

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of
The Social Animal

The Road to Character



DAVID
BROOKS

THE
ROAD TO
CHARACTER

DAVID BROOKS



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INTRODUCTION: ADAM II

Recently I've been thinking about the difference between the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues. The résumé virtues are the ones you list on your résumé, the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are deeper. They're the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being—whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed.

Most of us would say that the eulogy virtues are more important than the résumé virtues, but I confess that for long stretches of my life I've spent more time thinking about the latter than the former. Our education system is certainly oriented around the résumé virtues more than the eulogy ones. Public conversation is, too—the self-help tips in magazines, the nonfiction bestsellers. Most of us have clearer strategies for how to achieve career success than we do for how to develop a profound character.

One book that has helped me think about these two sets of virtues is *Lonely Man of Faith*, which was written by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in 1965. Soloveitchik noted that there are two accounts of creation in Genesis and argued that these represent the two opposing sides of our nature, which he called Adam I and Adam II.

Modernizing Soloveitchik's categories a bit, we could say that Adam I is the career-oriented, ambitious side of our nature. Adam I is the external, résumé Adam. Adam I wants to build, create, produce, and discover things. He wants to have high status and win victories.

Adam II is the internal Adam. Adam II wants to embody certain moral qualities. Adam II wants to have a serene inner character, a quiet but solid sense of right and wrong—not only to do good, but to be good. Adam II wants to love intimately, to sacrifice self in the service of others, to live in obedience to some transcendent truth, to have a cohesive inner soul that honors creation and one's own

possibilities.

While Adam I wants to conquer the world, Adam II wants to obey a calling to serve the world. While Adam I is creative and savors his own accomplishments, Adam II sometimes renounces worldly success and status for the sake of some sacred purpose. While Adam I asks how things work, Adam II asks why things exist, and what ultimately we are here for. While Adam I wants to venture forth, Adam II wants to return to his roots and savor the warmth of a family meal. While Adam I's motto is "Success," Adam II experiences life as a moral drama. His motto is "Charity, love, and redemption."

Soloveitchik argued that we live in the contradiction between these two Adams. The outer, majestic Adam and the inner, humble Adam are not fully reconcilable. We are forever caught in self-confrontation. We are called to fulfill both personae, and must master the art of living forever within the tension between these two natures.

The hard part of this confrontation, I'd add, is that Adams I and II live by different logics. Adam I—the creating, building, and discovering Adam—lives by a straightforward utilitarian logic. It's the logic of economics. Input leads to output. Effort leads to reward. Practice makes perfect. Pursue self-interest. Maximize your utility. Impress the world.

Adam II lives by an inverse logic. It's a moral logic, not an economic one. You have to give to receive. You have to surrender to something outside yourself to gain strength within yourself. You have to conquer your desire to get what you crave. Success leads to the greatest failure, which is pride. Failure leads to the greatest success, which is humility and learning. In order to fulfill yourself, you have to forget yourself. In order to find yourself, you have to lose yourself.

To nurture your Adam I career, it makes sense to cultivate your strengths. To nurture your Adam II moral core, it is necessary to confront your weaknesses.

The Shrewd Animal

We live in a culture that nurtures Adam I, the external Adam, and neglects Adam II. We live in a society that encourages us to think about how to have a great career but leaves many of us inarticulate about how to cultivate the inner life. The competition to succeed and win admiration is so fierce that it becomes all-consuming. The consumer marketplace encourages us to live by a utilitarian calculus, to satisfy our desires and lose sight of the moral stakes involved in everyday decisions. The noise of fast and shallow communications makes it harder to hear the quieter sounds that emanate from the depths. We live in a culture that teaches us to promote and advertise ourselves and to master the skills required for success, but that gives little encouragement to humility, sympathy, and honest self-confrontation, which are necessary for building character.

If you are only Adam I, you turn into a shrewd animal, a crafty, self-preserving creature who is adept at playing the game and who turns everything into a game. If that's all you have, you spend a lot of time cultivating professional skills, but you don't have a clear idea of the sources of meaning in life, so you don't know where you should devote your skills, which career path will be highest and best. Years pass and the deepest parts of yourself go unexplored and unstructured. You are busy, but you have a vague anxiety that your life has not achieved its ultimate meaning and significance. You live with an unconscious boredom, not really loving, not really attached to the moral purposes that give life its worth. You lack the internal criteria to make unshakable commitments. You never develop inner constancy, the integrity that can withstand popular disapproval or a serious blow. You find yourself doing things that other people approve of, whether these things are right for you or not. You foolishly judge other people by their abilities, not by their worth. You do not have a strategy to build character, and without that, not only your inner life but also your external life will eventually fall to pieces.

This book is about Adam II. It's about how some people have cultivated strong character. It's about one mindset that people through the centuries have adopted to put iron in their core and to

cultivate a wise heart. I wrote it, to be honest, to save my own soul.

I was born with a natural disposition toward shallowness. I now work as a pundit and columnist. I'm paid to be a narcissistic blow-hard, to volley my opinions, to appear more confident about them than I really am, to appear smarter than I really am, to appear better and more authoritative than I really am. I have to work harder than most people to avoid a life of smug superficiality. I've also become more aware that, like many people these days, I have lived a life of vague moral aspiration—vaguely wanting to be good, vaguely wanting to serve some larger purpose, while lacking a concrete moral vocabulary, a clear understanding of how to live a rich inner life, or even a clear knowledge of how character is developed and depth is achieved.

I've discovered that without a rigorous focus on the Adam II side of our nature, it is easy to slip into a self-satisfied moral mediocrity. You grade yourself on a forgiving curve. You follow your desires wherever they take you, and you approve of yourself so long as you are not obviously hurting anyone else. You figure that if the people around you seem to like you, you must be good enough. In the process you end up slowly turning yourself into something a little less impressive than you had originally hoped. A humiliating gap opens up between your actual self and your desired self. You realize that the voice of your Adam I is loud but the voice of your Adam II is muffled; the life plan of Adam I is clear, but the life plan of Adam II is fuzzy; Adam I is alert, Adam II is sleepwalking.

I wrote this book not sure I could follow the road to character, but I wanted at least to know what the road looks like and how other people have trodden it.

The Plan

The plan of this book is simple. In the next chapter I will describe an older moral ecology. It was a cultural and intellectual tradition, the “crooked timber” tradition, that emphasized our own brokenness. It was a tradition that demanded humility in the face of our own limitations. But it was also a tradition that held that each of us has

the power to confront our own weaknesses, tackle our own sins, and that in the course of this confrontation with ourselves we build character. By successfully confronting sin and weakness we have the chance to play our role in a great moral drama. We can shoot for something higher than happiness. We have a chance to take advantage of everyday occasions to build virtue in ourselves and be of service to the world.

Then I will describe what this character-building method looks like in real life. I'm going to do this through biographical essays, which are also moral essays. Since Plutarch, moralists have tried to communicate certain standards by holding up exemplars. You can't build rich Adam II lives simply by reading sermons or following abstract rules. Example is the best teacher. Moral improvement occurs most reliably when the heart is warmed, when we come into contact with people we admire and love and we consciously and unconsciously bend our lives to mimic theirs.

This truth was hammered home to me after I wrote a column expressing frustration with how hard it is to use the classroom experience to learn how to be good. A veterinarian named Dave Jolly sent me an email that cut to the chase:

The heart cannot be taught in a classroom intellectually, to students mechanically taking notes.... Good, wise hearts are obtained through lifetimes of diligent effort to dig deeply within and heal lifetimes of scars.... You can't teach it or email it or tweet it. It has to be discovered within the depths of one's own heart when a person is finally ready to go looking for it, and not before.

The job of the wise person is to swallow the frustration and just go on setting an example of caring and digging and diligence in their own lives. What a wise person teaches is the smallest part of what they give. The totality of their life, of the way they go about it in the smallest details, is what gets transmitted.

Never forget that. The message is the person, perfected over lifetimes of effort that was set in motion by yet another wise person now hidden from the recipient by

the dim mists of time. Life is much bigger than we think, cause and effect intertwined in a vast moral structure that keeps pushing us to do better, become better, even when we dwell in the most painful confused darkness.

Those words explain the methodology of this book. The subjects of the portraits that follow in chapters 2 through 10 are a diverse set, white and black, male and female, religious and secular, literary and nonliterary. None of them is even close to perfect. But they practiced a mode of living that is less common now. They were acutely aware of their own weaknesses. They waged an internal struggle against their sins and emerged with some measure of self-respect. And when we think of them, it is not primarily what they accomplished that we remember—great though that may have been—it is who they were. I’m hoping their examples will fire this fearful longing we all have to be better, to follow their course.

In the final chapter I wrap these themes up. I describe how our culture has made it harder to be good, and I summarize this “crooked timber” approach to life in a series of specific points. If you’re impatient for the condensed message of this book, skip to the end.

Occasionally, even today, you come across certain people who seem to possess an impressive inner cohesion. They are not leading fragmented, scattershot lives. They have achieved inner integration. They are calm, settled, and rooted. They are not blown off course by storms. They don’t crumble in adversity. Their minds are consistent and their hearts are dependable. Their virtues are not the blooming virtues you see in smart college students; they are the ripening virtues you see in people who have lived a little and have learned from joy and pain.

Sometimes you don’t even notice these people, because while they seem kind and cheerful, they are also reserved. They possess the self-effacing virtues of people who are inclined to be useful but don’t need to prove anything to the world: humility, restraint, reticence, temperance, respect, and soft self-discipline.

They radiate a sort of moral joy. They answer softly when challenged harshly. They are silent when unfairly abused. They are dignified when others try to humiliate them, restrained when others

try to provoke them. But they get things done. They perform acts of sacrificial service with the same modest everyday spirit they would display if they were just getting the groceries. They are not thinking about what impressive work they are doing. They are not thinking about themselves at all. They just seem delighted by the flawed people around them. They just recognize what needs doing and they do it.

They make you feel funnier and smarter when you speak with them. They move through different social classes not even aware, it seems, that they are doing so. After you've known them for a while it occurs to you that you've never heard them boast, you've never seen them self-righteous or doggedly certain. They aren't dropping little hints of their own distinctiveness and accomplishments.

They have not led lives of conflict-free tranquillity, but have struggled toward maturity. They have gone some way toward solving life's essential problem, which is that, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn put it, "the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart."

These are the people who have built a strong inner character, who have achieved a certain depth. In these people, at the end of this struggle, the climb to success has surrendered to the struggle to deepen the soul. After a life of seeking balance, Adam I bows down before Adam II. These are the people we are looking for.

CHAPTER 1

THE SHIFT

On Sunday evenings my local NPR station rebroadcasts old radio programs. A few years ago I was driving home and heard a program called *Command Performance*, which was a variety show that went out to the troops during World War II. The episode I happened to hear was broadcast the day after V-J Day, on August 15, 1945.

The episode featured some of the era's biggest celebrities: Frank Sinatra, Marlene Dietrich, Cary Grant, Bette Davis, and many others. But the most striking feature of the show was its tone of self-effacement and humility. The Allies had just completed one of the noblest military victories in human history. And yet there was no chest beating. Nobody was erecting triumphal arches.

"Well, it looks like this is it," the host, Bing Crosby, opened. "What can you say at a time like this? You can't throw your skimmer in the air. That's for run-of-the mill holidays. I guess all anybody can do is thank God it's over." The mezzo-soprano Risë Stevens came on and sang a solemn version of "Ave Maria," and then Crosby came back on to summarize the mood: "Today, though, our deep-down feeling is one of humility."

That sentiment was repeated throughout the broadcast. The actor Burgess Meredith read a passage written by Ernie Pyle, the war correspondent. Pyle had been killed just a few months before, but he had written an article anticipating what victory would mean: "We won this war because our men are brave and because of many other things—because of Russia, England, and China and the passage of time and the gift of nature's materials. We did not win it because destiny created us better than all other people. I hope that in victory

we are more grateful than proud.”

The show mirrored the reaction of the nation at large. There were rapturous celebrations, certainly. Sailors in San Francisco commandeered cable cars and looted liquor stores. The streets of New York’s garment district were five inches deep in confetti.¹ But the mood was divided. Joy gave way to solemnity and self-doubt.

This was in part because the war had been such an epochal event, and had produced such rivers of blood, that individuals felt small in comparison. There was also the manner in which the war in the Pacific had ended—with the atomic bomb. People around the world had just seen the savagery human beings are capable of. Now here was a weapon that could make that savagery apocalyptic. “The knowledge of victory was as charged with sorrow and doubt as with joy and gratitude,” James Agee wrote in an editorial that week for *Time* magazine.

But the modest tone of *Command Performance* wasn’t just a matter of mood or style. The people on that broadcast had been part of one of the most historic victories ever known. But they didn’t go around telling themselves how great they were. They didn’t print up bumper stickers commemorating their own awesomeness. Their first instinct was to remind themselves they were not morally superior to anyone else. Their collective impulse was to warn themselves against pride and self-glorification. They intuitively resisted the natural human tendency toward excessive self-love.

I arrived home before the program was over and listened to that radio show in my driveway for a time. Then I went inside and turned on a football game. A quarterback threw a short pass to a wide receiver, who was tackled almost immediately for a two-yard gain. The defensive player did what all professional athletes do these days in moments of personal accomplishment. He did a self-puffing victory dance, as the camera lingered.

It occurred to me that I had just watched more self-celebration after a two-yard gain than I had heard after the United States won World War II.

This little contrast set off a chain of thoughts in my mind. It occurred to me that this shift might symbolize a shift in culture, a shift from a culture of self-effacement that says “Nobody’s better

than me, but I'm no better than anyone else" to a culture of self-promotion that says "Recognize my accomplishments, I'm pretty special." That contrast, while nothing much in itself, was like a doorway into the different ways it is possible to live in this world.

Little Me

In the years following that *Command Performance* episode, I went back and studied that time and the people who were prominent then. The research reminded me first of all that none of us should ever wish to go back to the culture of the mid-twentieth century. It was a more racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic culture. Most of us would not have had the opportunities we enjoy if we had lived back then. It was also a more boring culture, with bland food and homogeneous living arrangements. It was an emotionally cold culture. Fathers, in particular, frequently were unable to express their love for their own children. Husbands were unable to see the depth in their own wives. In so many ways, life is better now than it was then.

But it did occur to me that there was perhaps a strain of humility that was more common then than now, that there was a moral ecology, stretching back centuries but less prominent now, encouraging people to be more skeptical of their desires, more aware of their own weaknesses, more intent on combatting the flaws in their own natures and turning weakness into strength. People in this tradition, I thought, are less likely to feel that every thought, feeling, and achievement should be immediately shared with the world at large.

The popular culture seemed more reticent in the era of *Command Performance*. There were no message T-shirts back then, no exclamation points on the typewriter keyboards, no sympathy ribbons for various diseases, no vanity license plates, no bumper stickers with personal or moral declarations. People didn't brag about their college affiliations or their vacation spots with little stickers on the rear windows of their cars. There was stronger social sanction against (as they would have put it) blowing your own trumpet, getting above yourself, being too big for your britches.

The social code was embodied in the self-effacing style of actors like Gregory Peck or Gary Cooper, or the character Joe Friday on *Dragnet*. When Franklin Roosevelt's aide Harry Hopkins lost a son in World War II, the military brass wanted to put his other sons out of harm's way. Hopkins rejected this idea, writing, with the understatement more common in that era, that his other sons shouldn't be given safe assignments just because their brother "had some bad luck in the Pacific."²

Of the twenty-three men and women who served in Dwight Eisenhower's cabinets, only one, the secretary of agriculture, published a memoir afterward, and it was so discreet as to be soporific. By the time the Reagan administration rolled around, twelve of his thirty cabinet members published memoirs, almost all of them self-advertising.³

When the elder George Bush, who was raised in that era, was running for president, he, having inculcated the values of his childhood, resisted speaking about himself. If a speechwriter put the word "I" in one of his speeches, he'd instinctively cross it out. The staff would beg him: You're running for president. You've got to talk about yourself. Eventually they'd cow him into doing so. But the next day he'd get a call from his mother. "George, you're talking about yourself again," she'd say. And Bush would revert to form. No more I's in the speeches. No more self-promotion.

The Big Me

Over the next few years I collected data to suggest that we have seen a broad shift from a culture of humility to the culture of what you might call the Big Me, from a culture that encouraged people to think humbly of themselves to a culture that encouraged people to see themselves as the center of the universe.

It wasn't hard to find such data. For example, in 1950, the Gallup Organization asked high school seniors if they considered themselves to be a very important person. At that point, 12 percent said yes. The same question was asked in 2005, and this time it wasn't 12 percent who considered themselves very important, it was

80 percent.

Psychologists have a thing called the narcissism test. They read people statements and ask if the statements apply to them. Statements such as “I like to be the center of attention...I show off if I get the chance because I am extraordinary...Somebody should write a biography about me.” The median narcissism score has risen 30 percent in the last two decades. Ninety-three percent of young people score higher than the middle score just twenty years ago.⁴ The largest gains have been in the number of people who agree with the statements “I am an extraordinary person” and “I like to look at my body.”

Along with this apparent rise in self-esteem, there has been a tremendous increase in the desire for fame. Fame used to rank low as a life’s ambition for most people. In a 1976 survey that asked people to list their life goals, fame ranked fifteenth out of sixteen. By 2007, 51 percent of young people reported that being famous was one of their top personal goals.⁵ In one study, middle school girls were asked who they would most like to have dinner with. Jennifer Lopez came in first, Jesus Christ came in second, and Paris Hilton third. The girls were then asked which of the following jobs they would like to have. Nearly twice as many said they’d rather be a celebrity’s personal assistant—for example, Justin Bieber’s—than president of Harvard. (Though, to be fair, I’m pretty sure the president of Harvard would also rather be Justin Bieber’s personal assistant.)

As I looked around the popular culture I kept finding the same messages everywhere: You are special. Trust yourself. Be true to yourself. Movies from Pixar and Disney are constantly telling children how wonderful they are. Commencement speeches are larded with the same clichés: Follow your passion. Don’t accept limits. Chart your own course. You have a responsibility to do great things because you are so great. This is the gospel of self-trust.

As Ellen DeGeneres put it in a 2009 commencement address, “My advice to you is to be true to yourself and everything will be fine.” Celebrity chef Mario Batali advised graduates to follow “your own truth, expressed consistently by you.” Anna Quindlen urged another audience to have the courage to “honor your character, your

intellect, your inclinations, and, yes, your soul by listening to its clean clear voice instead of following the muddled messages of a timid world.”

In her mega-selling book *Eat, Pray, Love* (I am the only man ever to finish this book), Elizabeth Gilbert wrote that God manifests himself through “my own voice from within my own self.... God dwells within you as you yourself, exactly the way you are.”⁶

I began looking at the way we raise our children and found signs of this moral shift. For example, the early Girl Scout handbooks preached an ethic of self-sacrifice and self-effacement. The chief obstacle to happiness, the handbook exhorted, comes from the overeager desire to have people think about you.

By 1980, as James Davison Hunter has pointed out, the tone was very different. *You Make the Difference: The Handbook for Cadette and Senior Girl Scouts* was telling girls to pay *more* attention to themselves: “How can you get more in touch with *you*? What are *you* feeling?...Every option available to you through Senior Scouting can, in some way, help you to a better understanding of yourself.... Put yourself in the ‘center stage’ of your thoughts to gain perspective on your own ways of feeling, thinking and acting.”⁷

The shift can even be seen in the words that flow from the pulpit. Joel Osteen, one of the most popular megachurch leaders today, writes from Houston, Texas. “God didn’t create you to be average,” Osteen says in his book *Become a Better You*. “You were made to excel. You were made to leave a mark on this generation.... Start [believing] ‘I’ve been chosen, set apart, destined to live in victory.’”⁸

The Humble Path

As years went by and work on this book continued, my thoughts returned to that episode of *Command Performance*. I was haunted by the quality of humility I heard in those voices.

There was something aesthetically beautiful about the self-effacement the people on that program displayed. The self-effacing person is soothing and gracious, while the self-promoting person is

fragile and jarring. Humility is freedom from the need to prove you are superior all the time, but egotism is a ravenous hunger in a small space—self-concerned, competitive, and distinction-hungry. Humility is infused with lovely emotions like admiration, companionship, and gratitude. “Thankfulness,” the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, said, “is a soil in which pride does not easily grow.”⁹

There is something intellectually impressive about that sort of humility, too. We have, the psychologist Daniel Kahneman writes, an “almost unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance.”¹⁰ Humility is the awareness that there’s a lot you don’t know and that a lot of what you think you know is distorted or wrong.

This is the way humility leads to wisdom. Montaigne once wrote, “We can be knowledgeable with other men’s knowledge, but we can’t be wise with other men’s wisdom.” That’s because wisdom isn’t a body of information. It’s the moral quality of knowing what you don’t know and figuring out a way to handle your ignorance, uncertainty, and limitation.

The people we think are wise have, to some degree, overcome the biases and overconfident tendencies that are infused in our nature. In its most complete meaning, intellectual humility is accurate self-awareness from a distance. It is moving over the course of one’s life from the adolescent’s close-up view of yourself, in which you fill the whole canvas, to a landscape view in which you see, from a wider perspective, your strengths and weaknesses, your connections and dependencies, and the role you play in a larger story.

Finally, there is something morally impressive about humility. Every epoch has its own preferred methods of self-cultivation, its own ways to build character and depth. The people on that *Command Performance* broadcast were guarding themselves against some of their least attractive tendencies, to be prideful, self-congratulatory, hubristic.

Today, many of us see our life through the metaphor of a journey—a journey through the external world and up the ladder of success. When we think about making a difference or leading a life with purpose, we often think of achieving something external—performing some service that will have an impact on the world,

creating a successful company, or doing something for the community.

Truly humble people also use that journey metaphor to describe their own lives. But they also use, alongside that, a different metaphor, which has more to do with the internal life. This is the metaphor of self-confrontation. They are more likely to assume that we are all deeply divided selves, both splendidly endowed and deeply flawed—that we each have certain talents but also certain weaknesses. And if we habitually fall for those temptations and do not struggle against the weaknesses in ourselves, then we will gradually spoil some core piece of ourselves. We will not be as good, internally, as we want to be. We will fail in some profound way.

For people of this sort, the external drama up the ladder of success is important, but the inner struggle against one's own weaknesses is the central drama of life. As the popular minister Harry Emerson Fosdick put it in his 1943 book *On Being a Real Person*, “The beginning of worth-while living is thus the confrontation with ourselves.”¹¹

Truly humble people are engaged in a great effort to magnify what is best in themselves and defeat what is worst, to become strong in the weak places. They start with an acute awareness of the bugs in their own nature. Our basic problem is that we are self-centered, a plight beautifully captured in the famous commencement address David Foster Wallace gave at Kenyon College in 2005:

Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe; the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness because it's so socially repulsive. But it's pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on. Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so

immediate, urgent, real.

This self-centeredness leads in several unfortunate directions. It leads to selfishness, the desire to use other people as means to get things for yourself. It also leads to pride, the desire to see yourself as superior to everybody else. It leads to a capacity to ignore and rationalize your own imperfections and inflate your virtues. As we go through life, most of us are constantly comparing and constantly finding ourselves slightly better than other people—more virtuous, with better judgment, with better taste. We're constantly seeking recognition, and painfully sensitive to any snub or insult to the status we believe we have earned for ourselves.

Some perversity in our nature leads us to put lower loves above higher ones. We all love and desire a multitude of things: friendship, family, popularity, country, money, and so on. And we all have a sense that some loves are higher or more important than other loves. I suspect we all rank those loves in pretty much the same way. We all know that the love you feel for your children or parents should be higher than the love you have for money. We all know the love you have for the truth should be higher than the love you have for popularity. Even in this age of relativism and pluralism, the moral hierarchy of the heart is one thing we generally share, at least most of the time.

But we often put our loves out of order. If someone tells you something in confidence and then you blab it as good gossip at a dinner party, you are putting your love of popularity above your love of friendship. If you talk more at a meeting than you listen, you may be putting your ardor to outshine above learning and companionship. We do this all the time.

People who are humble about their own nature are moral realists. Moral realists are aware that we are all built from “crooked timber”—from Immanuel Kant’s famous line, “Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.” People in this “crooked-timber” school of humanity have an acute awareness of their own flaws and believe that character is built in the struggle against their own weaknesses. As Thomas Merton wrote, “Souls are like athletes that need opponents worthy of them, if they are to be tried and extended and pushed to the full use of their powers.”¹²