



***The Road to Character* by David Brooks.
Random House Publishers, New York, 270 pages.
Review by Capt Brad DeWees**

The “Big Me” culture is the starting point for David Brooks’ *The Road to Character*. You, me, and most everyone else are a part of the “Big Me,” whether we know it or not. If Brooks’ book is successful, though, that may change. We would be better off if it does.

Brooks, a *New York Times* columnist and best-selling author, encountered the “Big Me” on a Sunday evening in Washington, D.C.. He was driving home when a classics radio program aired a broadcast from the end of World War II. The program was jubilant, but in a subdued manner. Brooks noted more humility than celebration in the show. The writer Ernie Pyle wrote a few months before the end of World War II: “We won this war because our men are brave and because of many other things—because of Russia, England, and China and the passage of time and the gift of nature’s materials. We did not win it because destiny created us better than all other people. I hope that in victory we are more grateful than proud.”

When Brooks got home, he turned on the television to an NFL game. After a sack, the defensive lineman did a celebration dance, pounding his chest as he looked down at the opposing quarterback. Brooks realized that he had just seen more pride in the aftermath of a mid-game sack than after victory in the biggest war that humanity has ever witnessed.

The “Big Me” prompted Brooks to take a deeper look into what he calls our collective “moral ecology.” Or, what behaviors we collectively label right and wrong. He argues that moral ecologies of the past focused on the common goal of building inner character, a character founded on humility and directed toward service. Today’s moral ecology focuses on self-realization. Self-realization has its benefits, he argues, but it has gone too far. Today, self-realization too often means self-centeredness.

Brooks describes character with two “Adams”—Adam I and Adam II. Each represents competing desires in life. Adam I wants material gain and societal prestige. Adam II wants to be a good person and serve a higher cause. Adam I stresses the “resume virtues”—those accomplishments we would place on a resume. While Adam II stresses the “eulogy virtues”—those traits that others will remember after we are gone. The definition of character, Brooks argues, now belongs to Adam I. Character is having qualities like work ethic, grit, and determination. Their value is measured in helping us get ahead. *The Road to Character* seeks to reclaim Adam II’s definition.

Brooks eventually gives a 15-point list of the Adam II meaning of character, but the most important of those points, by far, is that human beings are flawed. Left to our own devices we turn selfish and hedonistic. We are, in the words of Immanuel Kant, “crooked timber.”

Yet, we should not despair. The crooked timber view is just a starting point, and even crooked timber can yield a sound structure as long as the architect understands its crookedness. The rest of Brooks' book is about the journey toward understanding our own crookedness and learning to work with it in the service of a higher calling. The emphasis is not so much on character as a final destination, but on traveling the road to character as a higher calling in life.

Brooks offers more than one possible road to character. He builds his work around eight short, moral biographies. Each story is different, though they stress a core theme in their own way: meaning in life comes from moral joy, not pleasure or success; moral joy is built from confronting the crooked timber in our nature; confronting that timber and erecting a sound structure is too much to ask of one person alone, thus we need outside help from friends, loved ones, and a higher purpose in life.

Of the eight biographies, two will stand out to military readers. Brooks describes the road to character for the Eisenhower family, especially Ida Eisenhower, the mother of President Eisenhower. He also describes the road to character for General George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of the Army during World War II. Marshall, perhaps more than any of the other characters, would be an increasingly rare find today. Brooks describes him as an "institutional man," someone who found meaning by serving one institution almost his entire life. Today, calling someone an institutional man would be an insult reserved for the unimaginative and anti-entrepreneurial. Marshall, though, was neither. He was an Army reformer when reform was not something to be praised. What characterized him, above all, was a commitment to service, regardless of the personal costs to his career advancement or personal wealth.

Beyond Eisenhower and Marshall, Brooks describes the lives of Francis Perkins, the Secretary of Labor under President Franklin Roosevelt, Bayard Rustin, an American Civil Rights leader, St. Augustine, the 4th century theologian of the early Christian Church, and several others. A strength of the book is that he has something to offer nearly every walk of life, ethnicity, and belief system.

I found Brooks' work relevant to American culture, but especially relevant to our Air Force. If there is one place that the "Big Me" does not belong, it is amidst our ranks. Most of our professionals already intuitively grasp this point—in that sense Brooks is preaching to the choir. Still, none of us have completed the journey toward character. A work like Brooks' reminds us to be cognizant of the journey, to pay it due respect, and to keep on the path.

The Road to Character, if anything, is a source of energy to keep us moving along that path. Adam I draws his energy from taking an additional step up the ladder of success. Getting ahead, though, does not leave us satisfied; it only begets a greater desire to get ahead. Adam II on the other hand draws his energy from friendship, love, and devotion to a higher cause. These forces are super-abundant. They always keep giving, whether we direct them to a friend, a child, a parent, or a Wingman.

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