness. That joy is about forgetting oneself and finding contentment as part of our community, whereas happiness is about victory for the self. The first mountain is for happiness, the second mountain is to move beyond happiness and find joy.

# A Society Without Social Connections

For the overwhelming majority of human history we lived in dense communities and extended families. Humans are a social species, we survive through cooperation and thrive from social interactions.

The USA today is an atomized nation. Families are scattered, neighbors rarely know each other, we live in isolated boxes based around the nuclear family. This has led to rampant feelings of isolation and depression. Few people feel a sense of duty to their community or society. Less than half of the population votes, less than 1 in 10 have a full conversation with a neighbor even once a year. Most adults only see their parents, their grandparents, their brothers and sisters, during holidays. Many don't see them at all. 1 in 3 American report dealing with loneliness on a regular basis.

Loneliness has well established health issues, both mental health and physical health. Loneliness increases cortisol levels, the stress hormone, which contributes to heart disease, the number one killer of Americans. Suicide rates have risen steadily, in fact suicide is the leading cause of death among men aged 18-35. Less than half of the population reports feeling trust or friendliness towards neighbors, approval of the government, or participation in community organizations.

The US is a country full of people without direction. People that work too much and spend less and less time with friends and family. Within this space of isolation and emptiness the first mountain becomes all consuming.

# The Emptiness of Individualism

Imagine you're a young adult living in the individualistic United States, and you're about to begin your pursuit of the American Dream. You just graduated from an excellent university with a marketable degree, so you're well-equipped to succeed. The only thing left to do is to answer that dreaded question: Now what?

Brooks puts forward a concept he calls moral ecology, which he defines as the zeitgeist or cultural moment we're born into, as Brooks puts it "We all grew up in one moral ecology or another". The dominant moral ecology of the baby boomer generation according to Brooks, was one of self interest, a zeitgeist that emphasized the individual and downplayed any sense of duty to one another. A culture of "do your own thing", in which self-sacrifice and our relationships with one another were less important than personal self-actualization.

The first mountain therefore becomes about empty pursuit. Our only forms of structure come in the forms of school and work. Our only forms of success become material. We work too much, experience direct human relationships too little, and hope our empty achievements give our lives meaning.

Brooks writes that this moral ecology led to a "Big Swim to Nowhere", a life based around aesthetics and narcissism, in which we all need to remain constantly busy, like sharks that have to keep moving in order to breathe, or else we'll be suffocated by the emptiness of it all. This has led to an existential crisis in which we no longer feel like members of a society, we feel lost and disconnected. Which Brooks says has caused us to seek to find a feeling of belonging but has resulted in too many of us reacting to our feelings of loneliness and mistrust by aligning ourselves with group identities based on hatred and suspicion of one another.

# The Valley Between The Mountains

“The reason transformation happens in the valley is because something that had hitherto been useful and pleasant needs to die. That thing is the ego ... [from] ... the first mountain”

At the peak of the first mountain, where you’ve achieved all or many of the things you thought you were meant to be pursuing, you notice that by virtue of being on top of a mountain that the only direction to go is down. And you realize there’s no point in staying on top of the first mountain since there’s nothing and nobody else up there.

And so you descend into the valley between the first and second mountain. It’s here that Brooks says you have the chance to learn that joy, not happiness, is gained by seeking inter-dependence rather than individualism. Because it’s here that you learn that all the things you were pursuing on the first mountain won’t help you when life gets rough. When you lose your job or a loved one dies or you go through a breakup, it’s not vacuous material comforts that will help you get through it, it’s relationships. It’s leaning on others.

Which is why Brooks says that the place we find lasting identity and purpose, a higher sort of freedom, is on the second mountain. Which rather than being one to climb, it’s one you also help build through relationships, through giving, through building community.



# There's More to Life Than Happiness

For Brooks, happiness is a fleeting feeling. In American culture the pursuit of happiness is such a ubiquitous truism that it's enshrined in our founding documents. But Brooks argues that a much more lasting feeling we should pursue is that of what he calls "moral joy".

Moral joy isn't achievable via an individualist perspective because it's not based on personal accomplishments, and can't be obtained by yourself. Happiness is a series of experiences, the result of individual moments, not a lasting state of being. So when we're brought up being taught to chase the first mountain the only thing we know how to do after moments of happiness have passed is to pursue another moment of happiness. And the periods of emptiness in between are just the cost of doing business.

This isn't just an unfulfilling way to live, it's also inherently self-centered. It's about pursuing your own wellbeing, your own goals, your own pleasure. And by their nature the things that bring us happiness are ultimately pretty petty and unimportant. What good is being able to afford a fancy apartment in the long run? Achieving fleeting accomplishments leads to fleeting happiness, but lasting things, like helping others, leads to lasting feelings like contentment, fulfillment, and joy.

Which is why Brooks himself founded a group called the Social Fabric Project, with the goal of helping to weave the social fabrics of communities together. It's a charitable organization that provides aid and resources for foster parents, helps the homeless, and so on. And it is in this way that Brooks challenges all of us to try and do the same.

# A Life of Service

It seems a lot easier to tell someone to devote themselves to others and give up their own goals than it is to actually do it. Which is why Brooks does his best to argue that there are good reasons for doing so beyond abstract moral or religious principles.

The main thing Brooks tries to argue is that a life of service is itself rewarding. That it leads to a higher and different level of happiness. So the point isn't so much to give up your goals but to shift how you define them. Redefine what you think will make your life a fulfilling and happy one, and seek out the happiness that comes from bringing joy and charity to the lives of others. Brooks argues this is a much deeper level of happiness, a word he prefers to avoid in place of the word joy, though perhaps the word contentment would be equally applicable.

It seems almost Buddhist in principle; achieve happiness only by abandoning your pursuit of it. Abandon material pursuits, stop trying to make your life easier and instead try to make life easier for others. By helping to carry the weight of others, you remove your own weight from your shoulders. Finding joy in not just helping others but in focusing on the relationships in your life. Our culture so often teaches us to be fanatical about work and casual about relationships, whereas Brooks is arguing that we should all be doing the exact opposite.

Indeed Brooks even brings up the issue individualism plays in relationships. In our culture things like marriage become self-serving, it reduces marriage to an alliance based on personal growth, self-expression, and self-actualization, rather than one based on mutual love and devotion.

# Love and Marriage

As stated previously there are two ways to approach a romantic relationship, individualistically or devotedly. This can start by thinking about what a marriage ceremony actually is. At its core it is a public declaration of love and devotion, made in front of people you care about, the goal being to motivate you to follow through with those promises, to do the work to build and maintain that love.

That on its own isn't enough to make a marriage work. It requires actually putting in the effort, it involves putting your partner and your relationship first. It involves knowing your partner and being willing to open yourself up and let them know you on levels nobody else does.

The self-serving individualism of our country can make that difficult. In order to move up in the business world it is basically expected that you will sacrifice your personal life. But putting a job for a company that doesn't care about you ahead of the person who loves you isn't going to bring you lasting joy or contentment. Quite the opposite.

But there are other ways in which work can in fact contribute to a life of service.

# Vocations Over Professions

Vocations and professions are commonly associated with blue collar vs white collar jobs, but Brooks instead defines them as jobs you do for passion vs jobs you do for money.

Vocations can be seen as similar to relationships in that they require devotion. In a relationship you devote yourself to that one person over all others. A vocation is similar, you devote your time and energy to one field over all others. Whether you're a scientist or an activist, or a chef, you focus on that field.

For Brooks the goal is to make an impact. To choose a field you can genuinely make a difference in and decide you're not just going to try and benefit yourself, enrichen yourself or achieve status, but to use your dedication to that vocation as a way to benefit everyone.

It also means putting integrity first, even if it's not always beneficial to you. So when you're looking for a vocation ask yourself what your skills are, what do you find engaging, what do you care about, and how can you use those qualities to serve others?

If you want to actually climb the second mountain you need to be aware of how much work that takes. Both in literal energy and in emotional difficulty. Helping others means seeing lots of difficult things. It means becoming aware of and witnessing human suffering in a way most of us would choose to ignore. Helping the homeless or the terminally ill hurts, seeing people suffering like that hurts.

That's the other side of putting others first, not just giving up your own material gain, but dealing with emotionally challenging and demanding issues that in the short term can be extremely unpleasant and not at all joyful.

# Religious Service

The connection between serving others and religion is an old one. Most of the oldest existing charities started as religious organizations, and Brooks himself sees a deep intertwining of religion and service.

A recurring theme in *The Second Mountain* is the importance and usefulness of rituals. For Brooks the important part of a marriage ceremony is the ritual of professing love and devotion, the important part of declaring a college major is the ritual of choosing what direction you're focusing your life on, and religious rituals are no exception.

The rituals of organized religions, for Brooks, provide a means of connection between people. They are something the entire group has in common regardless of their other differences, they remind people that they are connected and share a common set of beliefs and (in many ways) goals.

Organized religion can also provide a social glue that gives people a sense of community. Even if you don't know your own neighbors the church, or temple, or synagogue, or mosque is a common space you share with others. A place you can feel you belong. Humans evolved to live communally, to depend on one another and to feel like we're a part of a group.

# Secular Service

Not everyone is religious, in fact not everyone thinks religion is even a positive force in the world. But you don't need to be a part of religion, or even respect religion, to try and build community or be of service to others.

Community transcends religion, it's a truly universal concept that we all understand regardless of country or religion or culture. And helping build and heal communities doesn't have to involve changing the world on a grand scale, in fact focusing on the smaller more local scale might even be a better goal. It can often feel like you're not actually changing anything in a material sense if you're advocating for some change in government policy, or trying to raise awareness about a worldwide issue.

But helping locally can help you see the change before your very eyes. It might seem smaller, but the homeless person who was hungry, that now has food because you helped out at a food bank, probably doesn't see it as nothing. Look into your own city at what issues need solving, it could be violent crime, or lack of proper education, or even just a lack of safe and constructive things for kids to do after school.

All of those issues can be helped, starting an after school arts program or joining charity organizations helping to improve the economic circumstances of poor neighborhoods or working with the local government to help people find jobs can all have real life changing effects on the world.

Think about what causes you personally find important, maybe you're an animal lover for instance, you can volunteer for a dog rescue or a local vet clinic. And if you ever feel like you're just not doing enough remind yourself of the adage to not let perfect be the enemy of good. If you feel like you haven't changed the world, so what? If you change one life that's more than many people ever accomplish.

## Final Summary

The process of dedicating yourself to serving others is one of commitments, commitments you make to yourself, to your spouse, and to your community. Brooks describes what he calls ‘The Four Commitments’, a roadmap for helping you in a life committed to serving your vocation, your marriage, your beliefs, and your community. Dedicating yourself to disciplined work and ritual over what is personally easy. Avoiding an individualist view of relationships that treats them merely as means of personal actualization and expression and instead focusing on self-giving and moral education.

An education that involves learning to lose your sense of self and cultivating a sense of togetherness. For Brooks the solution to our broken system of isolation and loneliness is to re-commit to putting “the village over the self”. Whether you do that through religion, public service, or simply through friendship and love.



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