

BOSTON COLLEGE

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

The Road to Character



DAVID
BROOKS

FIRST YEAR ACADEMIC CONVOCATION – SEPTEMBER 10, 2015

FORMATIVE EDUCATION: SHAPING OUR HEARTS AND MINDS



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WHY READ A BOOK?

We can learn what is in any book on Huffpost.com or Amazon, hear what others think on Twitter, listen to a TedTalk if we want to learn from cutting-edge thinkers. So why sit with a thick paper tome when it's far easier to get our information and entertainment in other forms?

One answer is precisely because it is easier, and noisier, to learn and be entertained via digital and truncated means. Technology keeps us connected, linked, always visible, always able to see and be seen. Sometimes this connection, this being linked, on, and seen is valuable, worthwhile and even politically efficacious. Sometimes.

But if all we ever do is check status updates, skim articles, and read summaries of other peoples' ideas while listening to music and texting our friends, something valuable gets lost. That something goes by many names: concentration, solitude, space for reflection, intimacy, and authenticity. Reading a book, we hope you'll learn at Boston College if you don't already know and believe already, brings with it unique form of pleasure and thinking.

Reading can take us out of the smallness of our own perception, our own little lives, the limited boundaries of what we have experienced. We can glimpse into the perspectives and even empathize with people whose lives are vastly different than our own. As Zits, the narrator of Sherman Alexie's novel *Flight* learns, "I can't jump into Dave's body but I can feel and see and understand a little bit about his pain, I guess."¹

Beyond teaching empathy, reading takes us briefly out of the noisy, overwhelming chaos that is our daily life and gives us something else, which William Dereseiwicz describes well:

But a book has two advantages over a tweet. First, the person who wrote it thought about it a lot more carefully. The book is the result of *his* solitude, *his* attempt to think for himself.

Second, most books are old. This is not a disadvantage: this is precisely what makes them valuable. They stand against the conventional wisdom of today simply because they're not *from* today. Even if they merely reflect the conventional wisdom of their own day, they say something different from what you hear all the time. But the great books, the ones you find on a syllabus, the ones people have continued to read, don't reflect the conventional wisdom of their day. They say things that have the permanent power to disrupt our habits of thought².

Cultivating habits of thought. That's what coming to BC is offering you. Some habits can and should be digital, connected, and even multi-tasked. But sometimes we all need the habit of opening a good book, diving in, and leaving the din of our contemporary moment, temporarily, behind.



WHY READ DAVID BROOKS' *THE ROAD TO CHARACTER*?

As a member of the class of 2019, each of you will have the opportunity to read *The Road to Character* and to welcome author David Brooks to Boston College to discuss his work.

David Brooks is a columnist for *The New York Times* and author of several books, including "Bobos In Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There" and "On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always Have) in the Future Tense." Prior to joining *The New York Times*, Brooks served as senior editor for *The Weekly Standard* and wrote for *The Wall Street Journal*. He has been a contributing editor at *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Newsweek* and has served as a commentator for "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer" and for National Public Radio (NPR) (from www.nytimes.com).

¹Alexie, S. (2007). *Flight*: a novel. New York: Black Cat.

²From a lecture by William Dereseiwicz to the plebe class at the United States Military Academy at West Point, October 2009



Brooks graduated from The University of Chicago and in a 2013 interview with that university's newspaper, *The Chicago Maroon*, he spoke about the influence that the books he reads has on him. When asked about why he values keeping and re-reading books, Brooks said, "...you read them differently, because you're at a different stage of your life. I mark in all my books so I can go back and find what I thought was an important passage, or what seemed important. I think, like most people, I can't remember the name of the person I met yesterday. But I remember where on the page a certain passage was—I know sort of top left a little, and from years ago.... I think if you lose all that—all that work you've put into reading the books and marginalizing and notes and underlining—to me all that goes from your brain" (<http://chicagomaroon.com/2013/10/04/uncommon-interview-david-brooks-a-b-83/>).

Brooks went on to remark about the way reading literature has impacted his work, "It widens your repertoire of understanding human nature. You understand how people interact; you get certain phrases to stick in your head. I'm reading *Middlemarch* right now, and Eliot's ability to define and judge character is pretty astronomical. We might say somebody's honest, somebody's brave; George Eliot has categories that are super fine distinctions on how to describe someone's character. That only comes from a lot of reading, combined with actual observation." (<http://chicagomaroon.com/2013/10/04/uncommon-interview-david-brooks-a-b-83/>)

As you begin reading *The Road to Character*, it is the hope of Boston College that this book gives you insight into human nature. Since 2004, Conversations in the First Year has engaged members of the incoming class in an intellectual and reflective dialogue with a common text. This practice embodies the richness of the Catholic intellectual tradition at Boston College, which calls us to examine our faith and experience in conversation with other thinkers. Not only do we wish to develop skills for rich professional lives and careers, but also to develop our character in a way that includes, but also transcends, our world of work into our most profound vocation: human flourishing. It is our hope that this dialogue will carry into conversations with all members of the Boston College community during your next four years.

A WAY TO APPROACH THE TEXT

As you enter into this Jesuit, Catholic University, we will ask each of you to engage in conversation, to live together, and to share your life with one another. As members of the Class of 2019, your conversation will include this book which invites us to consider how character is formed through the stories of men and women who grapple with how to respond to the culture of their time – as well as through our own stories.

Student formation is an essential component of a Jesuit education and at Boston College there is an emphasis on three particular dimensions of this formation – intellectual, social, and spiritual. The prominence of formation in Jesuit education can be traced back to the values which St. Ignatius Loyola and his companions embraced in founding the first Jesuit schools.

When Jesuits began their schools, two models were available. One was the medieval university, where students prepared for professions such as law, the clergy, and teaching by studying the sciences, mathematics, logic, philosophy, and theology. The other model was the Renaissance humanistic academy, which had a curriculum based on Greek and Latin poetry, drama, oratory, and history. The goal of the university was the training of the mind through the pursuit of speculative truth; the goal of the humanists was character formation, making students better human beings and civic leaders. Jesuit schools were unique in combining these two educational ideals. (from A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education).

From the very beginning, the goal of Jesuit education has been to form men and women for others. As part of this formation, St. Ignatius and his companions established guiding principles to cultivate a reflective practice among their students.

Perhaps the most important reason for the success of the early Jesuit schools was a set of qualities that Jesuits aspired to themselves and which they consciously set out to develop in their students:

- Self-knowledge and discipline,
- Attentiveness to their own experience and to others',
- Trust in God's direction of their lives,
- Respect for intellect and reason as tools for discovering truth,
- Skill in discerning the right course of action,
- A conviction that talents and knowledge were gifts to be used to help others,
- Flexibility and pragmatism in problem solving,

- Large-hearted ambition, and
- A desire to find God working in all things.

These qualities were the product of the distinctive spirituality that the early Jesuits had learned from Ignatius and that Ignatius had learned from his own experience. Jesuits hoped, in turn, to form their students in the same spiritual vision, so that their graduates would be prepared to live meaningful lives as leaders in government, the professions, and the Church. (from *A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education*).

These same principles provide the framework for today's Boston College experience:

"If we look at the issues of emerging adulthood in light of the understanding of human flourishing and the geography of meaning that characterized the early Jesuit schools, a concept of student formation begins to take shape. It focuses on helping students develop their gifts of mind and heart, cultivate their interior lives, and make good decisions about how they will use their gifts to help others..." (From *Journey Into Adulthood*, p. 12)

In *The Road to Character*, David Brooks highlights the importance of cultivating this interior life, saying that, "Character is built in the course of your inner confrontation." He goes on to say that, "Character is a set of dispositions, desires, and habits that are slowly engraved during the struggle against your own weakness. You become more disciplined, considerate, and loving through a thousand small acts of self-control, sharing, service, friendship, and refined enjoyment. If you make disciplined, caring choices, you are slowly engraving certain tendencies into your mind. You are making it more likely that you will desire the right things and execute the right actions (*The Road to Character*, pp. 263-4).

Brooks emphasizes the challenges which individuals face in the struggle of our humanity. He describes the competing values of what he calls Adam I and Adam II virtues. The Adam I virtues are those that are often used to define success in today's world – material wealth, a prosperous career, a busy life. The Adam II virtues often reflect a more personal definition of success – wealth measured by love and strong relationships, an opportunity for meaningful work, a full life. Brooks contrasts these virtues by referring to them as résumé virtues (Adam I) and eulogy virtues (Adam II), emphasizing that while the first may be accolades that reflect a professional polish, that veneer can prevent a person from engaging with the world with the depth and integrity of the second. Throughout our lives, each of us is called to this inner confrontation, this formation, determining whether to focus on immediate gratification or long-term service to the world, deciding whether to dedicate our energies toward the résumé virtues or the eulogy virtues.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

As you prepare to read the stories of individuals who faced their "inner confrontations", we invite you to consider these questions, and your own challenges on *The Road to Character*:

In his chapter on Frances Perkins and her life, Brooks discusses how she focused less on what the world could offer her and more on what she could offer to the world. "This is the way people tend to organize their lives in our age of individual autonomy," Brooks writes. "It's a method that begins with the self and ends with the self, that begins with self-investigation and ends with self-fulfillment. This is a life determined by a series of individual choices. But Frances Perkins found her purpose in life using a different method, one that was more common in past eras. In this method, you don't ask, What do I want from life? You ask a different set of questions: What does life want from me? What are my circumstances calling me to do?" (*The Road to Character*, p. 21).

As you reflect on how you have made your own decisions in the past, which method have you used? As you make decisions moving forward, in what ways can you "create" your life by looking inward to make decisions rather than being "summoned by life"? How will you live out those decisions during your time at Boston College? What does life want from you?

Brooks also examines how Perkins viewed her private life versus her public life, a distinction which George Marshall also made in his life. "Marshall was a private man," Brooks writes. "That is to say, he made a stronger distinction between the private and public spheres, between those people he considered intimates and everybody else" (*The Road to Character*, p. 119).

What do you consider to be the public sphere in today's world? What parts of your life do you share with the public? Who are the people in your "inner circle" and why have you chosen to share your life with them? What parts of your life do you share with them?

Brooks goes on to write, "This code of privacy is different from the one that is common in the era of Facebook and Instagram. This privacy code, which he [Marshall] shared with Frances Perkins, is based on the notion that this zone of intimacy should be breached only gradually, after long reciprocity and trust. The contents of the private world should not instantly be shared online or in conversation; they should not be tweeted" (*The Road to Character*, p. 119).

Do you use social media to gain what Brooks terms “victories in the currency of ‘likes’” (The Road to Character, p. 251)? As you begin your college experience, how will you place value on your most intimate friendships where you can reveal your most authentic self, sharing your hopes, fears, and vulnerabilities?

Brooks further examines the tension between a public life and a private life in the chapter on A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin. He writes of them, “They shared a worldview based on an awareness of both social sin and personal sin, the idea that human life is shot through with veins of darkness” (*The Road to Character*, p. 151). As part of his own “inner confrontation”, each considers his own weakness as well as the shared struggle in the world around them.

Where do you see instances of social sin in our world? How do you respond to it? How does that societal struggle impact your life? As your world-view broadens over the next four years, how will you continue to respond to those struggles?

That response, that moment when an individual begins to make decisions based on his or her reflection during the “inner confrontation” is what Brooks calls an “agency moment”. He describes George Eliot’s agency moment when he writes, “After the years of disjointed neediness, the iron was beginning to enter her soul and she became capable of that declaration of her own dignity. You might say that this moment was Eliot’s agency moment, the moment when she began the process by which she would stop being blown about by her voids and begin to live according to her own criteria, gradually developing a passionate and steady capacity to initiate action and drive her own life” (*The Road to Character*, p. 164).

When have you experienced an agency moment, a time when you began to live by your own criteria? What circumstances and reflections led you to this moment? How did it feel? How did this moment change the way you proceed in life? What in your own “inner confrontation” remains unresolved?

Brooks describes Eliot’s agency as maturing when she fell in love with George Lewes. Brooks writes, “Love is like an invading army that reminds you that you are not master of your own house. It conquers you little by little, reorganizing your energy levels, reorganizing your sleep patterns, reorganizing your conversational topics, and, toward the end of the process, rearranging the objects of your sexual desire and even the focus of your attention. When you are in love, you can’t stop thinking about your beloved” (*The Road to Character*, p. 170).

Have you had the experience of falling in love with someone or some cause? How did this love change you and your view of the world? As you read the prayer, “Falling in Love” by the late Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Pedro Arrupe, S.J., which appears on page 14, consider how the experience of growing in relationship with - of falling in love with - God influences your view of the world. How will you allow that love to continue to form you?

In his chapter, “The Big Me”, Brooks writes of the ways in which love can be treated as merit-based, rather than freely given. Brooks uses the context of parental love, writing, “Lurking in the shadows of merit-based love is the possibility that it may be withdrawn if a child disappoints. Parents would deny this, but the wolf of conditional love is lurking here” (*The Road to Character*, p. 254). Not limited to the parent-child relationship, the use of love as a way to influence behavior can also manifest itself in other relationships.

How have you had the experience of unconditional and conditional love in your life? How did each of these differ from the other? Who have been the people with whom you offer unconditional love? When and what are the moments and commitments in which you have experienced unconditional love?

Throughout this book, Brooks offers examples of the tension to balance the demands of the exterior world which has continued to put a greater emphasis on the Adam I or résumé virtues with the Adam II or eulogy virtues of the interior life. In the final chapter, out of desire “to restore the balance, to rediscover Adam II, to cultivate the eulogy values” Brooks invites readers to reflect on these questions: “Toward what should I orient my life? Who am I and what is my nature? How do I mold my nature to make it gradually better day by day? What virtues are the most important to cultivate and what weaknesses should I fear the most?” (*The Road to Character*, p. 261).

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Through these stories Brooks also shows that reflective practices are essential to this formation, to creating a more integrated life. For Frances Perkins, it was service that encouraged her reflection; for Augustine, it was prayer; for Samuel Johnson, writing. In the first chapter, Brooks offers a way to address the tension between the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues as he describes the practice of a friend at the end of each day. “I have a friend who spends a few moments in bed at night

reviewing the mistakes of his day. His central sin, from which many of his other sins branch out, is a certain hardness of heart. He's a busy guy with many people making demands on his time. Sometimes he is not fully present for people who are asking his advice or revealing some vulnerability. Sometimes he is more interested in making a good impression than in listening to other people in depth..." Brooks goes on to say that, "Each night, he catalogs the errors. He tallies his recurring core sins and other mistakes that might have branched off from them. Then he develops strategies for how he might do better tomorrow. Tomorrow he'll try to look differently at people, pause more before people. He'll put care about prestige, the higher thing above the lower thing" (*The Road to Character*, pp 11-12). For Brooks, character comes from these moments of recognizing our human weakness as well as the tremendous capacity and strength we possess, our sin as well as the many reasons for gratitude in our lives.

This reflective practice of reviewing one's day can also be found in one mode of prayer from the Ignatian tradition – the Examen. This is a prayer in five parts which helps individuals move through an examination of conscience, allowing the experiences of the day to guide one's reflection. Its basis is in Christianity, but it can also be considered in light of other faith traditions.

At first it might be helpful to move through all five of the points, spending two or three minutes on each, just to see what works for you. Or you may want to remain on the first point, giving thanks, after an especially great day. Or there may be times when you want to consider your career or a possible long-term relationship and then you might spend time on orienting your future. There is no single way to make the examination. The only essential is to bring your day before God. At the core of the examination is self-awareness before God. Its power lies in the way you become conscious of your own relationship with God, with your own spirituality.

- *Giving Thanks. I thank God for the way God has met me today—in the work I have done, in the people I have encountered, in the letters from home, etc. I begin my prayer with the solid hope that God cares for me, knows me and loves me with an everlasting love.*

- *Seeking Light. I ask for light to understand the specific moments in which God has clarified who I am, what my gifts really are, and how I treat other people. I ask not to hide from the truth. I ask to be gentle with myself and honest, too. I ask to learn from God who I am.*

- *Reviewing Life. I go over the events of the day, noticing the ones where I felt closer to God and the ones where I felt distanced from God. Where today I met weakness or failure, I ask for forgiveness and self-acceptance. Where today I have lived faithfully and productively, I rejoice in God's service. God does not ask the impossible from me, only the good that I can do and be.*

- *Noting Patterns. I stand before my history as God does—lovingly wise about who I am, eager to make me part of the work of the Kingdom, allowing me to understand the patterns of my life that lead me to a more personal sense of how God calls me here at Boston College. Are there emerging insights about the life I should live? Are there difficulties that I keep trying to avoid and know I must face? Are there people, places and occasions that especially open me to God? And are there people, places, and occasions that bring out the worst in me? What does God want me to do with the person that I am becoming?*

- *Orienting My Future. Finally, I ask to live as Christ did. I look at the pattern of openness and the essentials of his teaching. I look at the trust he had in God's design for the world. I look at his availability to people. I accept the strategy of forgiveness, truthfulness and service that Christ portrayed. I want to believe that I am called to live just as Christ was, as a woman or man for others. Of course, I will fail. But failure can be the way to wisdom and compassion if I use failure to know myself better and to understand the human heart more deeply. More important, I look ahead out of the successes of the day. I ask to live with a growing sense of God's trust in my future. (The Red Book 2009, pp 115, 117)*

This reflective practice is one that Rev. Anthony Penna, Boston College's Director of Campus Ministry, prayed that members of the Class of 2015 would take with them into the world. Just before Commencement he offered these words to them:

St. Ignatius said that the world's great sin is the lack of gratitude. So, I'm going to ask you to consider integrating this simple ritual into your daily life when you move on from Boston College. Every night before you go to bed, take a few minutes to think about your day. Examine the day reflectively, the ups and the downs (for no day is without a few bumps in the road, as is true for a four-year college career). Then, identify one thing that occurred, one thing that happened in the day for which you are grateful and give thanks for that one thing. Let that be the way you end every day before you fall to sleep. If you do this, you'll be a healthier, happier, more spiritual, and more balanced person. This practice will be good for you and everyone else who's a part of your life as well (Boston College Class of 2015 Senior Class Toast, May 14, 2015).

We renew his prayer for the Class of 2019 as you begin your time here at Boston College!



CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

As you enter Boston College, you must consider how we live in the 21st century and how the world is growing rapidly and changing in unforeseen ways. In the midst of this globalized and technologically driven world, we ask you to critically evaluate all that has come before us. To enter into the University core curriculum is to enter into a foundation of knowledge and experiences that will better equip each of you to synthesize and adapt to the ever-changing world that you are part of each day. Being able to read, write, and think critically will be important building blocks within your academic journey here at Boston College.

To fully embrace your Jesuit, Catholic education, you also need to consider how you will grow in your own understanding of faith. There are many conversation partners, including the Jesuit community, faculty, staff, and administrators, who are here to be your companions in contemplative action and reflective conversation as you search for truths in your life and the world around you.

Boston College hopes that each student will deepen their individual faith over the course of their years here. There are a number of sacred places within our community where you can go to contemplate and recognize God in all things.

**We would encourage you to seek out
these sacred places on our campus:
*www.bc.edu/prayermap.***

Patient Trust

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something
unknown, something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability—
and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you;
your ideas mature gradually—let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today what time
(that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own good will)
will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give Our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J.

Fall in Love with God

Nothing is more practical than finding God,
that is, falling in love
in a quite absolute, final way.
What you are in love with,
what seizes your imagination,
will affect everything.
It will decide
what will get you out of bed in the morning,
what you will do with your evenings,
how you will spend your weekends,
what you read,
who you know,
what breaks your heart,
and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.
Fall in love,
stay in love,
and it will decide everything.

—Pedro Arrupe, SJ

COMING FULL CIRCLE



First Flight First Year Convocation



Graduation Lineup on Linden Lane.

As you enter into your first year of college, it is important to examine the decisions that you make while here at BC. Taking time to reflect upon your motivations, your desires, and your fears will give you a better perspective on your life—where you came from, where you are presently, and where you are heading. Boston College hopes to partner with you during this journey through the careful discernment of the intellectual, spiritual, and social components that affect you during your undergraduate journey.



Go Set the World Aflame!



Torch lighting during First Flight Procession.

Notes _____



**CONVERSATIONS IN THE FIRST YEAR:
A PROGRAM OF THE OFFICE OF FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE**



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