

*#1 New York Times bestselling author  
of *The Road to Character**

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SECOND  
MOUNTAIN

The Quest for a Moral Life

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# THE SECOND MOUNTAIN

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**DAVID BROOKS**



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## INTRODUCTION

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 large 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.

When you meet these people, you realize that joy is not just a feeling, it can be an outlook. There are temporary highs we all get after we win some victory, and then there is also this other kind of permanent joy that animates people who are not obsessed with themselves but have given themselves away.

I often find that their life has what I think of as a two-mountain shape. They got out of school, began their career or started a family, and identified the mountain they thought they were meant to climb: I'm going to be a cop, a doctor, an entrepreneur, what have you. On the first mountain, we all have to perform certain life tasks: establish an identity, separate from our parents, cultivate our talents, build a secure ego, and try to make a mark in the world. People climbing that first mountain spend a lot of time thinking about reputation management. They are always keeping score. How do I measure up?

Where do I rank? As the psychologist James Hollis puts it, at that stage we have a tendency to think, I am what the world says I am.

The goals on that first mountain are the normal goals that our culture endorses—to be a success, to be well thought of, to get invited into the right social circles, and to experience personal happiness. It's all the normal stuff: nice home, nice family, nice vacations, good food, good friends, and so on.

Then something happens.

Some people get to the top of that first mountain, taste success, and find it...unsatisfying. "Is this all there is?" they wonder. They sense there must be a deeper journey they can take.

Other people get knocked off that mountain by some failure. Something happens to their career, their family, or their reputation. Suddenly life doesn't look like a steady ascent up the mountain of success; it has a different and more disappointing shape.

For still others, something unexpected happens that knocks them crossways: the death of a child, a cancer scare, a struggle with addiction, some life-altering tragedy that was not part of the original plan. Whatever the cause, these people are no longer on the mountain. They are down in the valley of bewilderment or suffering. This can happen at any age, by the way, from eight to eighty-five and beyond. It's never too early or too late to get knocked off your first mountain.

These seasons of suffering have a way of exposing the deepest parts of ourselves and reminding us that we're not the people we thought we were. People in the valley have been broken open. They have been reminded that they are not just the parts of themselves that they put on display. There is another layer to them they have been neglecting, a substrate where the dark wounds, and most powerful yearnings live.

Some shrivel in the face of this kind of suffering. They seem to get more afraid and more resentful. They shrink away from their inner depths in fear. Their lives become smaller and lonelier. We all know old people who nurse eternal grievances. They don't get the



respect they deserve. They live their lives as an endless tantrum about some wrong done to them long ago.

But for others, this valley is the making of them. The season of suffering interrupts the superficial flow of everyday life. They see deeper into themselves and realize that down in the substrate, flowing from all the tender places, there is a fundamental ability to care, a yearning to transcend the self and care for others. And when they have encountered this yearning, they are ready to become a whole person. They see familiar things with new eyes. They are finally able to love their neighbor as themselves, not as a slogan but a practical reality. Their life is defined by how they react to their moment of greatest adversity.

The people who are made larger by suffering go on to stage two small rebellions. First, they rebel against their ego ideal. When they were on their first mountain, their ego had some vision of what it was shooting for—some vision of prominence, pleasure, and success. Down in the valley they lose interest in their ego ideal. Of course afterward they still feel and sometimes succumb to their selfish desires. But, overall, they realize the desires of the ego are never going to satisfy the deep regions they have discovered in themselves. They realize, as Henri Nouwen put it, that they are much better than their ego ideal.

Second, they rebel against the mainstream culture. All their lives they've been taking economics classes or living in a culture that teaches that human beings pursue self-interest—money, power, fame. But suddenly they are not interested in what other people tell them to want. They want to want the things that are truly worth wanting. They elevate their desires. The world tells them to be a good consumer, but they want to be the one consumed—by a moral cause. The world tells them to want independence, but they want interdependence—to be enmeshed in a web of warm relationships. The world tells them to want individual freedom, but they want intimacy, responsibility, and commitment. The world wants them to climb the ladder and pursue success, but they want to be a person for others. The magazines on the magazine rack want them to ask “What

can I do to make myself happy?” but they glimpse something bigger than personal happiness.

The people who have been made larger by suffering are brave enough to let parts of their old self die. Down in the valley, their motivations changed. They’ve gone from self-centered to other-centered.

At this point, people realize, Oh, that first mountain wasn’t my mountain after all. There’s another, bigger mountain out there that is actually my mountain. The second mountain is not the opposite of the first mountain. To climb it doesn’t mean rejecting the first mountain. It’s the journey after it. It’s the more generous and satisfying phase of life.

Some people radically alter their lives when this happens. They give up their law practices and move to Tibet. They quit their jobs as consultants and become teachers in inner-city schools. Others stay in their basic fields but spend their time differently. I have a friend who built a successful business in the Central Valley of California. She still has her business but spends most of her time building preschools and health centers for the people who work in her company. She is on her second mountain.

Still others stay in their same jobs and their same marriages, but are transformed. It’s not about self anymore; it’s about a summons. If they are principals, their joy is in seeing their teachers shine. If they work in a company, they no longer see themselves as managers but as mentors; their energies are devoted to helping others get better. They want their organizations to be thick places, where people find purpose, and not thin places, where people come just to draw a salary.

In their book *Practical Wisdom*, psychologist Barry Schwartz and political scientist Kenneth Sharpe tell a story about a hospital janitor named Luke. In the hospital where Luke worked, there was a young man who’d gotten into a fight and was now in a coma, and he wasn’t coming out. Every day, his father sat by his side in silent vigil, and had done so for six months. One day, Luke came in and cleaned the young man’s room. His father wasn’t there; he was out getting a

smoke. Later that day, Luke ran into the father in the hallway. The father snapped at Luke and accused him of not cleaning his son's room.

The first-mountain response is to see your job as cleaning rooms. "I did clean your son's room," you would snap back. "It was just that you were out smoking." The second-mountain response is to see your job as serving patients and their families. It is to meet their needs at a time of crisis. That response says, This man needs comfort. Clean the room again.

And that's what Luke did. As he told an interviewer later, "I cleaned it so that he could see me cleaning it....I can understand how he could be. It was like six months that his son was there. He'd been a little frustrated, and I cleaned it again. But I wasn't angry with him. I guess I could understand."

Or take Abraham Lincoln. As a young man, Lincoln had a ferocious hunger for fame and power, to the point where he was scared by the intensity of his own hunger. But preserving the Union was a summons so great that considerations of self no longer mattered. He left personal reputation behind and set off on his second mountain.

One day in November 1861, he paid a call to the home of General George McClellan, hoping to press him, in person, to take the fight to the Confederacy more aggressively. When Lincoln arrived, McClellan was not at home, so Lincoln told the butler that he, Secretary of State William Seward, and an aide, John Hay, would wait in the parlor. An hour later, McClellan arrived home and walked past the room where the president was waiting. Lincoln waited another thirty minutes. The butler returned to say that McClellan had decided to retire for the night and would see Lincoln some other time. McClellan was playing power games with Lincoln.

Hay was incensed. Who has the gall to treat the president of the United States with such disrespect? Lincoln, however, was unruffled. "Better at this time," he told Seward and Hay, "not to be making points of etiquette and personal dignity." This wasn't about him. His pride was not at stake. He would be willing to wait forever if he could

find a general who would fight for the Union. By this point Lincoln had given himself away. The cause was the center of his life. His ultimate appeal was to something outside, not inside.

That's the crucial way to tell whether you are on your first or second mountain. Where is your ultimate appeal? To self, or to something outside of self?

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. 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 who need, and walking arm in arm with them.

You don't climb the second mountain the way you climb the first mountain. You conquer your first mountain. You identify the summit, and you claw your way toward it. You are conquered by your second mountain. You surrender to some summons, and you do everything necessary to answer the call and address the problem or injustice that is in front of you. On the first mountain you tend to be ambitious, strategic, and independent. On the second mountain you tend to be relational, intimate, and relentless.

It's gotten so I can recognize first- and second-mountain people. The first-mountain people are often cheerful, interesting, and fun to be around. They often have impressive jobs and can take you to an amazing variety of great restaurants. The second-mountain people aren't averse to the pleasures of the world. They delight in a good glass of wine or a nice beach. (There's nothing worse than people who are so spiritualized they don't love the world.) But they have surpassed these pleasures in pursuit of moral joy, a feeling that they have aligned their life toward some ultimate good. If they have to choose, they choose 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."

I've come to recognize first- and second-mountain organizations, too. Sometimes you work at a company or go to a college, and it doesn't really leave a mark on you. You get out of it what you came for, and you leave. Second-mountain organizations touch people at their depths and leave a permanent mark. You always know when you meet a Marine, a Morehouse man, a Juilliard pianist, a NASA scientist. These institutions have a collective purpose, a shared set of rituals, a common origin story. They nurture thick relationships and demand full commitment. They don't merely educate; they transform.

## **THE PLAN**

The first purpose of this book is to show how individuals move from the first to the second mountain, to show what that kind of deeper and more joyful life looks like, step-by-step and in concrete detail. Everybody says you should serve a cause larger than yourself, but nobody tells you how.

The second purpose is to show how societies can move from the first to the second mountain. This is ultimately a book about renewal, how things that are divided and alienated can find new wholeness. Our society suffers from a crisis of connection, a crisis of solidarity. We live in a culture of hyper-individualism. There is always a tension between self and society, between the individual and the group. Over the past sixty years we have swung too far toward the self. The only way out is to rebalance, to build a culture that steers people toward relation, community, and commitment—the things we most deeply yearn for, yet undermine with our hyper-individualistic way of life.

In the first section I'm going to give a fuller account of how the two-mountain life happens. I'll take us up the slope of the first mountain, down the back slope into the valley, and then up the second mountain. Please don't take this metaphor too literally. There is, of course, no one formula that covers how all lives happen. (My

wife, for example, seems to have climbed her second mountain first. Unlike most of us, she was raised in an environment that emphasized moral commitment, not individual success.) I'm using this two-mountain metaphor to render in narrative form two different moral ethoses by which people can live—a life lived for self and a life lived as a gift for others. I want to show how this first mode, which is common in our culture, doesn't satisfy. I'll describe some of the experiences people have on their way to more fulfilling lives, and share the important truths they discover. Most of us get better at living, get deeper and wiser as we go, and this book seeks to capture how that happens.

In the second half of the book, I'll describe how people live with a second-mountain mentality. People on the first mountain have lives that are mobile and lightly attached. People on the second mountain are deeply rooted and deeply committed. The second-mountain life is a committed life. When I'm describing how second-mountain people live, what I'm really describing is how these people made maximal commitments to others and how they live them out in fervent, all-in ways. These people are not keeping their options open. They are planted. People on the second mountain have made strong commitments to one or all of these four things:

A vocation

A spouse and family

A philosophy or faith

A community

A commitment is making a promise to something without expecting a reward. A commitment is falling in love with something and then building a structure of behavior around it for those moments when love falters. In this second section of this book I will try to describe commitment making: how people are called by a vocation and then live it out; how they decide who to marry and thrive in marriage; how they come up with their philosophy of life

and how they experience faith; how they are seized by a desire to serve their community; and how they work with others to help their communities prosper. The fulfillment of our lives depends on how well we choose and live out those sometimes clashing commitments.

Some of the people I'll be describing in these pages lived their lives at a very high level. Realistically, you and I are not going to live as self-sacrificially as they did. We'll fall short because we're ordinary human beings, and we're still going to be our normal self-centered selves more than we care to admit. But it is still important to set a high standard. It is still important to be inspired by the examples of others and to remember that a life of deep commitments is possible. When we fall short, it will be because of our own limitations, not because we had an inadequate ideal.

## **WHAT I'VE LEARNED**

The first- and second-mountain distinction might sound a little like the résumé virtues versus eulogy virtues distinction I made in my last book, *The Road to Character*. And now I should confess that I'm writing this book in part to compensate for the limitations of that one. The people I described in *The Road to Character* have a lot to teach us. But a book is written in a particular time, at a particular spot on one's journey. The five years since I finished that book have been the most tumultuous years of my life. Those years—sometimes painful, sometimes joyous—have been an advanced education in the art and pitfalls of living. They have taken me a lot further down the road toward understanding.

When I wrote *The Road to Character*, I was still enclosed in the prison of individualism. I believed that life is going best when we take individual agency, when we grab the wheel and steer our own ship. I still believed that character is something you build mostly on your own. You identify your core sin and then, mustering all your willpower, you make yourself strong in your weakest places.

I no longer believe that character formation is mostly an individual task, or is achieved on a person-by-person basis. I no longer believe that character building is like going to the gym: You do

your exercises and you build up your honesty, courage, integrity, and grit. I now think good character is a by-product of giving yourself away. You love things that are worthy of love. You surrender to a community or cause, make promises to other people, build a thick jungle of loving attachments, lose yourself in the daily act of serving others as they lose themselves in the daily acts of serving you. 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.

Furthermore, I no longer believe that the cultural and moral structures of our society are fine, and all we have to do is fix ourselves individually. Over the past few years, as a result of personal, national, and global events, I have become radicalized.

I now think the rampant individualism of our current culture is a catastrophe. The emphasis on self—individual success, self-fulfillment, individual freedom, self-actualization—is a catastrophe. I now think that living a good life requires a much vaster transformation. It's not enough to work on your own weaknesses. The whole cultural paradigm has to shift from the mindset of hyper-individualism to the relational mindset of the second mountain.

## **WHY WE ARE HERE**

I've written this book, in part, to remind myself of the kind of life I want to live. Those of us who are writers work out our stuff in public, even under the guise of pretending to write about someone else. In other words, we try to teach what it is that we really need to learn. My first mountain was an insanely lucky one. I achieved far more professional success than I ever expected to. But that climb turned me into a certain sort of person: aloof, invulnerable, and uncommunicative, at least when it came to my private life. I sidestepped the responsibilities of relationship. My ex-wife and I have an agreement that we don't talk about our marriage and divorce in public. But when I look back generally on the errors and failures and sins of my life, they tend to be failures of omission, failures to



truly show up for the people I should have been close to. They tend to be the sins of withdrawal: evasion, workaholism, conflict avoidance, failure to empathize, and a failure to express myself openly. I have two old and dear friends who live 250 miles from me, for example, and their side of the friendship has required immense forbearance and forgiveness, for all the times I've been too busy, too disorganized, too distant when they were in need or just available. I look at those dear friendships with a gratitude mixed with shame, and this pattern—not being present to what I love because I prioritize time over people, productivity over relationship—is a recurring motif in my life.

The wages of sin are sin. My faults accumulated and then crashed down upon me in 2013. In that year, life put me in the valley. The realities that used to define my life fell away. Our marriage of twenty-seven years ended, and, in the wake of that failed commitment, I moved into an apartment. My children were emerging into adulthood and had either left home for college or were preparing to. I still got to see them when we went out to dinner and such, but I missed those fifteen-second encounters in the hallway or kitchen at home. I had spent my adult life in the conservative movement, but my conservatism was no longer the prevailing conservatism, so I found myself intellectually and politically unattached, too. Much of my social life had been spent in conservative circles, and those connections drifted away. I realized I had a lot of friendships that didn't run deep. Few people confided in me, because I did not give off a vibe that encouraged vulnerability. I was too busy, on the move.

I was unplanted, lonely, humiliated, scattered. I remember walking through that period in a state that resembled permanent drunkenness—my emotions were all on the surface, my playlists were all Irish heartbreak songs by Sinéad O'Connor and Snow Patrol. I was throwing myself needily upon my friends in ways that are embarrassing now if I stop to remember them, which I try not to. I was unattached, wondering what the rest of my life should be,

confronting the problems of a twenty-two-year-old with the mind of a fifty-two-year-old.

Having failed at a commitment, I've spent the ensuing five years thinking and reading about how to do commitments well, how to give your life meaning after worldly success has failed to fulfill. This book is a product of that search. Writing it was my attempt to kick myself in my own rear, part of my continual effort to write my way to a better life. "A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us," Kafka wrote. It should wake us up and hammer at our skull. Writing this book has served that purpose for me.

I've also written it, I hope, for you. When it comes to what we writers do, I like to apply an observation by D. T. Niles: We are like beggars who try to show other beggars where we found bread. You have to get only a few pages into this book to realize that I quote a lot of people wiser than myself. I mean a *lot* of people. I'm unapologetic about this. It's occurred to me many times over the course of writing this book that maybe I'm not really a writer. I'm a teacher or middleman. I take the curriculum of other people's knowledge and I pass it along.

Finally, I write it as a response to the current historical moment. For six decades the worship of the self has been the central preoccupation of our culture—molding the self, investing in the self, expressing the self. Capitalism, the meritocracy, and modern social science have normalized selfishness; they have made it seem that the only human motives that are real are the self-interested ones—the desire for money, status, and power. They silently spread the message that giving, care, and love are just icing on the cake of society.

When a whole society is built around self-preoccupation, its members become separated from one another, divided and alienated. And that is what has happened to us. We are down in the valley. The rot we see in our politics is caused by a rot in our moral and cultural foundations—in the way we relate to one another, in the way we see ourselves as separable from one another, in the

individualistic values that have become the water in which we swim. The first-mountain culture has proven insufficient, as it always does.

Our society has become a conspiracy against joy. It has put too much emphasis on the individuating part of our consciousness—individual reason—and too little emphasis on the bonding parts of our consciousness, the heart and soul. We've seen a shocking rise of mental illness, suicide, and distrust. We have become too cognitive when we should be more emotional; too utilitarian when we should be using a moral lens; too individualistic when we should be more communal.

So we as people and as a society have to find our second mountain. This doesn't mean rejecting the things we achieved on the first mountain—the nice job, the nice home, the pleasures of a comfortable life. We all need daily ego boosts throughout our lives. But it does require a shift in culture—a shift in values and philosophy, a renegotiation of the structure of power in our society. It's about shifting from one mode of thinking toward another. It's about finding an ethos that puts commitment making at the center of things.

The good news is that what we give to our community in pennies, our communities give back to us in dollars. If there is one thing I have learned over the past five years, it is that the world is more enchanted, stranger, more mystical, and more interconnected than anything we could have envisioned when we were on the first mountain.

Most of the time we aim too low. We walk in shoes too small for us. We spend our days shooting for a little burst of approval or some small career victory. But there's a joyful way of being that's not just a little bit better than the way we are currently living; it's a quantum leap better. It's as if we're all competing to get a little closer to a sunlamp. If we get up and live a different way, we can bathe in real sunshine.

When I meet people leading lives of deep commitment, this fact hits me: Joy is real.

## JOY

Before I start describing the journey across the two mountains, I want to pause over that last point—the one about joy being real. Our public conversation is muddled about the definition of a good life. Often, we say a good life is a happy life. We live, as it says in our founding document, in pursuit of happiness.

In all forms of happiness we feel good, elated, uplifted. But the word “happiness” can mean a lot of different things. So it’s important to make a distinction between happiness and joy.

What’s the difference? Happiness involves a victory for the self, an expansion of self. Happiness comes as we move toward our goals, when things go our way. You get a big promotion. You graduate from college. Your team wins the Super Bowl. You have a delicious meal. Happiness often has to do with some success, some new ability, or some heightened sensual pleasure.

Joy tends to involve some transcendence of self. It’s when the skin barrier between you and some other person or entity fades away and you feel fused together. Joy is present when mother and baby are gazing adoringly into each other’s eyes, when a hiker is overwhelmed by beauty in the woods and feels at one with nature, when a gaggle of friends are dancing deliriously in unison. Joy often involves self-forgetting. Happiness is what we aim for on the first mountain. Joy is a by-product of living on the second mountain.

We can help create happiness, but we are seized by joy. We are pleased by happiness, but we are transformed by joy. When we experience joy we often feel we have glimpsed into a deeper and truer layer of reality. A narcissist can be happy, but a narcissist can never be joyful, because the surrender of self is the precise thing a narcissist can’t do. A narcissist can’t even conceive of joy. That’s one of the problems with being stuck on the first mountain: You can’t even see what the second mountain offers.

My core point is that happiness is good, but joy is better. Just as the second mountain is a fuller and richer phase of life after the first mountain, joy is a fuller and richer state beyond happiness.