

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Where does meaning for our lives come from?



Douglas Kindschi Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute, GVSU

What mountain are you climbing? This is the theme of New York Times columnist David Brooks' latest book, "The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life." He writes about his own life, including the successes and failures, as well as the valleys that have given him new perspective.

For the first mountain, Brooks explains, we "perform certain life tasks, establish an identity, separate from our parents, cultivate our talents, build secure ego, and try to make a mark in the world. People climbing the first mountain spend a lot of time thinking about reputation management. They are always keeping score." Brooks writes of his own professional success that exceeded his expectations, but did not keep him from being "knocked off that mountain," requiring a re-evaluation of his life. He not only examines his own life but also that of our society.

He continues, "Our society suffers from a crisis of connection, a crisis of solidarity. We live in a culture of hyper-individualism. ... Over the past 60 years we have swung too far toward the self."

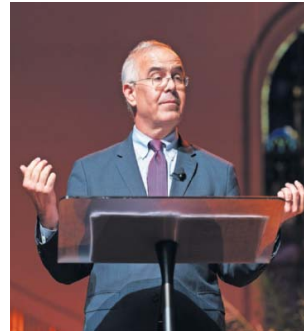
Following the completion of his earlier book, "The Road to Character," he confesses that he "was still enclosed in the prison of individualism. I believed that life is going best when we take individual agency, when we grab the wheel and steer our own ship. I still believed that character is something you build mostly on your own." But he now reports that the five years following that book's publication "have been the most tumultuous years of my life." He was "knocked off that mountain" as his marriage failed and "life put me in the valley."

He sees this happening as well in our society: "built around self-preoccupation, its members become separated from one another, divided and alienated. ... The rot we see in our politics is caused by a rot in our moral and cultural foundations." While individually and collectively we seek happiness and self-fulfillment, we have lost commitment and joy.

The book then explores the commitments we need to make, including commitments to vocation, marriage, community, and a section on philosophy and faith. In this later section he relates his own growing-up years as a combination of his Jewish family and community together with his education in Episcopalian schools and summer camps. He describes a certain kind of Jew who sought to fit in the larger society by becoming Anglophile. He shares the slogan, "Think Yiddish, Act British." His nursery school was St. George's and his elementary school was Grace Church School. Summer camp for 15 years was called Incarnation Camp, "sponsored by the Church of the Incarnation on Madison Avenue."

He describes how he learned the Lord's Prayer, sang the hymns and became familiar with the story of Jesus. But as he writes, "I sort of knew he was on the other team." He describes this dualism in which he was raised: "I was and remain an amphibian, living half in water and half on land." As an adult he sees himself as a "border stalker." Politically "not quite left and not quite right" and professionally "not quite an academic and not quite a journalist." When accused of not being able to make up his mind, he writes, "I wonder if it comes from spending my childhood in the crossroads between two great moral ecologies. I realize that, in theory, both Judaism and Christianity contain both the majestic and the humble, the yearning glory and holy submission."

He describes his life as being the "most



Columnist David Brooks speaks at Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. His book "The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life" documents Brooks' successes and failures, and how he finds meaning in life. Michael A. Schwarz, Washington Post

Christianity Jew on earth or the most Jewish Christian, a plight made survivable by the fact that I was certain God did not exist, so the whole matter was of only theoretical importance." He chooses not to bore the reader with his "decades of atheism," but does include a telling quote from writer David Foster Wallace's commencement address at Kenyon College:

"There is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship — be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH ... or some inviolable set of ethical principles — is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. ... Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out."

Wallace says we already know this at some level. He continued, "It's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables; the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness."

Brooks also writes of the great stories by which we find meaning. For him, "if there are no overarching stories, then life is meaningless." He sees in his own Jewish upbringing how the story of the Exodus is his story of liberation and becomes a "journey of spiritual formation." He doesn't describe his journey as a conversion but sees himself as "more Jewish than ever before. I was always and will always be culturally Jewish, but now I feel religiously Jewish."

Brooks also sees in the story of Jesus a different approach to meaning in life, as expressed by Jesus forgiving his enemies and his teachings in the Beatitudes. In the latter, he writes, he finds something morally sublime and "the source of awe, the moral purity that takes your breath away and toward which everything points ... the ultimate road map for our lives."

For years I have been impressed by Brooks' columns and his weekly appearances on the "PBS NewsHour," but this book is very personal. He exposes his own vulnerability in ways that drew me in and became personal for me as well. It has the potential to change lives.

interfaith@gvsu.edu