

Care of the Soul (2)

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The first mountain is the individualist worldview, which puts the desire 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. (David Brooks, *The Second Mountain*)

New York Times columnist David Brooks' latest book is sub-titled "The Quest for a Moral Life."

As with a number of authors in the last 20 years, Brooks cries out at what he calls the "hyperindividualism" of our current society. The despair in individual life, the breakdown of marriage, and the loss of meaningful community are the pervasive results of individualism run wild. The quest for wealth, power, and prestige have

undermined the basis for a healthy moral life.

The soul, Brooks explains, is the source of moral consciousness. It is the element within us that seeks care and nourishment by acts of goodness and love in service to others. As a society, we have certainly experienced periods of generosity, unselfishness, and solidarity. Alas, many of these moral qualities have been eroded by the bubbles of personal autonomy and the illusion of success at all costs.

Although Brooks himself achieved success in ways recognized by our culture, he felt a profound sense of loneliness and emptiness. He describes at length his religious quest that brings him home to an awareness of the moral order of reality within the universe and within himself. It is the soul within that makes him realize that the service and love of others are the true sources of success.

"The central journey of modern life is moving self to service," he writes. Not a simple service, but one of commitment and dedication. So, for example, when he discusses marriage, his emphasis is on life-long dedication to one's spouse. He cites figures of divorce and love-less marriages at almost 50%, the consequence of each spouse seeking self-fulfillment.

In a similar way, communities are weakened when there is little sense that there is a moral order that seeks to bring people together in care and love. We become profit-maximizers as rents soar, or we build suburbs and isolate ourselves. The closest we come to community is Starbucks, where we chat with strangers over coffee.

Brooks describes the Weavers, a project he has initiated through the Aspen Institute. He has traveled across the U.S. and identifies communities and projects of love and service. These are the weavers who establish "thick communities" where people get to know each other by working together as committed citizens for the benefit of their communities. The moral life, Brooks explains, demands serving something or someone who is worthy of love.

Society, at its best, needs a "moral ecology" where all the parts work for the benefit of the greater whole. So, for example, every single act contributes to the benefit of the whole or diminishes the whole. A smile, a kind word, an act of loving kindness contributes to a moral life and a healthy society. These are things that children can learn at home. And, these are the social and emotional activities that are the core of a character education school such as The Principled Academy.

Brooks quotes a former president of Mount Holyoke College who said, "Character is the main object of education." He goes so far as to say that "The educated life is a journey toward higher and higher love." We need to understand what is worthy of love and how to love, and that is the challenge of education and the quest for a moral life.