

THE BIG IDEAS

Happiness vs. Joy

Two different mountain peaks.

The Committed Life

Vocation + Marriage/Family +
Philosophy/Faith + Community.

Vocation

Let's answer the call.

Marriage

And the art of recommitment.

Faith

Grace and transforming agency.

Community

Hyper-individualism vs. relationalism.

"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. If the first mountain is about acquisition, the second mountain is about contribution. If the first mountain is elitist-moving up the second mountain is egalitarian-planting yourself amid those in need, and walking arm in arm with them."

~ David Brooks

The Second Mountain

The Quest for a Moral Life

BY DAVID BROOKS · RANDOM HOUSE © 2019 · 384 PAGES

"Every once in a while, I meet a person who radiates joy. These are people who seem to glow with an inner light. They are kind, tranquil, delighted by small pleasures, and grateful for the larger ones. These people are not perfect. They get exhausted and stressed. They make errors in judgment. But they live for others, and not for themselves. They've made unshakable commitments to family, a cause, a community, or a faith. They know why they were put on this earth and derive a deep satisfaction from doing what they have been called to do. Life isn't easy for these people. They've taken on the burdens of others. But they have a serenity about them, a settled resolve. They are interested in you, make you feel cherished and known, and take delight in your good. ...

Life, for these people, has often followed what we might think of as a two-mountain shape. They got out of school, they start a career, and they begin climbing the mountain they thought they were meant to climb. Their goals on this first mountain are the ones our culture endorses: to be a success, to make your mark, to experience personal happiness. But when they get to the top of that mountain, something happens. They look around and find the view . . . unsatisfying. They realize: This isn't my mountain after all. There's another, bigger mountain out there that is actually *my* mountain. And so they embark on a new journey. On the second mountain, life moves from self-centered to other-centered. They want the things that are truly worth wanting, not the things other people tell them to want. They embrace a life of interdependence, not independence. They surrender to a life of commitment."

~ David Brooks from *The Second Mountain*

David Brooks is one of the nation's leading writers and commentators. He is an op-ed columnist for the *New York Times* and appears regularly on *PBS NewsHour* and *Meet the Press*.

I loved his book [The Road to Character](#). So, when Alexandra told me she got this, his latest book, I immediately snatched it and read it. And, here we are.

David tells us there are two mountains: The first mountain? That's what society tells us we should pursue: all the normal trappings of success. The second mountain? That's where the magic (and joy!) exists: where we move beyond ourselves and COMMIT (important word for this book!) to giving ourselves most fully to something bigger than ourselves.

David identifies four potential commitments: to our families, to our vocations, to our faith/philosophy of life and to our communities. Ultimately, the book is intended to be a guide to the ULTIMATE quest in life: "The Quest for a Moral Life."

My copy of the book is ridiculously underlined and asterisked and all that. <- The ultimate sign of a wisdom-packed gem. I highly recommend the book. (Get a copy [here](#).)

It's PACKED with Big Ideas. I'm excited to share some of my favorite Ideas we can apply to our lives TODAY (and tomorrow and...) so let's jump straight in.

HAPPINESS VS. JOY

"Their days are often exhausting, because they have put themselves out for people, and those people fill their days with requests and demands. But they are living at a fuller amplitude, activating deeper parts of themselves and taking on broader responsibilities. They have decided that, as C.S. Lewis put it, 'The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken.'"

~ David Brooks

"Happiness is the proper goal for people on the first mountain. And happiness is great. But we only get one life, so we might as well use it hunting for big game: to enjoy happiness, but to surpass happiness toward joy.

Happiness tends to be individual; we measure it by asking, 'Are you happy?' Joy tends to be self-transcending. Happiness is something you pursue; joy is something that rises up unexpectedly and sweeps over you. Happiness comes from accomplishments; joy comes from offering gifts. Happiness fades; we get used to the things that used to make us happy. Joy doesn't fade. To live with joy is to live with wonder, gratitude, and hope. People who are on the second mountain have been transformed. They are deeply committed. The outpouring of love has become a steady force."

Happiness vs. Joy.

That's from the Introduction in which we get an overview of what the first mountain looks like (think: pursuit of normal success, wealth, and... happiness) and what the second mountain is all about (transcending the self and experiencing deep, abiding joy as a by-product of commitments to something bigger than yourself).

We'll talk about the two mountains and how to climb the second via commitments in a moment. First, let's talk about joy. David walks us through what he sees as the different levels of joy. The highest level of joy is what he calls "moral joy." Whereas the prior levels offer powerful yet fleeting experiences of joy, "moral joy has an extra feature. It can become permanent."

As I read his take on the subject I thought of Aristotle, Abraham Maslow and Martin Seligman—all of whom, I think, reflect on the same truth in terms of "happiness" vs. "joy."

First, we have Maslow. He's best known for his hierarchy of needs and his concept of the "self-actualizing" individual. We often talk about his line that "What one can be, one must be."

But... We need to remember that actualizing our selves is NOT the last stage of development. We actualize ourselves so we can go BEYOND ourselves. Which is why SELF-TRANSCENDENCE is the highest stage of development. The first mountain vs. the second mountain. We could say that one leads to happiness. The other to moral joy.

Then we have Martin Seligman. As we've discussed, Seligman helped launch the positive psychology movement. His first book of that era was called [Authentic Happiness](#). Then he moved beyond that to a broader conception of well-being that he called [Flourish](#).

As we've discussed countless times, "flourish" is a word we can use to describe Aristotle's word for the highest good in life: *eudaimonia*. And, how do we achieve *eudaimonia*? By committing to a deeply moral life in which virtue is our ultimate target. The by-product of a well-lived life (aka one focused on virtue in service to others)? Moral joy.

Which leads us back to David. I loved his distinction between "résumé virtues" and "eulogy virtues" in *The Road to Character*. As he explains in this book, he no longer believes that "character building is like going to the gym: You do your exercises and build up your honesty, courage, integrity, and grit." He says: "I now think good character is a by-product of giving yourself away." And, he tells us that "Character is a good thing to have, and there's a lot to be learned on the road to character. But there's a better thing to have—moral joy. And that serenity arrives as you come closer to embodying perfect love."

I agree. Only... I'd frame it in a slightly different, "yes, and..." progression.

"Wonder or radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious man's attitude toward history and nature," Rabbi Heschel writes in God in Search of Man. 'One attitude is alien to his spirit: taking things for granted. There are holy sparks in every occasion and a cosmic universe in every person.'"

~ David Brooks

"Comparison is the robber of joy."

~ David Brooks

I think that character building IS like going to the gym. With one distinction: We're not going to the gym for ourselves per se (/the equivalent of snapping a six-pack selfie for Instagram). We're going to the gym (and training hard!) to have (heroic) STRENGTH FOR TWO.

We KNOW that the *ultimate* end is not our own character development for its own sake but character development SUCH THAT we can serve as profoundly as possible and have the necessary strength to give ourselves most fully to the world.

Which leads us to our oft-repeated: Optimize = Optimus = Best = Eudaimon = HERO. <- We do the hard work to have strength for two so we can give ourselves to the world. Period. Repeat. Enter: Moral (Eudaimonic!) Joy.

P.S. David was deeply inspired by Richard Rohr's [Falling Upward](#). Check out our Notes on his *amazing* book for the importance of creating a strong ego-container to hold all the Goodness.

THE COMMITTED LIFE

"The best adult life is lived by making commitments: commitments to a vocation, to a family, to a philosophy or faith, to a community. Adult life is about making promises to others, being faithful to those promises. The beautiful life is found in the mutual giving of unconditional gifts."

~ David Brooks

"Our commitments allow us to move to a higher level of freedom. In our culture we think of freedom as the absence of restraint. That's freedom *from*. But there is another and higher kind of freedom. That is freedom *to*. This is freedom as fullness of capacity, and it often involves restriction and restraint. You have to chain yourself to the piano to practice for year after year if you want to have the freedom to really play. You have to chain yourself to a certain set of virtuous habits so you don't become slave to your destructive desires—the desire for alcohol, the desire for approval, the desire to lie in bed all day.

As theologian Tim Keller puts it, real freedom 'is not so much the absence of restrictions as finding the right ones.' So much of our lives are determined by the definition of freedom we carry around unconsciously in our heads. On the second mountain it is your chains that set you free."

That's from Chapter 7: "The Committed Life."

Want to successfully navigate the second mountain and experience abiding moral joy? COMMIT. Specifically, David tells us we need to move beyond freedom *from* into that higher kind of freedom known as freedom *to* as we commit to FOUR things: 1. Vocation + 2. Marriage + 3. Philosophy and Faith + 4. Community.

After establishing "The Two Mountains" in Part I, each of those four commitments gets its own section. Let's explore each in a little more depth as we remember: "*On the second mountain it is your chains that set you free.*"

But... First: Here's some more wisdom from David on the power of commitment as a vehicle to forge character: "*Gradually the big loves overshadow the small ones: Why would I spend my weekends playing golf when I could spend my weekends playing ball with my children? In my experience, people repress bad desires only when they are able to turn their attention to a better desire. When you're deep in a commitment, the distinction between altruism and selfishness begins to fade away. When you serve your child it feels like you are serving a piece of yourself. That disposition to good is what having good character is all about.*"

In this way, moral formation is not individual; it is relational. Character is not something you build sitting in a room thinking about the difference between right and wrong and about your own willpower. Character emerges from our commitments. If you want to inculcate character in someone else, teach them how to form commitments—temporary ones in childhood, provisional ones in youth, permanent ones in adulthood. Commitments are the school for moral formation. When your life is defined by fervent commitments, you are on the second mountain."

P.S. Our recent Note on Jocko Willink's manifesto comes to mind: [Discipline Equals Freedom](#).

"But if you aren't saying a permanent no to anything, giving anything up, then you probably aren't diving into anything fully. A life of commitment means saying a thousand noes for the sake of a few precious yeses."

~ David Brooks

"Some activity or some injustice has called to the deepest level of your nature and demanded an active response. Carl Jung called a vocation 'an irrational factor that destines a man to emancipate himself from the herd and from its well-worn paths. . . . Anyone with a vocation hears the voice of the inner man: He is called.'"

~ David Brooks

VOCATION: ANSWERING THE CALL

"Then came World War II and the Nazi occupation. [Viktor] Frankl found himself thrown into a concentration camp. He realized that the career questions—What do I want from life? What can I do to make myself happy?—are not the proper questions. The real question is, What is life asking of me? Frankl realized that a psychiatrist in a concentration camp has a responsibility to study suffering and reduce suffering. 'It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us,' he realized. 'We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which life constantly sets for each individual.' The sense of calling comes from the question, What is my responsibility here? Frankl went on to work as a psychotherapist in the camp, reminding despairing prisoners that the world still expected things of them. They still had responsibilities and purposes to pursue."

That's from the first (of five) chapters in Part II on Vocation: "What Vocation Looks Like."

Viktor Frankl is the quintessential exemplar in playing our roles well—which is why we talk about him so often. As Frankl describes in [Man's Search for Meaning](#), when he was thrown into a concentration camp he realized that: *"It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us."* Then he answered that call from life and served. Profoundly.

David ends that first chapter on Vocation with this: *"The summons to vocation is a very holy thing. It feels mystical, like a call from deep to deep. But then the messy way it happens in actual lives doesn't feel holy at all; just confusing and screwed up."* <- Which is why he spends the next few chapters describing how vocations are found and grown.

He references our beloved scholar of moral development and purpose, William Damon, a number of times (in fact, Damon is probably the most cited scholar in the book). Check out our Notes on [The Path to Purpose](#), [The Power of Ideals](#) and [Noble Purpose](#) for more.

He also references Robert Greene and his brilliant book [Mastery](#) as he advises us: *"That may be fine if you're willing to settle for something meager like a career. But if you are trying to discern your vocation, the right question is not What am I good at? It's the harder questions: What am I motivated to do? What activity do I love so much that I'm going to keep getting better at it for the next many decades? What do I desire so much that it captures me at the depth of my being? In choosing a vocation, it's precisely wrong to say that talent should trump interest. Interest multiplies talent and is in most cases more important than talent. The crucial terrain to be explored in any vocation search is the terrain of your heart and soul, your long-term motivation. Knowledge is plentiful, motivation is scarce."*

Robert Greene gets at the core truth in his book [Mastery](#): *"Your emotional commitment to what you are doing will be translated directly into your work. If you go at your work with half a heart, it will show in lackluster results and in the laggard way in which you reach the end."*

P.S. We can't wrap up this section without referencing William Damon's wisdom from [Noble Purpose](#) where he tells us: *"The idea of a 'calling' is an ancient notion with religious roots. Max Weber wrote that a calling is a 'task set by God.' All individuals have their own particular callings, reflecting three realities: (1) their own God-given abilities; (2) the world's need for the services their callings provide; and (3) their enjoyment in serving society and God in their own special ways. Much like any noble purpose, a calling is both meaningful to the self and important to the world beyond the self. Christian theologian Frederick Buechner writes, 'The kind of work God usually calls you to do is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. . . . The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.'"*

"When making a commitment decision, defining the purpose of your life is the biggest part of the problem. That's a matter of the ultimate horizon. The question What is my ultimate good? is a different kind of question than How can I win at Monopoly?"

~ David Brooks

P.P.S. Here's another great Note you may enjoy in committing to your vocation: [The Great Work of Your Life](#) by Stephen Cope. Plus: You might enjoy [Purpose 101](#).

MARRIAGE: THE ART OF RECOMMITMENT

"Good people will mirror goodness in us, which is why we love them so much, Richard Rohr writes. 'Not-so-mature people will mirror their own unlived and confused lives onto us.'"

~ David Brooks

"During these low moments, it is helpful to remember that marriage is not just a relationship; it is a covenant. It's a moral promise to hold fast through thick and thin. Both people have vowed to create this project or cause, the marriage, that is more important than each person's emotional weather. Of course, there are times when divorce is the right and only course, but there are other times when the sentiment that guides Parker Palmer comes in handy: 'If you can't get out of it, get into it!' If you can't easily walk away from something, then the only way forward is to double down."

That's from the fifth chapter in Part III: "Marriage: The School You Build Together." One of the essential lessons of that school? "The art of recommitment."

As we've discussed, it's relatively easy to "fall" in love. It's MUCH more challenging to STAND in love. And, we can only do that by RECOMMITTING. Again and again and again.

David discusses his own failures in his first marriage, while celebrating the lessons learned in his second. He tells us: *"I know what it's like to fail here. Recommitment involves going against yourself. But life is defined by the moments we're asked to go against ourselves. Marriage, like all commitments, isn't there to make you happy; it is there to make you grow."*

Of course, as David points out, all relationships have their own idiosyncratic challenges and destinies. But, for those of us who are married, let's remember that, when we exchanged our sacred vows, we said, "I DO." Not, "I'll try."

Here's to the commitment (and recommitments!) required to build our schools together.

P.S. In this section, David references Jon Gottman—"the dean of marriage scholars." He tells us: *"Happy marriages are based on deep friendship. By this I mean mutual respect for and enjoyment of each other's company."* Check out our Notes on [The 7 Principles for Making Marriage Work](#) for more of his wisdom.

FAITH: GRACE + TRANSFORMING AGENCY

"One is apt to think of moral failure as due to weakness of character," the British educator Sir Richard Livingstone wrote. 'More often it is due to an inadequate ideal.' So one job of a teacher was, in this educational model, to hold up exemplars. 'I make honorable things pleasant to children,' a Spartan educator put it. When the students emerged from school they would have had at least some contact with the best things human beings have thought and done."

~ David Brooks

"But God doesn't seem to want the elimination of the will; He seems to want the training and transformation of it. He doesn't want a lack of will, but a merger between the will of the person and the will of God. ..."

A believer approaches God with a humble reverence and comes, through study and prayer and spiritual disciplines, to get a feel for the grain of God's love. She gradually learns to live along the grain of God's love and not against the grain. It is not a willful attempt to dominate life, nor is it a complete surrender and self-annihilation. It is an enthusiastic response. It is participation, the complex participation of a person's will into God's larger will. ..."

Faith and grace are not about losing agency. They are about strengthening and empowering agency while transforming it. When grace floods in, it gives us better things to desire and more power to desire them. When people talk about dying to self, they are really talking about dying to old desires and coming alive to a new and better set of desires."

That's from Part IV on Philosophy and Faith in which David walks us through his own spiritual process and gives us some tips on how to cultivate a deeper commitment to our own relationship to our "Philosophy and Faith."

As you might have noticed, we've revisited the whole "gym" chat from our first Idea. I think THIS captures the paradoxical and complex dance between our little self and our BIG SELF quite well.

"The secret of life, the sculptor Henry Moore once said, 'is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of every day for the rest of your life. And the most important thing is, it must be something you cannot possibly do.'"

~ David Brooks

That particular passage is from a chapter called "Ramps and Walls" in which David discusses obstacles to ("Walls") and supportive structures for ("Ramps") our faith/philosophy commitment process. Of course, check out the book for more. For now: The top three Ramps? Ritual + "Unabashed faith" + prayer.

COMMUNITY: HYPER-INDIVIDUALISM VS. RELATIONALISM

"The core flaw of hyper-individualism is that it leads to a degradation and a pulverization of the human person. It is a system built on the egoist drives within each of us. These are self-interested drives—the desire to excel; to make a mark in the world; to rise in wealth, power, and status; to win victories and be better than others. Hyper-individualism does not emphasize and eventually does not even see the other drives—the deeper and more elusive motivations that seek connection, fusion, service, and care. These are not the desires of the ego, but the longings of the heart and soul: the desire to live in loving interdependence with others, the yearning to live in service to some ideal, the yearning to surrender to a greater good. Hyper-individualism numbs these deepest longings. Eventually, hyper-individualism creates isolated, self-interested monads who sense that something is missing in their lives but cannot even name what it is."

That's from the final chapter of the book (and Part V on the fourth commitment to Community) called "Conclusion: The Relationalist Manifesto."

The chapter kicks off with this recap: *"The first mountain is the individualist worldview, which puts the desires of the ego at the center. The second mountain is what you might call the relationalist worldview, which puts relation, commitment, and the desires of the heart and soul at the center. My core argument has been that we have overdone it with the individualist worldview. By conceiving of ourselves mostly as autonomous selves, we've torn our society to shreds, opened up division and tribalism, come to worship individual status and self-sufficiency, and covered over what is most beautiful in each human heart and soul."*

The antidote to hyper-individualism? Making a commitment to others—dedicating our ENTIRE lives (and every moment in them) to becoming the best versions of ourselves such that we can most powerfully serve our families and communities and world.

Optimize = Optimus = Best = Eudaimon = Hero = YOU and me and all of us. Together. Today.

B

Brian Johnson,
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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.

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