

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Finding meaning in the various paths we take



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Why have many prominent people found faith and reported mystical experiences while in prison?

David Brooks writes about some of these in his book "The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life." When he discusses the first mountain, it is about ambition, strategy and independence. It is about making your own way in the world, becoming independent from family, building a career, seeking to make a mark in the world. But when life's circumstances put one in prison, the ability to pursue these goals is radically eliminated. That first mountain now seems impossible.

Brooks writes about Anwar Sadat, who was imprisoned during World War II and later became the president of Egypt. Writing about the loss of his material things and his freedom, Sadat describes his transcending "the confines of time and place. ... I felt I had stepped into a vaster and more beautiful world and my capacity for endurance redoubled." He writes of his individual entity merging into "the vaster entity of all existence, my point of departure became love of home (Egypt), love of all being, love of God."

Vaclav Havel, author, playwright and public intellectual, was a political dissident during the Communist era. Following the country's liberation, he became president of Czechoslovakia and then served for more than ten years as president of the Czech Republic. He describes his rejection of the materialist basis of the Marxist philosophy and his affirmation of spiritual reality. He writes, "The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human modesty, in human responsibility."

While in prison and very sick, even near death, Havel writes in a letter to his wife about a "dizzying sensation of tumbling endlessly into the abyss ... an unending joy at being alive, at having been given the chance to live through all I have lived through, and at the fact that everything has a deep and obvious meaning."

Brooks also writes about the experiences of Viktor Frankl as a prisoner in the Nazi concentration camps. Frankl saw his condition as more than just a physical struggle but also a spiritual one. Frankl writes, "The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity — even under the most difficult circumstances — to add a deeper meaning to his life."



Author David Brooks advises those who seek to help someone in the "middle of any sort of intellectual or spiritual journey: Don't try to lead or influence." We're all on our own path to meaning. *MLive.com files*

Frankl famously describes "the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in prison wrote, "Bless you, prison. Bless you for being in my life. For there, lying upon the rotting prison straw, I came to realize that the object of life is not prosperity as we are made to believe, but the maturity of the human soul." Brooks describes him as being given "a sense of participation in a larger story."

For Brooks, this larger story is the key to meaning. He writes, "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part? If there are no overarching stories, then life is meaningless." But he goes on to affirm that "life does not feel meaningless" and it is these stories that "provide the horizon of meaning in which we live our lives — not just our individual lives, but our lives together." Brooks finds the Exodus story as forming Jewish life and belief. He observes, "God commands Moses to tell the story of the liberation before He actually performs the liberation."

Brooks describes his own coming to the realization of faith while hiking up to American Lake, which is a high mountain lake near Aspen, Colorado. While sitting on a rock overlooking the lake, he pulled out a book of prayers he had taken with him, one of which is titled, "The Valley of Vision." He reads the first line, "Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly" and observes the mountain peaks as well as the small animals nearby. As he reads on, "Where I live in the depths but see Thee in the heights," he realizes what he calls the "whole inverse logic of faith. The broken heart is the healed heart. The contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit."

He then describes the interfaith@gvsu.edu

"sensation of things clicking into place ... a sensation of deep harmony and membership. ... Life is not just a random collection of molecules that happen to have come together in space. Our lives play out within a certain moral order." Brooks denies this experience as some kind of religious conversion, but "more like a deeper understanding ... seeing the presence of the sacred in the realities of the everyday." While in his valley of personal struggle and seeking meaning, he described some who tried to convert him as some "sort of win for their team" as not at all helpful but a kind of "destructive force." He advises those who seek to help someone in the "middle of any sort of intellectual or spiritual journey: Don't try to lead or influence. Let them be led by that which is summoning them."

Following his hike to American Lake, Brooks says he realized that he was a religious person. As he explains, "To be religious, as I understand it, is to perceive reality through a sacred lens, to feel that there are spiritual realities in physical, imminent things." He quotes writer and Trappist monk Thomas Merton: "Trying to see God is like trying to see your own eyeballs." Brooks then explains that God is "what you see and feel with and through."

As I described in last week's Insight, Brooks' book about seeking the second mountain is very candid and self-disclosing. For some reviewers it is too much, but I have learned from his transparency and willingness to share his journey. Each of our journeys toward meaning takes its own path. It is important not to expect another person to have the same experience as one's own, but to respect, learn and rejoice in the variety of ways we find meaning in our lives.

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