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THE ROAD TO DEPTH: THINKING ABOUT WHAT CHARACTER IS

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THE ROAD TO DEPTH: THINKING ABOUT WHAT CHARACTER IS

SPEAKER: - wonderment to all of you who are new and first timers to the Ideas Festival, that this is one of the most sought-after lectures to attend. So if this is your first David Brooks Lecture at the Aspen Ideas Festival, then brace yourselves.

I want to say one thing before I introduce David. At the heart of the Aspen Institute is a seminar that has existed for over 63 years since its founding, and it's called the Aspen Seminar. And I would encourage all of you who've never taken the Aspen Seminar to sign up for it. It's a

wonderful exploration of the Western canon, from Aristotle to Rousseau, to Hobbes, to Locke, to David Brooks.

(Laughter)

It is a compilation of readings that over 6,000 individuals have taken in seminars since the inception of the Aspen Institute. And I'm very proud to say, as a moderator in those seminars, we've incorporated very contemporary texts. And a lot of the contemporary texts that we've incorporated are authored by David Brooks. And there is no better conversation for us to engage in here at the Aspen Ideas Festival than a conversation about character, because it is at the core of the Aspen Institute's Aspen Seminar.

And David Brooks is a great artificer and articulator of character and virtue, and reminds us in his Op-Eds of what it really means to be a part of a good society and what it really means to strive to be a really good person.

And a personal confession, the first two sections that I turn to in the New York Times is the obit section and the op-ed page, and I turn to the op-ed page first, David.

So welcome, David Brooks.

(Applause)

MR. BROOKS: You're too young to turn to the op-ed section, first. I don't know which is more depressing. Actually it occurs to me, the Aspen Seminar was started by Mortimer Adler and Robert Maynard Hutchins when they were at the University of Chicago, which is where I went.

They say the weakest thing about the University of Chicago is it's where fun goes to die, which is no longer really true. But the more accurate saying is it's a Baptist school where atheist professors teach Jewish students St. Thomas Aquinas.

(Laughter)

So I think that's something Aspen and Chicago have in common. Now, this talk is always a special talk for me. It's a sort of a one-off talk for me where I mull what I've been thinking about over the past few years – over the past years since my last talk, and I sort of jam all the accumulated thoughts into one talk. And so I'm going to do that again.

And when I was here a year ago, I was in the other theatre over at where you register, and I gave a talk about character morality as is my wont these days. And a woman came up to me right after the talk and – I had talked a little about suffering and a little about death, and she told me she had lost her son in an auto accident. And she was – said she was a mathematician and she couldn't make sense – she was used to making sense of things mathematically. And in this case a car just drifted across the road, no alcohol was involved, nothing, just across the road, accident, and killed her son.

Another woman came up to me about 35 seconds later and said she had lost her husband, I think, two years before. And in the days since she lost her husband, she would walk along the beach and she read out of a little prayer book that she kept. And after the talk, she gave me the book. And I keep it now in the drawer of my nightstand. And I remember at those – after both those encounters, when somebody honors you with that sort of sharing, even in a crowded room like this one, you feel you should be worthy of that sort of thing, you should have something to say or you should have some way to act.

And especially in those two encounters, I really didn't know what to say, I didn't know how to act. I was unworthy of how they had honored me. And it sort of bothered me through the week and I was at – because this is Aspen I was at a security line at the airport, getting out of there and the person in front of me was Katie Couric. So I asked her what do you do, what do you say. And she, you know, said, "Sometimes you just listen, there's nothing else you can do, you just listen."

And so I was thinking about that, what she would call the art of presence, and thinking about that in the intervening year. And from some

people who have endured that sort of suffering, I have picked up a few things that those of us who are in the presence of those who have endured a trauma should do. And one of them I learned is just to bring it up in conversation.

A woman who lost a daughter told me, "You know, people are afraid to bring up my daughter, Anna, because they think they don't want to remind me of her, but Anna is always on my mind. So you should bring it up. And if I want to talk about it, you've opened the door for me to talk about it, and if I don't want to talk about it, I'll just let it pass, but mention it." And that was one thing I learned when you're with somebody who's endured trauma.

The second is just show up. And people who have endured this told me over and over again, "Don't come like the cavalry trying to save the day, just come like the milkman bringing milk, just show up and just be there and sit alongside and keep company."

Third I was told, don't compare. Don't say, you know, I understand the loss of your son because my dog died. Don't compare one trauma to another, never compare. Don't turn the other person's trauma into a story about yourself.

Fourth, be practical, bring paper towels. Make sure the things you offer are not supply-driven. Don't give the meal that you do best, make sure it's demand-driven, offer what they actually need.

Fifth, don't offer false counsel or false hope, don't say you'll get over it. Don't insult the survivor by saying - by trying to rationalize it. Don't try to say it's all for the best, don't try to make sense of what's happened. Don't try to impose any view upon it.

Sixth, don't try to take over. Practice a sort of passive activism. Don't try to fix the problem, solve the problem, interpret or explain the problem. Allow the sufferer the dignity of their own process.

And so it's a matter of just being there and just presence. And so those are techniques you can learn if you want to be worthy of such

moments. But to be really worthy of such moments, you'd say it's not just what you do, it's not just some technique you can read about in a magazine but it's who you are, it's establishing a real human connection.

And to establish that human connection, it's a matter of deep meeting deep, of having the quality of soul, the depth of soul that really is capable of just being there for a person who's enduring suffering, who's enduring joy, just being there at depth for other people.

And so the main question I've been thinking about over the past year is how do you possess this quality of inner depth, how do you possess what might be called a thousand-year heart. And the way – the one way to frame I've put around that to understand that question of how you become a deeper person is separating two sorts of virtues, the resume virtues and the eulogy virtues.

The resume virtues are the things that you offer the job market, the skills you have that make you employable. The eulogy virtues are the things they talk about at your funeral. And those are virtues that exist at the core of your being, whether you're kind, brave, honest, or faithful, what sort of relationships you formed.

And I think we lived in a culture, and I'm certainly guilty of this, have spent way more time in my life thinking about the resume virtues, going to school, to think about how to develop skills than the eulogy virtues. And though I think we would all agree the eulogy virtues are more important, we spend more time, I think most of us, on the resume virtues. So that's one way to think about it.

The second way to think about it is something I mentioned last year, which I'll just review briefly. And it's an instruction from a book called *Lonely Man of Faith* by a rabbi named Joseph Soloveitchik, which came out in 1965, another way to think about the two sides of our nature. Soloveitchik said there are two sides, which he called the Adam I and the Adam II. Adam I is the external Adam, it's the resume Adam. Adam I wants to build, create, produce, discover things.

Adam II is the internal Adam. Adam II wants to embody certain

moral qualities, to have a serene inner character, not only to do good but to be good, to live in obedience to some transcendent truth, to have inner coherence of soul.

So Adam I, the resume Adam, wants to conquer the world, become famous, rich, Adam II wants to obey a calling and serve the world. Adam I asks how things work, Adam II asks why things exist and what ultimately we're here for. Adam I wants to venture forth, Adam II wants to return home to the comfort of a family meal. Adam I's motto is success, Adam II experiences life as a moral drama and his motto is charity, love, and redemption.

Now, Soloveitchik argued that each of us lives at the confrontation between these two Adams, these two sides of our nature. And I'd add that confrontation is different. You know, some days we want to be externally successful, some days we want to be internally good. And they're both right, I mean, you got to have a balance. And the question is whether your life is in balance between these two things.

And I'd add that balance is so hard to achieve because these two Adams are in tension with each other, and sometimes in contradiction with each other. And they live by different logics. Adam I, the resume Adam, lives by a straightforward economic logic, effort leads to reward, practice makes perfect, pursue self-interest, work hard.

Adam II lives by an inverse logic, which is a moral logic and 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 want, success leads to the greatest failure, which is pride, failure leads to the greatest success, which is humility and learning, to forget yourself you have to lose yourself, to find yourself you have to forget yourself.

And so it's filled with paradoxes. And so they're entirely different logics.

And I found that in my own life, and I think I see around us, that we live in a culture that nurtures Adam I. Go to the magazines, the

bookstores, universities, a lot of attention on resume Adam, neglects Adam II. It's not that people are bad, it's just that morally inarticulate; we don't have the (inaudible) to think about those things.

We're in a very competitive society, the competition to achieve admiration, attention is so fierce, there's little time to cultivate inner depth. We're in a technological society; and the noise, the fast and shallow communications makes it hard to hear the quiet voices that emanate out of our depth.

Third, we live in a publicity culture that war for attention. We're taught to be assertive, to master skills, to broadcast our brand, to get likes, to get followers. And it's hard in that outward to look inward and have the moments - spare moments for inner depth.

And so I think if you're only Adam I, you turn into a shrewd animal, a crafty, crafty clever creature that is adept at playing games and turns life into a game. And I think you learn the ability to speak in a sophisticated moral vocabulary.

I don't think we're degenerate, we just don't have that vocabulary to think about how we actually become deaf to think about what's actually going on inside.

And so in thinking about this problem, how do you develop a better Adam II, more or less, I thought it's better to start from the beginning and ask basic questions.

And the first basic question is, you know, when we say someone is deep, what do we mean by that? When we look at someone and say that is a deep person, what do we mean? What wisdom is contained in the words? And I think we mean that that person is capable of experiencing large and sonorous emotions, they have a profound spiritual presence, people who are deep are spiritual, they've come to some stable philosophical convictions about fundamental things, they've made firmly-rooted moral commitments.

To put it in another way, the people are deep, we say are

deep, in the realm of emotion they have a web of unconditional love, in the realm of intellect they have a sense of permanent philosophy about how life is, in the realm of action they have a commitment to important projects that can't be completed in a life time, in the realm of morality they have a certain consistency and rigor, they're not always perfect but there's sort of a moral demand that pervades everything they do.

So I think that's sort of what we mean when we say someone is deep.

Then the next question is, well, how long does it take to get depth? How does depth happen? And when we look at people who we think are deep – are deep, whether it's Gandhi or Pope Francis, you notice that it doesn't happen all at once. The people – the things that happen that lead you astray, those things are fast, lust, fear, vanity, gluttony.

The things that we admire most, honesty, humility, self-control, courage, those things take some time and they accumulate slowly. It's sort of an ensemble of settled feelings. And so when we think of people who are deep, usually it's been over a long time. It's not something that happens to people when they're 15.

The next question to ask is where does all this stuff happen? When we say it's deep, what are we talking about? Are we talking about their cerebellum, their frontal cortex? No, we're actually talking about some metaphorical moral center of themselves, we're talking about some core. And it can't be reduced to a brain state, it's a metaphor, we understand it by metaphor, and that there are some core piece of yourself that when you make a decision, you make that core piece of yourself slightly better or worse.

If you make disciplined and selfless decisions, you'll reinforce the core tendencies in that self, if you make selfish and short-sighted decisions, you'll fragment or degrade that core piece of yourself. And so you can degrade that core piece of yourself even if you're not hurting anybody else. If you have a bunch of degraded thoughts, selfish thoughts, lustful thoughts, you'll degrade something in yourself.

And so there's some core piece there. And the old-fashioned word we would use for that core piece is the word soul. And one of the things when you start thinking about depth, there are a lot of words that used to have real power in the culture and now don't have much power.

The word 'soul' well, 'soul music' but for centuries it had real power, that word. And we sort of let those words drift away from the center of our consciousness. But I think recovering those words is part of recovering what it means to be – to think seriously about these questions, moral questions.

And so the next question to ask, when we admire a deep person or a virtuous person, again I'm thinking of Dorothy Day or people I admire, like Francis or Augustine, or even Soloveitchik, Albert Schweitzer, what do we admire about them? Like, what is the quality of our admiration? And one of the things, when you think about it is it's a – it's beautiful, it's aesthetic.

Albert Schweitzer was this great man who gave up being a very successful music theorist, became a doctor, went off to Africa, and he didn't hire people who he thought would be idealistic or who were out to do good, he only hired people who did good service as if they were just doing the dishes. He didn't want any idealists because he didn't think they'd be tough enough to handle the rigors of being a jungle doctor.

And when you look at Schweitzer, you read his writing, or look at Pope Francis, there's something aesthetically beautiful about the guy. And they possess sort of a moral framework. They possess some sort of character, and they possess – and here comes another word that's sort of old-fashioned but that has lost some of its power and it seems pompous to us, and that word is 'virtue'. They possess a certain virtue.

And the word 'virtue' again it has pompous connotations, seems stuffed-up, self-righteous. But all virtue is, is having your loves in the right order. We all love and desire a multitude of things. We all desire love, friendship, family, popularity, we all desire money, be in good shape, we all desire a lot of different things. And I think all of us

understand whether we thought about it or not that some loves are higher than other loves, that the love of family is higher than the love of money. And if you've sold out your family to make an extra buck, you've done something wrong.

If the love of truth or friendship is higher than the love of popularity, if somebody tells you a secret and you blab it at a dinner party, you'd become popular for a few minutes at the dinner party conversation, we know you've inverted your love. And so being virtuous is not some pompous thing, it's not some puritanical thing, it's just having your loves in the right order.

And so what I've tried to capture here is what depth looks like and feels like, that it's something acquired slowly, that it's virtuous, that it happens in the soul, in a moral center. And so that's what we think about when we think of depth, that sonorousness and that high standard that some people do achieve. And so then to me then the big question is what activities do you do to get you there, how do you get on your way to depth.

And I should give you the secret of why I'm giving this talk. We have a lot of emphasis on our society on happiness, how can I be happy, how can I measure happiness, I'm trying to offer an antidote to that. I'm all for happiness, I happen to be happy right now. It's great. But I'm trying to remind us of a different goal in life that is deeper than happiness and more important than happiness. And I'm calling it depth, you could call it holiness, you can call it whatever you want. But I'm trying to help us think about that and what words go with that.

So what I'm doing in this talk is trying to give us a counter-culture, to think about the happiness culture which is so much around us.

So again the final question is what activities send us to depth, to make us holy, if you want to use a religious term. Well, the first one is love. It's really hard to think so and so is deep if they haven't experienced some big transforming love. The heroes we think about, it could be love for a cause, usually it's love for a person, it could be love for God; whether it's Martin Luther King or Mandela or anybody else, Lincoln;

they've experienced some transforming love for something.

And so love is the key part of it. So what does love do? First, it humbles us, it reminds us – love reminds we're not even in control of ourselves. Love is like an invading army that conquers you little by little, reorganizes your energy levels, reorganizes your sleep patterns, reorganizes your conversational topics, reorganizes the objects of your sexual desire, the focus of your attention, when you're in love you can't stop thinking about your beloved, you walk through a crowd in the airport you think you see him or her down in the crowd, every perception is changed. Love is the strongest kind of invading army that doesn't generate opposition. A person in love wants to be conquered by that army and wants to be totally defeated by it.

And so that's one thing love does, it humbles us by reminding us we don't even don't control our own minds, love just takes over.

The second and maybe the central thing that love does is that it de-centers the self. If a shallow person lives in a the smallness of his own ego, a person in love finds the center of himself is outside of himself, his treasures are somewhere out there released in the space between the two. And so you find people in these tumultuous relationships where they're making themselves miserable and you say, "You know, you really should break off of that person, you're making yourself miserable, you're not being happy." And you find very often they don't want to break off, because they'd rather be unhappy with that person than happy without them.

And so what love does, first it takes over and then it causes you to seek union with another. And your joy, the center of yourself, happens outside of yourself in the joy of another.

The third thing love does is it complicates the distinction between giving and receiving, because two selves are so intermingled in love, the person giving is giving to him or herself. Montaigne has a beautiful sentence where he says that the person who receives a gift from her beloved is doing the ultimate favor to that person by giving them the pleasure of giving a gift.

And so the souls are mingled. And giving and receiving are more or less the same thing. Montaigne is this wonderful guy because he was really looking for depth but he did it in sort of – if I can say some sort of West Coast Southern California kind of way. He didn't want to be suffering his way to depth, he didn't want to be miserable on the way to depth. He thought, "I'm going to be happy on the way to depth, but I'm still going to get there. And I'm going to have tremendous faith in nature, and I'm going to have tremendous faith and the happy activities of life are going to make me a deep soul. You know adolescents think to be deep you have to wear black all the time.

Montaigne was not like that. And he put tremendous emphasis on friendship. He had a great friendship with this guy. And here's a sentence he wrote about his friendship, "Such a friendship has no model but itself and can only be compared to itself. It was not one special consideration or two, nor three, nor four, not a thousand. It was some mysterious quintessence of all this mixture which possessed itself of my will which led it to plunge and lose myself in his, which possessed itself of his whole will and led it with a similar hunger and a like impulse to plunge and lose itself in mine. I may truly say lose for it left us with nothing that was our own, nothing that was either his or mine." And when Montaigne was asked what caused you to fall in love with this guy, La Boétie, he couldn't have an answer, it was just – it was because I was I and he and he. And so love is the first thing that really is essential to depth.

The second we'd say is suffering. When people look forward, when they plan their lives, they say how can I plan some lives that'll make me happy. But when people look backward at the things that made them who they are, they usually don't talk about the moments when they're happiest, they usually talk about the moments of suffering and ordeal. So we plan for happiness, but we're formed by suffering.

Now, it should be said there's nothing intrinsically noble about suffering. Most of the time when you're suffering you just want to get out of it. But you do find people who were really improved by suffering. You think of Franklin Roosevelt, who's this sort of shallow guy before he suffered from polio and emerged a different sort of person after suffering from polio.

Now, the big thing suffering does is, first, it humbles you, like love. You can't really control your suffering. Even when you come out of your suffering, the moments of healing seem like outside of your control, like just nature did it, or God did it. So it humbles you.

The second thing suffering does is it drags you deeper into yourself. There's a 1950s theologian, Paul Tillich, who wrote that when people endure suffering, they're taken between the routine busyness of life and they find out they're not who they believe themselves to be. The pain involved in losing someone or even composing a great symphony or a book takes you, smashes through the floor of what you felt was the bottom floor of your soul, he wrote, revealing a cavity below that one, and then it smashes below that one, and reveals a cavity below that one; and a cavity below that one. And so it digs down. In suffering people find depths of themselves they had never imagined.

The third thing suffering does, it gives people a sense of calling. They are not masters of their pain, they can't control their pain, but you do have a responsibility to respond to your pain. And it's interesting to watch people in the depth of suffering, how they respond to pain. If you see someone who loses a child, they don't say, "I've just endured the horrible pain of losing a child, I really want to balance off my happiness levels by going out and partying a lot." They don't say that. What they do, do is they form a foundation. They want to take the suffering, and they want to make it moral, they want to somehow make it sacred. So the response to suffering is not happiness, it's some sort of moral commitment and a set of eternal demands.

So suffering, like love but in the inverse, first, you realize you're not in control of yourself, second, it thrusts you outside of yourself, third, it thrusts you toward morality, it makes you more moral, more morally engaged.

The third act of going to depth is internal struggle. And here I don't mean the struggle involved in winning a championship or starting a company or making a lot of money, you can, as we know, be the shallowest human being on earth and do all those things, I mean the self-struggle. The people who seem at their depth are often at war with

themselves, they are aware that while they have great strength and great dignity, they also have great weakness, and they're engaged in an internal struggle with themselves. I have friend who goes to bed at night and he reviews the day, what sins did I commit – and sins is another of those words that has lost power in our culture but is sort of inescapable.

He asks what sins did I exist – what I commit today. And he's a pretty good guy, but he tends to have – at least he told me this. He tends to be a people pleaser, and he's much in demand, and people ask him favors, "Can you do this for me? Can you do that for me?" And instead of saying honestly I don't feel like doing that, it's not a high priority for me, he lies and he says, "No, I don't have time for that, I've got this commitment, this commitment, and this commitment." So he's constantly lying to people to get out commitments. And that's a sin, a small sin, maybe.

And he's trying to – he over-flatters people. He told me sometimes he's not present when someone is talking. When somebody he is in conversation, he's not really thinking about what they're saying, he's thinking about what impressive things he can say to make himself more impressive before them. And so he's not a big sinner, he's not a murderer, but he spends each night in bed thinking of those sins and trying to think how he can do better. And you see in his example, often the response to sin is sort of this U-shape, you're up here and you got to go down and think about your sins and then sort of plan your way out.

And so there's a moment of what Soloveitchik calls withdrawal, or in the Christian context we would call life, death and resurrection.

Dante in Divine Comedy, you had to go down to hell to go up to heaven. Kierkegaard has this great phrase, "Only the knight who goes to the underworld gets to rescue the beloved." And so there's this inner struggle with the weaknesses we all have. Some of us are scattered, some of us like me start out shallow and you got to work your way to be a little less shallow. Some people are selfish, well we're all selfish, some people are – just want to please people, some people are terrified all the time. And you got to engage in an internal struggle against that core weakness.

I told the story in this talk a couple of years about Eisenhower,

his core weakness was just this anger, this fury, he grew furious with people at the drop of a hat and he spent his entire life trying to combat his own temper. And it was an internal struggle. And for a lot of these people, if you read their journals – I talked about Samuel Johnson last year – the internal struggle against their own weakness is the most dramatic thing that's happening in their lives.

When they're a little less selfish, when they're a little less pleasing, they write it down in their journal as if it's this great victory. When they let themselves down, it's this horrific humiliation. And no career success or failure will be as dramatic to them as that internal struggle.

And so internal struggle is sort of the logic by which we build character, it's the logic by which I think we go to depth. So that's the third activity.

The fourth activity you observe in people who are really deep is obedience. And this is another quality that's really out of fashion these days. When you go to commencement speeches, college students are taught find your passion, follow the beat of your own drummer, pursue your dreams, that is to say look inside yourself and find out what you want to do. And the answers to your life, vocation are inside yourself.

If you look at the people who are deep, often they don't look inside themselves. Something caused them from outside themselves. I told the story a few years ago of Francis Perkins, who was the first woman in cabinet, under Franklin Roosevelt, and Perkins was having coffee or tea one afternoon in 1913, at Washington Square park in the north side. She hears a commotion, she rushes out and she sees a fire. She stumbled across the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. And she rushes to the building which is just a block off Washington Square, if you know New York. And she sees the fire and then she sees what she thinks are bundles of clothing coming out of the top windows of the 10th and the 11th floor.

But it's like 9/11, instead of being burnt to death, people are deciding to leap to their deaths, just have a quicker death. And so she sees I think 57 people go over this way. And she sees a guy holding women over the window sill and then dropping them, a second, a third,

and then one guy, he holds the fourth, his girlfriend, they have a long embrace and a kiss and he drops her, and then he himself goes over the edge.

And she watches this moment. And she's a little unsure at this moment what to do. But at this moment, the world had presented her with a problem, which is worker safety, and she devotes the rest of her life to that problem. And so it was obedience to that problem, not something she found in herself.

This process of obedience was best described in another famous book called *Man's Search for Meaning*, which I'm sure many of you read, by Victor Frankl. Frankl was a psychologist in Europe, I think at Vienna, a Jewish guy in the 1940s captured by the Nazis, sent to concentration camps. He laid tracks for a few years. This was not the life that he had planned for himself. But this is what fate had put in front of him.

And so he wrote in that book, "It did not matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking the meaning of life, and instead think of ourselves as those who are being questioned by life daily and hourly."

So fate had put a task in front of him. First a moral task, which he said, was to suffer well. The Nazis would try to humiliate him, he tried to behave with dignity even in the face of the pain and the humiliation to exercise what he called the inner hold. Every time they tried to humiliate him, he would assert his dignity.

The second thing, he was an intellectual, a psychological. So he had been put in this worst circumstance, he had been given an opportunity to study suffering. And so he studied suffering and he decided if I live, I'll write about suffering and what I learned about that.

Now, few of us are put in circumstances that horrific or that extreme, but we're all given certain talents which demand responsibility, we're all put around certain problems that are just in front of us, whether we chose to respond to them or not. And so people are obedient to that

problem. And you see people who are – like Mother Theresa, obedient to a problem year after year after year after year.

And then the final thing I'll say, the activity that gets us to depth is acceptance. And this is the hardest one for people like me. And I suspect for a lot of us. And I'm going to describe the trait of acceptance which is the most counterintuitive by another episode that happened to me when I was here at Aspen a year ago.

Every year I go on a hike, I go on the same hike every year. And it's on the trail, it's probably about 13 miles in some direction from here, I have a GPS, I don't know what direction, and it's called the American Lake Trail. And so I go on that, it's like 90 minutes up, and you get to this beautiful mountain lake and it's surrounded by mountains.

And I sat there, I hiked up for about 90 minutes or 2 hours, I sat there, eating candy, that's what I do, and I – because I'm me, I had a backpack full of books. And I had a book about Puritanism, and I opened it up and started reading this passage just while I'm resting up there. And I came across a Puritan prayer called Valley of Vision, which I imagine is a 17th century prayer though I don't really know.

And the prayer begins this way, "High and holy, meek and lowly, Lord thou hast brought me to the Valley of Vision where I live in the depths but see thee in the heights, hemmed in my mountains of sin, I behold thy glory. Let me learn by paradox that the way down is up, that the way to be low is to be high, that the broken heart is the healed heart, and the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit."

And so I was reading that and I was looking around and everything seemed to fit in with the world I was in. And I'm sure you've all had these moments of the transcendent experience in nature. The poem, the prayer was high and holy, I had these majestic mountains, the vast limitless sky above me; meek and lowly, as I was sitting there, I'm not really good at animals but there's a little badger or some furry critter who walked up, and he didn't – I was sitting quietly and still. And so he walked up to me and – like about a foot away from my sneaker, and then he noticed me, and he scampered away.

And it was just this meek and lowly, little one of God's creatures, seemed to fit in with the prayer. I saw the beauty in the water rippling across the lake, I saw the grounds, really this valley enclosed and hemmed in by mountains. And for me, we've all had sort of transcendent experiences in nature.

For me, this particular experience was the sensation of things clicking into place, like a series of puzzle pieces clicking neatly into place, like some well-engineered car, or something – just being part of the order, like there was this order of nature, an order of life, and I was there, I was clicking in and being a part, I was admitted.

And that word came to me, "I'm admitted." Now, we think of admittance in our culture in a very certain way. It has a certain connotation, "admittance," "admit." In my world, we think of it as college admittance. It has an air of exclusivity. "Are you admitted into college? Are you admitted into a club? Are you admitted into workplace? Are you admitted into a job or a profession?"

What I was experiencing then was a fury of – was open admissions. It was – I was just being admitted because I was a person, I was up there. And most important thing of that form of admittance was that it wasn't earned. There was nothing I did, no virtue I possessed, no work I did, no great column I wrote. I was just being admitted. It was unmerited, unearned admittance. It was membership in some sort of human transcendent community.

And there's a word in religions that applies to this state. And that word is 'grace,' which is unmerited love, things that you don't deserve that come to you. One of my favorite passages on grace was written by Paul Tillich, who I mentioned earlier, in a collection of essays called *Shaking of the Foundations*.

Tillich wrote, "Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness, it strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, our lack of direction, composure have become intolerable to us. Sometimes at that moment, a wave of light

breaks into our darkness and it is as though a voice is saying, 'You're accepted, you're accepted' accepted by that which is greater than you and the name of which you do not know.

Do not ask for the name now. Perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now. Perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything, do not perform anything, do not intend anything, simply accept the fact that you are accepted.

If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience, we may not be better than before, we may not believe more than before, but everything is transformed, and nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but as acceptance.

So Adam I wants to go out and win victories, to win grace, to win honor, to win beauty, to win things. Adam I wants to work, Adam I wants to sweat, and practice. And Adam I when life offers him a gift, Adam I tends to ruin them by trying to buy the gifts, ruin a gift by trying to buy it.

But Adam II, at the deepest part of ourselves, simply accepts the fact that he's accepted. Adam II, the spiritual side of our nature stands against the whole ethos of self-cultivation, which is the resume side of our world, the ethos of scrambling and working and climbing. Adam II has that paradoxical logic I mentioned before. Adam II simply accepts the gifts, he accepts the fact that your family loves you more than you deserve, your friends are for you even when you're inattentive, the past wants to give you the gifts you did not earn. The admissions committee has already met and you're already in. Your job is simply to accept the fact that you're accepted, it's passive. Adam II is passive, in the face of this acceptance.

Soloveitchik says your job is to retreat, it's to withdraw and to accept this. And this is the trait you see in these deep people. They have acceptance that they are accepted.

And then the final paradox is that this somehow gives them great energy. Because it's like someone who gets the greatest birthday

present ever they are grateful, they're inspired, they want to live that way. They want to honor the people who gave them that gift and they want to pass on the gift that they didn't deserve.

Dorothy Day, one of my heroes, when she gave birth to a child, she said, "If I had painted the greatest painting, sculpted the greatest sculpture, carved the greatest figure, I could not have felt the most exalted Creator than I did when they put my child in my arms, and with that came a desire to adore and to worship." She was grateful for something she didn't earn, she felt the great need to adore, to worship and to serve. And great energy came out of that, the desire to pass along the gift.

In the middle of this year, sometime around May, I was in Frederick, Maryland, I did some fundraiser for a friend, I was in a bad mood because I hate traveling and speaking – that's bad. So I go to this place and it's a fundraiser for a group that – they teach adult immigrants to read. And I learned while meeting these people that they – it sometimes takes seven years to teach an adult to read in a foreign language. And the people who did this were amazing. They had – they were sort of quiet, they had a gratitude about them, they had a calm, settled manner, they didn't have like the blooming virtues I see in my Yale students, the kind of things that show up when you're 18.

But they had the ripening virtues of – people who've lived a little, learned a little, suffered a little, sort of a quiet wait and stability. They were quiet people, they were soft people, they talked about their jobs very matter-of-factly, they didn't boast, they weren't trying to prove to me how smart they were, they just were going about their job.

And there was something grateful about them. And that gratitude – imagine sitting with an immigrant seven years trying to teach them to read. That's a great deal of energy. And so there was just a quiet to them. And they had nothing to prove, they were just doing it with great energy and great passion.

So in this little talk, I've tried to present a counterculture, a counterculture first to the resume culture, which we're all caught up in, and a counterculture, when we think about spiritual life, to the happiness

culture, which let's face it is about self and about having – being in a good mood. Happiness culture really doesn't have much room for suffering.

I've tried to describe what suffering is, what we think about – or what depth is when we think about depth, and I've tried to describe the activities that contribute to depth; love, obedience, struggle, suffering, and finally this paradoxical one, acceptance.

And when you look at those people who exemplify all this, you see them not – their Adam II is just rich and strong, you feel that in them, balancing their Adam I, and they're still out in the world. There's still healing the sick, they're still doing drug counseling, they're still teaching.

And they're involved in a compromise of life, where you see a certain beauty, a spiritual beauty to them. And that beauty is summarized in a passage from Reinhold Niebuhr. He wrote, "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime, therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true, or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history, therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone, therefore we must be saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint, therefore we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness."

Thanks very much.

(Applause)

And now that I've consumed my Pepsi product, I think we have 10 or 15 minutes for questions. If anybody wants ask about Ted Cruz, I can do that too.

(Laughter)

It was not a talk that – now, there's a question over there, if we can –

SPEAKER: Thank you for your very stimulating speech. When you talk about a core that can be either degraded or enhanced, do you feel that there's any kind of internal neurological basis for this core that you mentioned?

MR. BROOKS: Yeah. You know, I wrote a book called *The Social Animal* that came out about four years ago. And I'd spent the previous five years reading a lot about neuroscience and social psychology. And it's - I'm so glad I spent those years around neuroscientists and cognitive scientists because you learn a lot about our nature.

And I discovered - I think I came to the conclusion that neuroscience really teaches us something new about philosophy, but it teaches us which old philosophers were probably more right than others. So Descartes thought reason is totally separate from emotion. I think we know from what we've learned about the brain and cognitive psychology that that's probably wrong, that Hume probably knew about human nature more than Descartes.

But most of the things that we've learned from neuroscience confirm or disconfirm something George Elliot already knew. George Elliot was pretty smart and had observed human nature. And now what neuroscience does is it clarifies our knowledge of that I think and it gives us the mechanism by which certain things happen, about how love happens.

For example, I think what we know about the brain or mind says that love is not an emotion, it's a motivational state, it's a drive, which involves a lot of different emotions. And so I think what's happened over the past 30 years is this fantastic advance in helping us understand ourselves and finding out which theories, what observations were true and were not true.

What I don't think it can do is describe to us the moral nature of what we're doing. And I think one of the things that has led us away from - I think it has had a demoralizing effect on society where we think of things either as evolutionary responses or we think of things in terms of utility.

And my students at Yale, and I think a lot of us, speak in a very utilitarian vocabulary, what would leave the biggest impact, how can I do good outside. But as far as seeing life as a moral drama inside, I don't think evolutionary psychology and neuroscience, for all their great benefits, do that. It happens on a different level, which is why we have the metaphor of a soul.

It's not a real thing, obviously, but it's a – it's not a spot on the brain, but it's a – when we think of the soul, we think we're involved in a moral drama rather than just a cognitive and decision-making drama. And it's so easy to forget that.

And so for all the great benefits that neuroscience has given us in the past 30 years, I think it's distracted us away from the fact that psychological health is very often moral health. And I would say my students, if they lack anything, a lot of us lack the moral vocabulary.

I'll just quickly – Christian Smith, a sociologist went around college campuses asked them can you name your last moral dilemma, and 70 percent could not name a moral dilemma. They would say, "I pulled in a parking space, I couldn't afford – I didn't have any quarters." And he would say, "That's a problem, it's not really a moral dilemma."

And it's not that they're bad, they just hadn't been given the vocabulary of when values clash; and so again, not bad, just morally inarticulate. And I think all the attention that's gone to the cognitive sciences and neuroscience, which I'm guilty of, has taken us a little away from morality, theology, talking in non-pompous ways about the moral drama.

SPEAKER: Thank you very much, so much. So I'm really interested in just blossoming virtues in your 18-year-olds. So we work with 18 to 25-year-olds and at first we thought the challenge was help them develop real skills and ability to jump into the adult world and contribute.

But then we started noticing what you're saying that there was this other part, let's call it Adam II, that was very inchoate and inarticulate

in them, and necessary, I think, for their health. So we started trying to work with them in this way. And I'm just – they have been – I was so afraid they would tell us to go jump in a lake like you're not the mom of me, you know, I'm like a grown up. But they're so eager and hungry. And they're very willing. I'm just interested in what you've learned about how – how to give – how to work with them on that dimension, and if you find them interested or you find them like, "Later, you know, when I'm 40 I'll worry about this." What is your experience?

MR. BROOKS: Exactly like yours. So Paul Bloom, a Yale psychologist does moral experiments on babies, infants. And so he'll have a little image of a triangle going up a hill, circle trying to stop it, and the babies at very young ages know there's something wrong with the circle and they root for the triangle. So they have a moral sense. But then it gets suppressed because we shove them in this high achieving culture where all the emphasis is on, you know, building the right college resume, getting the right grades, getting into the college.

And, you know, my students are great there, they're perfect resume gods. And they do sort of good moral things. You know, I joke. My joke is when you ask them what are you doing over spring break, they say, "You know, I'm cycling across Thailand, while reading to lepers," they're doing a lot of that kind of stuff.

But when you tell them, and I tell them in class, I think you're great, I don't think you have a moral vocabulary, they get it immediately and the phrase that they seize on to is the phrase "moral ecology," that we live in this ecosystem that either gives us a moral system or it doesn't. And they know they've been given a system that drives them to think about their skills and have not given what they hunger for, I agree with you, they totally hunger for it.

And if I can ride my one hobbyhorse, they're raised often in families that's pushed them to Adam I. And my students often have two majors, one for mom and dad, one for them. The mom and dad major is always finance or economics, the major for them is history, art, where they really care about and worse, mom and dad have really loved them passionately but are really anxious for them to succeed.

So they've kept these two great forces and when those collide, mom and dad love them a little more when they're succeeding. And they withdraw the love a little when they're not succeeding. And the wolf of conditional love is at the door here. And they feel it, and they have a panic that the love may be withdrawn if they don't stay on the balance beam of Adam I.

And that is just the destructive force on them, because it creates terror and it robs them of the internal criteria to make the decisions about their own lives. And I think in this culture we have an epidemic of conditional love. And that's one of the things that pushes them to succeed so much, but they hunger so much for this moral system.

The best compliment I got from my student this year, one of the students said in class, after we've read Montaigne, we've read Dorothy Day, we've read Augustine, he said, "The best thing about this class is you've made me so much sadder." I took that as a compliment.

SPEAKER: Thank you, David. From your comments, have you found any Adam IIs in your time at Yale or just doesn't exist in that situation?

MR. BROOKS: They're all at Princeton.

(Laughter)

No. No, you find them everywhere. One of the things Schweitzer said in this essay when – he says I never hire idealists, but the people who are amazingly noble, you find them, they're just – they're not the ones who are on Facebook, and they're not broadcasting it. I found amazing professors, amazing students under the worst circumstances pursuing, doing something that really is not great for their career.

I ran into a guy not long ago, and he hires a lot of people. And I just asked him randomly what job, what question do you ask somebody when you're deciding whether to hire them or not. And this guy said, "I ask them this question, name a time where you told the truth and it

hurt you?"

And that's a good question because it's really asking all your loves in the right order; do you put love of truth over love of career. And a lot of my students, a lot of co-professors have done that. And have sacrificed sometimes fellowships, sometimes lives of ease. I met a young woman who was homeless in Phoenix. She was going to enlist in the Navy just because she needed money to pay for her four brothers she was looking after her parents had split back to the Philippines. And God bless the enlistment officer, who said you should not enlist in the Navy, you should go Annapolis, go to the Academy, your grades are good enough. She went to the Academy and graduated number one academically in her class and she is now a Rhodes Scholar in Oxford. Amazing story.

But she spent all this time, whatever spare time you have at the Naval Academy, which, believe me, is not much, finding foster homes and adoptive parents for her brothers. And you just see somebody living a life of that, that's sort of amazing even in this culture. And I think we all could look around. If you name a few people you admire most, I think we could all do that and find people who are balanced.

I always keep a list of five people I admire most in Washington, just so I don't feel totally hopeless.

(Laughter)

And they're usually people like Anthony Weiner, Eliot Spitzer and I am kidding.

(Laughter)

But two leap out, some of you may know, one is no longer in Washington; it was George Shultz who was secretary of State, secretary of Treasury, remarkable man who did all these jobs and it was never about himself. And another one who's always on my list is Jim Lehrer, who I used to work with at the News Hour, who he did a TV show, but the show was not about himself, it was about the stories. And you couldn't see it, but when I was talking to him on air and the camera was not on

him, his face was very expressive. And I was – if I was saying something unworthy of the show, I could see his mouth droop. And if I was saying something he liked, he thought was worthy of the show, I could see his eyes crinkle in a smile. And so for 10 years I was guided and taught by the mouth and the crinkling eye. And those instant reactions were my teaching. And somebody who has those right instincts, proper instincts can be a great influence and teacher.

We have time for one more. Over here. Let's go with my friend, Kennedy.

MR. KENNEDY: Thank you so much. And I have a struggle going on, but about – (inaudible) about deep and depth. And in my life in Kenya, in poverty, I felt I was much more deeper. And then when came where I have a better life, I felt like I'm losing Adam I. Am I the only one and how do – that's a struggle, so I just want to raise it to you. Thank you.

MR. BROOKS: Thank you. That's a very profound point. When you go back to look at some of the lives of people who've really led very powerful lives, in part there was so much hardship. They couldn't afford not to be thrifty, responsible, because they were inculcated with habits of discipline, because there was no safety net there, one little slip up could lead to disaster. And they were focused on the elementals and serving each other. And you have to rely on others to survive.

I should, in the act of full disclosure, my older son, Joshua, work for Kennedy at the Kennedy School in Keberra in Kenya, so we do know each other. And one of the things he noticed about the little girls he taught, who were 5, this was an internship in the summer, was that they were on the swing set, and when they fell off, they didn't cry. And they would really hit their heads and they were just, "Ow, that hurt." And then they would get up and not cry, because there's a level of discipline that's enforced by poverty.

And then when you're surrounded by affluence, a lot of that discipline goes away, so some of the good habits can go away. And then you got all the baubles of life. And we don't think about it. And maybe we should spend more time – if Katie is here, a track, a dangerous

track for the Aspen Ideas Festival, the corruptions of wealth, but they are real.

I think I've just lost my private plane ride out of here.

(Laughter)

But you know, our founding fathers and through history, in every single religion that I know of, they're super aware that there's a reason the beatitudes, the last shall be hearth (phonetic), the meek shall inherit the earth, not many of the wealthy will be chosen.

And I don't believe virtue inheres in a class, an economic class, I think you can be good in any class. And I don't believe it inheres in profession. You can have total schmucks who are working at NGOs and total great people who are working at Goldman Sachs - well, maybe not Goldman Sachs, no.

(Laughter)

But it depends on whether you're doing internal struggle. If you're a banker, one of my heroes is a guy named Robert Rubin, who was, you know - he was at Goldman Sachs. Somebody doing internal struggle is building themselves. And that you can do that poor, you can do that rich, it's whether you make the decision, but it's certainly true that the biblical view of wealth, that wealth is problematic, it's a challenge, it's a character challenge, like power, something we all, especially if we are at Aspen, have to deal with.

Anyway, our time is up. Thank you very much.

(Applause)

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