

THE
**SECOND
MOUNTAIN**



THE QUEST FOR A MORAL LIFE



'A stirring guide to escaping the prison of self'

OLIVER BURKEMAN

DAVID BROOKS

NO.1 INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

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THE SECOND MOUNTAIN

‘Heartfelt, refreshing, honest . . . a friendly, gentle nudging toward the conclusion that real joy lies in moral commitment’ *Irish Times*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Brooks is a columnist for *The New York Times* and frequent broadcaster. His previous books include the bestsellers *The Social Animal* and *Bobos in Paradise*. His *New York Times* columns reach over 800,000 readers across the globe.

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MOUNTAIN

The Quest for a Moral Life

David Brooks



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*To Anne,
who has brought boundless joy*

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INTRODUCTION

EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE, I MEET A PERSON WHO RADIATES JOY. THESE are people who seem to glow with an inner light. They are kind, tranquil, delighted by small pleasures, and grateful for the large ones. These people are not perfect. They get exhausted and stressed. They make errors in judgment. But they live for others, and not for themselves. They've made unshakable commitments to family, a cause, a community, or a faith. They know why they were put on this earth and derive a deep satisfaction from doing what they have been called to do. Life isn't easy for these people. They've taken on the burdens of others. But they have a serenity about them, a settled resolve. They are interested in you, make you feel cherished and known, and take delight in your good.

When you meet these people, you realize that joy is not just a feeling, it can be an outlook. There are temporary highs we all get after we win some victory, and then there is also this other kind of permanent joy that animates people who are not obsessed with themselves but have given themselves away.

I often find that their life has what I think of as a two-mountain shape. They got out of school, began their career or started a family, and identified the mountain they thought they were meant to climb:

I'm going to be a cop, a doctor, an entrepreneur, what have you. On the first mountain, we all have to perform certain life tasks: establish an identity, separate from our parents, cultivate our talents, build a secure ego, and try to make a mark in the world. People climbing that first mountain spend a lot of time thinking about reputation management. They are always keeping score. How do I measure up? Where do I rank? As the psychologist James Hollis puts it, at that stage we have a tendency to think, I am what the world says I am.

The goals on that first mountain are the normal goals that our culture endorses—to be a success, to be well thought of, to get invited into the right social circles, and to experience personal happiness. It's all the normal stuff: nice home, nice family, nice vacations, good food, good friends, and so on.

Then something happens.

Some people get to the top of that first mountain, taste success, and find it . . . unsatisfying. "Is this all there is?" they wonder. They sense there must be a deeper journey they can take.

Other people get knocked off that mountain by some failure. Something happens to their career, their family, or their reputation. Suddenly life doesn't look like a steady ascent up the mountain of success; it has a different and more disappointing shape.

For still others, something unexpected happens that knocks them crossways: the death of a child, a cancer scare, a struggle with addiction, some life-altering tragedy that was not part of the original plan. Whatever the cause, these people are no longer on the mountain. They are down in the valley of bewilderment or suffering. This can happen at any age, by the way, from eight to eighty-five and beyond. It's never too early or too late to get knocked off your first mountain.

These seasons of suffering have a way of exposing the deepest parts of ourselves and reminding us that we're not the people we thought we were. People in the valley have been broken open. They have been reminded that they are not just the parts of themselves that they put on display. There is another layer to them they have been neglecting, a substrate where the dark wounds, and most powerful yearnings live.

Some shrivel in the face of this kind of suffering. They seem to get more afraid and more resentful. They shrink away from their inner depths in fear. Their lives become smaller and lonelier. We all know old people who nurse eternal grievances. They don't get the respect they deserve. They live their lives as an endless tantrum about some wrong done to them long ago.

But for others, this valley is the making of them. The season of suffering interrupts the superficial flow of everyday life. They see deeper into themselves and realize that down in the substrate, flowing from all the tender places, there is a fundamental ability to care, a yearning to transcend the self and care for others. And when they have encountered this yearning, they are ready to become a whole person. They see familiar things with new eyes. They are finally able to love their neighbor as themselves, not as a slogan but a practical reality. Their life is defined by how they react to their moment of greatest adversity.

The people who are made larger by suffering go on to stage two small rebellions. First, they rebel against their ego ideal. When they were on their first mountain, their ego had some vision of what it was shooting for—some vision of prominence, pleasure, and success. Down in the valley they lose interest in their ego ideal. Of course afterward they still feel and sometimes succumb to their selfish desires. But, overall, they realize the desires of the ego are never going to satisfy the deep regions they have discovered in themselves. They realize, as Henri Nouwen put it, that they are much better than their ego ideal.

Second, they rebel against the mainstream culture. All their lives they've been taking economics classes or living in a culture that teaches that human beings pursue self-interest—money, power, fame. But suddenly they are not interested in what other people tell them to want. They want to want the things that are truly worth wanting. They elevate their desires. The world tells them to be a good consumer, but they want to be the one consumed—by a moral cause. The world tells them to want independence, but they want interdependence—to be enmeshed in a web of warm relationships.

The world tells them to want individual freedom, but they want intimacy, responsibility, and commitment. The world wants them to climb the ladder and pursue success, but they want to be a person for others. The magazines on the magazine rack want them to ask “What can I do to make myself happy?” but they glimpse something bigger than personal happiness.

The people who have been made larger by suffering are brave enough to let parts of their old self die. Down in the valley, their motivations changed. They’ve gone from self-centered to other-centered.

At this point, people realize, Oh, that first mountain wasn’t my mountain after all. There’s another, bigger mountain out there that is actually my mountain. The second mountain is not the opposite of the first mountain. To climb it doesn’t mean rejecting the first mountain. It’s the journey after it. It’s the more generous and satisfying phase of life.

Some people radically alter their lives when this happens. They give up their law practices and move to Tibet. They quit their jobs as consultants and become teachers in inner-city schools. Others stay in their basic fields but spend their time differently. I have a friend who built a successful business in the Central Valley of California. She still has her business but spends most of her time building preschools and health centers for the people who work in her company. She is on her second mountain.

Still others stay in their same jobs and their same marriages, but are transformed. It’s not about self anymore; it’s about a summons. If they are principals, their joy is in seeing their teachers shine. If they work in a company, they no longer see themselves as managers but as mentors; their energies are devoted to helping others get better. They want their organizations to be thick places, where people find purpose, and not thin places, where people come just to draw a salary.

In their book *Practical Wisdom*, psychologist Barry Schwartz and political scientist Kenneth Sharpe tell a story about a hospital janitor named Luke. In the hospital where Luke worked, there was a young man who’d gotten into a fight and was now in a coma, and he wasn’t coming out. Every day, his father sat by his side in silent vigil, and had

done so for six months. One day, Luke came in and cleaned the young man's room. His father wasn't there; he was out getting a smoke. Later that day, Luke ran into the father in the hallway. The father snapped at Luke and accused him of not cleaning his son's room.

The first-mountain response is to see your job as cleaning rooms. "I did clean your son's room," you would snap back. "It was just that you were out smoking." The second-mountain response is to see your job as serving patients and their families. It is to meet their needs at a time of crisis. That response says, This man needs comfort. Clean the room again.

And that's what Luke did. As he told an interviewer later, "I cleaned it so that he could see me cleaning it. . . . I can understand how he could be. It was like six months that his son was there. He'd been a little frustrated, and I cleaned it again. But I wasn't angry with him. I guess I could understand."

Or take Abraham Lincoln. As a young man, Lincoln had a ferocious hunger for fame and power, to the point where he was scared by the intensity of his own hunger. But preserving the Union was a summons so great that considerations of self no longer mattered. He left personal reputation behind and set off on his second mountain.

One day in November 1861, he paid a call to the home of General George McClellan, hoping to press him, in person, to take the fight to the Confederacy more aggressively. When Lincoln arrived, McClellan was not at home, so Lincoln told the butler that he, Secretary of State William Seward, and an aide, John Hay, would wait in the parlor. An hour later, McClellan arrived home and walked past the room where the president was waiting. Lincoln waited another thirty minutes. The butler returned to say that McClellan had decided to retire for the night and would see Lincoln some other time. McClellan was playing power games with Lincoln.

Hay was incensed. Who has the gall to treat the president of the United States with such disrespect? Lincoln, however, was unruffled. "Better at this time," he told Seward and Hay, "not to be making points of etiquette and personal dignity." This wasn't about him. His pride was not at stake. He would be willing to wait forever if he could find a

general who would fight for the Union. By this point Lincoln had given himself away. The cause was the center of his life. His ultimate appeal was to something outside, not inside.

That's the crucial way to tell whether you are on your first or second mountain. Where is your ultimate appeal? To self, or to something outside of self?

If the first mountain is about building up the ego and defining the self, the second mountain is about shedding the ego and losing the self. If the first mountain is about acquisition, the second mountain is about contribution. If the first mountain is elitist—moving up—the second mountain is egalitarian—planting yourself amid those who need, and walking arm in arm with them.

You don't climb the second mountain the way you climb the first mountain. You conquer your first mountain. You identify the summit, and you claw your way toward it. You are conquered by your second mountain. You surrender to some summons, and you do everything necessary to answer the call and address the problem or injustice that is in front of you. On the first mountain you tend to be ambitious, strategic, and independent. On the second mountain you tend to be relational, intimate, and relentless.

It's gotten so I can recognize first- and second-mountain people. The first-mountain people are often cheerful, interesting, and fun to be around. They often have impressive jobs and can take you to an amazing variety of great restaurants. The second-mountain people aren't averse to the pleasures of the world. They delight in a good glass of wine or a nice beach. (There's nothing worse than people who are so spiritualized they don't love the world.) But they have surpassed these pleasures in pursuit of moral joy, a feeling that they have aligned their life toward some ultimate good. If they have to choose, they choose joy.

Their days are often exhausting, because they have put themselves out for people, and those people fill their days with requests and demands. But they are living at a fuller amplitude, activating deeper parts of themselves and taking on broader responsibilities. They have decided that, as C. S. Lewis put it, "The load, or weight, or burden of

my neighbor's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken."

I've come to recognize first- and second-mountain organizations, too. Sometimes you work at a company or go to a college, and it doesn't really leave a mark on you. You get out of it what you came for, and you leave. Second-mountain organizations touch people at their depths and leave a permanent mark. You always know when you meet a Marine, a Morehouse man, a Juilliard pianist, a NASA scientist. These institutions have a collective purpose, a shared set of rituals, a common origin story. They nurture thick relationships and demand full commitment. They don't merely educate; they transform.

THE PLAN

The first purpose of this book is to show how individuals move from the first to the second mountain, to show what that kind of deeper and more joyful life looks like, step-by-step and in concrete detail. Everybody says you should serve a cause larger than yourself, but nobody tells you how.

The second purpose is to show how societies can move from the first to the second mountain. This is ultimately a book about renewal, how things that are divided and alienated can find new wholeness. Our society suffers from a crisis of connection, a crisis of solidarity. We live in a culture of hyper-individualism. There is always a tension between self and society, between the individual and the group. Over the past sixty years we have swung too far toward the self. The only way out is to rebalance, to build a culture that steers people toward relation, community, and commitment—the things we most deeply yearn for, yet undermine with our hyper-individualistic way of life.

In the first section I'm going to give a fuller account of how the two-mountain life happens. I'll take us up the slope of the first mountain, down the back slope into the valley, and then up the second mountain. Please don't take this metaphor too literally. There is, of course, no one formula that covers how all lives happen. (My wife, for example, seems to have climbed her second mountain first. Unlike

most of us, she was raised in an environment that emphasized moral commitment, not individual success.) I'm using this two-mountain metaphor to render in narrative form two different moral ethos by which people can live—a life lived for self and a life lived as a gift for others. I want to show how this first mode, which is common in our culture, doesn't satisfy. I'll describe some of the experiences people have on their way to more fulfilling lives, and share the important truths they discover. Most of us get better at living, get deeper and wiser as we go, and this book seeks to capture how that happens.

In the second half of the book, I'll describe how people live with a second-mountain mentality. People on the first mountain have lives that are mobile and lightly attached. People on the second mountain are deeply rooted and deeply committed. The second-mountain life is a committed life. When I'm describing how second-mountain people live, what I'm really describing is how these people made maximal commitments to others and how they live them out in fervent, all-in ways. These people are not keeping their options open. They are planted. People on the second mountain have made strong commitments to one or all of these four things:

- A vocation
- A spouse and family
- A philosophy or faith
- A community

A commitment is making a promise to something without expecting a reward. A commitment is falling in love with something and then building a structure of behavior around it for those moments when love falters. In this second section of this book I will try to describe commitment making: how people are called by a vocation and then live it out; how they decide who to marry and thrive in marriage; how they come up with their philosophy of life and how they experience faith; how they are seized by a desire to serve their community; and how they work with others to help their communities prosper.

The fulfillment of our lives depends on how well we choose and live out those sometimes clashing commitments.

Some of the people I'll be describing in these pages lived their lives at a very high level. Realistically, you and I are not going to live as self-sacrificially as they did. We'll fall short because we're ordinary human beings, and we're still going to be our normal self-centered selves more than we care to admit. But it is still important to set a high standard. It is still important to be inspired by the examples of others and to remember that a life of deep commitments is possible. When we fall short, it will be because of our own limitations, not because we had an inadequate ideal.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

The first- and second-mountain distinction might sound a little like the résumé virtues versus eulogy virtues distinction I made in my last book, *The Road to Character*. And now I should confess that I'm writing this book in part to compensate for the limitations of that one. The people I described in *The Road to Character* have a lot to teach us. But a book is written in a particular time, at a particular spot on one's journey. The five years since I finished that book have been the most tumultuous years of my life. Those years—sometimes painful, sometimes joyous—have been an advanced education in the art and pitfalls of living. They have taken me a lot further down the road toward understanding.

When I wrote *The Road to Character*, I 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. You identify your core sin and then, mustering all your willpower, you make yourself strong in your weakest places.

I no longer believe that character formation is mostly an individual task, or is achieved on a person-by-person basis. I no longer believe that character building is like going to the gym: You do your exercises and you build up your honesty, courage, integrity, and grit. I now

think good character is a by-product of giving yourself away. You love things that are worthy of love. You surrender to a community or cause, make promises to other people, build a thick jungle of loving attachments, lose yourself in the daily act of serving others as they lose themselves in the daily acts of serving you. Character is a good thing to have, and there's a lot to be learned on the road to character. But there's a better thing to have—moral joy. And that serenity arrives as you come closer to embodying perfect love.

Furthermore, I no longer believe that the cultural and moral structures of our society are fine, and all we have to do is fix ourselves individually. Over the past few years, as a result of personal, national, and global events, I have become radicalized.

I now think the rampant individualism of our current culture is a catastrophe. The emphasis on self—individual success, self-fulfillment, individual freedom, self-actualization—is a catastrophe. I now think that living a good life requires a much vaster transformation. It's not enough to work on your own weaknesses. The whole cultural paradigm has to shift from the mindset of hyper-individualism to the relational mindset of the second mountain.

WHY WE ARE HERE

I've written this book, in part, to remind myself of the kind of life I want to live. Those of us who are writers work out our stuff in public, even under the guise of pretending to write about someone else. In other words, we try to teach what it is that we really need to learn. My first mountain was an insanely lucky one. I achieved far more professional success than I ever expected to. But that climb turned me into a certain sort of person: aloof, invulnerable, and uncommunicative, at least when it came to my private life. I sidestepped the responsibilities of relationship. My ex-wife and I have an agreement that we don't talk about our marriage and divorce in public. But when I look back generally on the errors and failures and sins of my life, they tend to be failures of omission, failures to truly show up for the people I should have been close to. They tend to be the sins of withdrawal: evasion, workaholism, conflict avoidance, failure to empathize, and a failure to express myself openly. I

have two old and dear friends who live 250 miles from me, for example, and their side of the friendship has required immense forbearance and forgiveness, for all the times I've been too busy, too disorganized, too distant when they were in need or just available. I look at those dear friendships with a gratitude mixed with shame, and this pattern—not being present to what I love because I prioritize time over people, productivity over relationship—is a recurring motif in my life.

The wages of sin are sin. My faults accumulated and then crashed down upon me in 2013. In that year, life put me in the valley. The realities that used to define my life fell away. Our marriage of twenty-seven years ended, and, in the wake of that failed commitment, I moved into an apartment. My children were emerging into adulthood and had either left home for college or were preparing to. I still got to see them when we went out to dinner and such, but I missed those fifteen-second encounters in the hallway or kitchen at home. I had spent my adult life in the conservative movement, but my conservatism was no longer the prevailing conservatism, so I found myself intellectually and politically unattached, too. Much of my social life had been spent in conservative circles, and those connections drifted away. I realized I had a lot of friendships that didn't run deep. Few people confided in me, because I did not give off a vibe that encouraged vulnerability. I was too busy, on the move.

I was unplanted, lonely, humiliated, scattered. I remember walking through that period in a state that resembled permanent drunkenness—my emotions were all on the surface, my playlists were all Irish heart-break songs by Sinéad O'Connor and Snow Patrol. I was throwing myself needily upon my friends in ways that are embarrassing now if I stop to remember them, which I try not to. I was unattached, wondering what the rest of my life should be, confronting the problems of a twenty-two-year-old with the mind of a fifty-two-year-old.

Having failed at a commitment, I've spent the ensuing five years thinking and reading about how to do commitments well, how to give your life meaning after worldly success has failed to fulfill. This book is a product of that search. Writing it was my attempt to kick myself in my own rear, part of my continual effort to write my way to a better

life. “A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us,” Kafka wrote. It should wake us up and hammer at our skull. Writing this book has served that purpose for me.

I’ve also written it, I hope, for you. When it comes to what we writers do, I like to apply an observation by D. T. Niles: We are like beggars who try to show other beggars where we found bread. You have to get only a few pages into this book to realize that I quote a lot of people wiser than myself. I mean a *lot* of people. I’m unapologetic about this. It’s occurred to me many times over the course of writing this book that maybe I’m not really a writer. I’m a teacher or middleman. I take the curriculum of other people’s knowledge and I pass it along.

Finally, I write it as a response to the current historical moment. For six decades the worship of the self has been the central preoccupation of our culture—molding the self, investing in the self, expressing the self. Capitalism, the meritocracy, and modern social science have normalized selfishness; they have made it seem that the only human motives that are real are the self-interested ones—the desire for money, status, and power. They silently spread the message that giving, care, and love are just icing on the cake of society.

When a whole society is built around self-preoccupation, its members become separated from one another, divided and alienated. And that is what has happened to us. We are down in the valley. The rot we see in our politics is caused by a rot in our moral and cultural foundations—in the way we relate to one another, in the way we see ourselves as separable from one another, in the individualistic values that have become the water in which we swim. The first-mountain culture has proven insufficient, as it always does.

Our society has become a conspiracy against joy. It has put too much emphasis on the individuating part of our consciousness—individual reason—and too little emphasis on the bonding parts of our consciousness, the heart and soul. We’ve seen a shocking rise of mental illness, suicide, and distrust. We have become too cognitive when we should be more emotional; too utilitarian when we should be using a moral lens; too individualistic when we should be more communal.

So we as people and as a society have to find our second mountain. This doesn't mean rejecting the things we achieved on the first mountain—the nice job, the nice home, the pleasures of a comfortable life. We all need daily ego boosts throughout our lives. But it does require a shift in culture—a shift in values and philosophy, a renegotiation of the structure of power in our society. It's about shifting from one mode of thinking toward another. It's about finding an ethos that puts commitment making at the center of things.

The good news is that what we give to our community in pennies, our communities give back to us in dollars. If there is one thing I have learned over the past five years, it is that the world is more enchanted, stranger, more mystical, and more interconnected than anything we could have envisioned when we were on the first mountain.

Most of the time we aim too low. We walk in shoes too small for us. We spend our days shooting for a little burst of approval or some small career victory. But there's a joyful way of being that's not just a little bit better than the way we are currently living; it's a quantum leap better. It's as if we're all competing to get a little closer to a sun-lamp. If we get up and live a different way, we can bathe in real sunshine.

When I meet people leading lives of deep commitment, this fact hits me: Joy is real.

JOY

Before I start describing the journey across the two mountains, I want to pause over that last point—the one about joy being real. Our public conversation is muddled about the definition of a good life. Often, we say a good life is a happy life. We live, as it says in our founding document, in pursuit of happiness.

In all forms of happiness we feel good, elated, uplifted. But the word “happiness” can mean a lot of different things. So it's important to make a distinction between happiness and joy.

What's the difference? Happiness involves a victory for the self, an expansion of self. Happiness comes as we move toward our goals, when things go our way. You get a big promotion. You graduate from col-

lege. Your team wins the Super Bowl. You have a delicious meal. Happiness often has to do with some success, some new ability, or some heightened sensual pleasure.

Joy tends to involve some transcendence of self. It's when the skin barrier between you and some other person or entity fades away and you feel fused together. Joy is present when mother and baby are gazing adoringly into each other's eyes, when a hiker is overwhelmed by beauty in the woods and feels at one with nature, when a gaggle of friends are dancing deliriously in unison. Joy often involves self-forgetting. Happiness is what we aim for on the first mountain. Joy is a by-product of living on the second mountain.

We can help create happiness, but we are seized by joy. We are pleased by happiness, but we are transformed by joy. When we experience joy we often feel we have glimpsed into a deeper and truer layer of reality. A narcissist can be happy, but a narcissist can never be joyful, because the surrender of self is the precise thing a narcissist can't do. A narcissist can't even conceive of joy. That's one of the problems with being stuck on the first mountain: You can't even see what the second mountain offers.

My core point is that happiness is good, but joy is better. Just as the second mountain is a fuller and richer phase of life after the first mountain, joy is a fuller and richer state beyond happiness. Moreover, while happiness tends to be fickle and fleeting, joy can be fundamental and enduring. The more you are living a committed life well, the more joy will be your steady state, the frame of mind you carry around with you and shine on others. You will become a joyful person. So throughout this book as in life, joy is our north star, our navigating point. If we steer toward joy, we will wind up at the right spot.

THE LEVELS OF JOY

A few years ago, I started collecting joy. Or, more accurately, I started collecting accounts of joy. I collected people's descriptions of what it felt like when life seemed to be at its peak, in those moments when life felt fullest, most meaningful, and most complete.

When I look over my collection now, I realize that there are dif-

ferent layers of joy. First, there is physical joy. There are moments when you are doing some physical activity, often in rhythm with other people, when you experience flow. In *Anna Karenina*, Levin is out cutting grass with the men who work on the farm. At first Levin is clumsy with his scythe, but then he learns the motion and cuts clean, straight rows. “The longer Levin mowed, the more often he felt those moments of oblivion during which it was no longer his arms that swung the scythe, but the scythe itself that lent motion to his whole body, full of life and conscious of itself, and, as if by magic, without a thought of it, the work got rightly and neatly done on its own. These were the most blissful moments.”

Flow is especially wonderful when it is collective flow, something you experience with your team or unit. My former history professor William McNeill experienced that after he was drafted into the army in 1941. In boot camp he was taught to march with the other men in his unit. He began to experience strange sensations while marching: “Words are inadequate to describe the emotion aroused by the prolonged movement in unison that drilling involved. A sense of pervasive well-being is what I recall; more specifically, a strange sense of personal enlargement; a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than life, thanks to participation in collective ritual.”

The next layer of joy is collective effervescence, celebratory dance. In almost every culture, stretching back through time, joyous moments are celebrated and enhanced with rhythmic dancing. I write this the morning after attending the wedding of one of my friends, an Orthodox Jew. After the ceremony, we men danced around the groom as the music raced. We were tightly packed, circling around him, and he was in the center of the whirl, jumping up and down with wild abandon. Every few minutes he would call different people—his grandfather, a friend, even me—to come to the white-hot center and bounce with joy with him and swing our arms and roar in laughter.

The writer Zadie Smith once described being in a nightclub in London in 1999. She was wandering about, looking for her friends, wondering where her handbag was, when suddenly a song by A Tribe Called Quest came on. At that point, she wrote,

A rail-thin man with enormous eyes reached across a sea of bodies for my hand. He kept asking me the same thing over and over: “*You feeling it?*” I was. My ridiculous heels were killing me. I was terrified I might die, yet I felt simultaneously overwhelmed with delight that “Can I Kick It?” should happen to be playing at this precise moment in the history of the world, and was now morphing into “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” I took the man’s hand. The top of my head flew away. We danced and danced. We gave ourselves up to joy.

In this kind of joy, like all joy, the cage of self-consciousness falls away, and people are fused with those around them. This kind of joy is all present tense; people are captured by and fully alive in the moment.

The third layer of joy is what you might call emotional joy. This is the sudden bursting of love that you see, for example, on the face of a mother when she first lays eyes on her infant. Dorothy Day captured it beautifully: “If I had written the greatest book, composed the greatest symphony, painted the most beautiful painting or carved the most exquisite figure, I could not have felt the more exalted creator than I did when they placed my child in my arms. . . . No human creature could receive or contain so vast a flood of love and joy as I felt after the birth of my child. With this came the need to worship, to adore.”

This kind of joy is intimate and powerful. I often speak of the time, more than a decade ago now, when I came home from work one summer evening and pulled into the driveway on the side of the house and found my three kids, then twelve, nine, and four, playing with a plastic ball in the backyard. They were kicking it in the air and then racing one another across the grass to catch it. They were giggling and tumbling all over one another and having a deliriously good time. I sat there in the car looking at this tableau of family happiness through the windshield. The summer sun glowed through the trees. My lawn, for some reason, looked perfect. I experienced a sort of liquid joy and overflowing gratitude that seemed to stop time, that made my heart swell. I’m sure all parents have experienced something like this.

Emotional joy can often happen early in a romantic relationship. Fresh lovers glow at each other across a picnic blanket. Or it can happen later. Old couples can feel like they are deeper in each other than they are in themselves. You'll hear people in happy marriages talk this way: When I make love to her, I disappear.

The writer David Whyte makes the core point. "Joy," he writes,

is the meeting place, of deep intentionality and self-forgetting, the bodily alchemy of what lies inside us in communion with what formally seemed outside, but is now neither, but becomes a living frontier, a voice speaking between us and the world: dance, laughter, affection, skin touching skin, singing in the car, music in the kitchen, the quiet irreplaceable and companionable presence of a daughter: the sheer intoxicating beauty of the world inhabited as an edge between what we previously thought was us and what we thought was other than us.

The fourth layer of joy is spiritual joy. Sometimes joy comes not through movement, not through love, but from an unexpected contact with something that seems boundaryless, pure spirit. Joy comes with a sensation that, as the writer Jerry Root, citing C. S. Lewis, put it, all reality is iconoclastic—the world is enchanted by a mystical force.

One day, while he was living in Prague, the poet Christian Wiman was working in his kitchen when a falcon landed on the windowsill, about three feet from him. The bird scanned the trees below and the building across the street, but didn't yet turn to look at Wiman. Wiman was transfixed. He called out to his girlfriend, who was in the bath, to come see, and she came out, dripping, and stood next to him, staring at the falcon. "Wish for something," she whispered. Then the falcon turned its head and locked his eyes with Wiman's, and Wiman felt some bottom fall out within him. He later wrote a poem about that moment, which includes this stanza:

*For a long moment I'm still in
I wished and wished and wished*

*the moment would not end.
And just like that it vanished.*

This kind of spiritual joy often involves mystical attunement. Tolstoy's mother died when he was a young boy, and before the funeral he found himself in a room alone with her open casket. He climbed up on a chair to look down on her and experienced a strange peacefulness. "Somehow as I gazed, an irrepressible, incomprehensible power seemed to compel me," he later wrote. "For a time I lost all sense of existence and experienced a kind of vague blissfulness which though grand and sweet, was also sad." Then a man walked into the room and Tolstoy realized that the man might think him unfeeling if he wore a blissful look on his face, so to keep with social convention, he pretended to burst out crying. "This egotistic consciousness completely annulled any element of sincerity in my woe."

We are climbing now, to higher and higher experiences of joy. The fifth layer of joy is transcendent joy, feeling at one with nature, the universe, or God. In *Backpacking with the Saints*, Belden Lane describes the experience of hiking this way:

Whenever I plunge into wilderness, my body and the environment move in and out of each other in an intimate pattern of exchange. I wade through water and inhale air filled with the scent of honeysuckle. I'm wrapped in cobwebs and pierced by briars. I swallow gnats drawn to the sweat on my body and feel the rocks on the trail through my boots. Where I "end" and everything else "begins" isn't always clear. What seems to be "me" doesn't stop at the fixed boundary of my skin.

Such transcendent moments can last only a few minutes, but they can alter a lifetime. People have a sense that they are seeing into the hidden reality of things, and afterward they can never go back and be content to watch pale shadows dancing on the wall of the cave. Ralph Waldo Emerson built a philosophy off such moments of transcendence. "Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe

air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become the transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me.”

This kind of joy is a delicious, if painful, longing. It starts with a taste of something eternal and then the joy consists of longing for that taste again. The joy, as C. S. Lewis put it, is not the satisfaction of the longing but the longing itself. Saint Augustine felt God’s love as a delicious and fervent hunger: “You called, shouted, broke through my deafness; you flared, blazed, banished my blindness; you lavished your fragrance, I gasped; and now I pant for you; I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst; you touched me, and I burned for your peace.”

Other people, though not explicitly religious, also experience moments when love seems to shine down on them. Jules Evans was skiing at age twenty-four when he fell off a cliff, dropped thirty feet, and broke his leg and back. “As I lay there I felt immersed in love and light. I’d been suffering from emotional problems for six years and feared my ego was permanently damaged. In that moment, I knew that I was OK, I was loved, that there was something in me that could not be damaged, call it ‘the soul,’ or ‘the self,’ ‘pure consciousness’ or what have you.”

In 2016, the Gallup organization asked Americans if they had had a mystical experience, a moment when they went beyond their ordinary self and felt connected to some infinity. Eighty-four percent of respondents said they had had such an experience at least once, even as 75 percent said there’s a social taboo against speaking about it in public.

MORAL JOY

Here I want to shift now to the highest layer of joy, which I’ll call moral joy. I say this is the highest form of joy in part because this is the kind that even the skeptics can’t explain away. The skeptics could say that all those other kinds of passing joy are just brain chemicals in some weird formation that happened to have kicked in to produce odd sensations. But moral joy has an extra feature. It can become permanent. Some people live joyfully day by day. Their daily actions are

aligned with their ultimate commitments. They have given themselves away, united and wholeheartedly. They are so grateful to have found their place and taken their stand. They have the inner light.

Pope Francis seems to have this, and so, it is said, do Bishop Tutu and Paul Farmer. So do Geoffrey Canada, who founded the Harlem Children's Zone, and the great cellist Yo-Yo Ma. I once was seated with the Dalai Lama at a lunch in Washington. He didn't say anything particularly illuminating or profound during the lunch, but every once in a while he just burst out laughing for no apparent reason. He would laugh, and I wanted to be polite, so I would laugh, too. He laughed. I laughed. He is just a joyful man. Ebullience is his resting state.

This kind of moral joy can start out as a surge of what the social psychologists call "moral elevation." For example, a researcher working for the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt interviewed a woman who volunteered at the Salvation Army one winter's morning with a few other people from her church. One of the other volunteers offered to give a bunch of them a ride home. It had been snowing solidly that morning. As they were driving through a residential neighborhood they saw an older lady standing in her driveway with a snow shovel. At the next intersection one of the guys in the backseat asked to be dropped off there. They let him out of the car, figuring he was close to home.

But instead of going into some nearby house, he walked up to the lady, took her shovel, and started shoveling her driveway. One of the women in the car witnessed this and recalled, "I felt like jumping out of the car and hugging this guy. I felt like singing and running, or skipping and laughing. Just being active. I felt like saying nice things about people. Writing a beautiful poem or love song. Playing in the snow like a child. Telling everybody about his deed. . . . My spirit was lifted even higher than it already was. I was joyous, happy, smiling, energized. I went home and gushed to my suite-mates, who clutched at their hearts." As Haidt notes, powerful moments of moral elevation seem to push a mental reset button, wiping out feelings of cynicism and replacing them with feelings of hope, love, and moral inspiration.

These moments of elevation are energizing. People feel strongly motivated to do something good themselves, to act, to dare, to sacrifice, to help others.

When people make generosity part of their daily routine, they re-fashion who they are. The interesting thing about your personality, your essence, is that it is not more or less permanent like your leg bone. Your essence is changeable, like your mind. Every action you take, every thought you have, changes you, even if just a little, making you a little more elevated or a little more degraded. If you do a series of good deeds, the habit of other-centeredness becomes gradually engraved into your life. It becomes easier to do good deeds down the line. If you lie or behave callously or cruelly toward someone, your personality degrades, and it is easier for you to do something even worse later on. As the criminologists say, the people who commit murder don't start there. They have to walk through a lot of doors before they get to the point where they can take another human life.

The people who radiate a permanent joy have given themselves over to lives of deep and loving commitment. Giving has become their nature, and little by little they have made their souls incandescent. There's always something flowing out of the interiority of our spirit. For some people it's mostly fear or insecurity. For the people we call joyful, it's mostly gratitude, delight, and kindness.

How do you build your personality to glow in this way? You might think a bright personality would come from an unburdened life—a life of pleasures and constant delights. But if you closely look at joyful people, you notice that very often the people who have the most incandescent souls have taken on the heaviest burdens.

Benjamin Hardy is a writer who described his decision to take on three foster children in *Inc.* magazine. “Before having that personal load to carry, I was somewhat complacent. I lacked the urgency. I didn't have the traction to move forward,” he writes. “A life of ease is not the pathway to growth and happiness. On the contrary, a life of ease is how you get stuck and confused in life.” Taking on those kids meant knowing more about frustration, anxiety, and fatigue, but also elation, sweetness, and especially caring love. Happiness can be tasted

alone. But permanent joy comes out of an enmeshed and embedded life. Happiness happens when a personal desire is fulfilled. Permanent moral joy seems to emerge when desire is turned outward for others.

Gregory Boyle ministers to gang members in Los Angeles and captures the difference between a life lived for self and one lived for others: “Compassion is always, at its most authentic, about a shift from the cramped world of self-preoccupation into a more expansive place of fellowship.” It’s one of the inescapable truisms of life: You have to lose yourself to find yourself, give yourself away to get everything back.

You might think this kind of life of joyous service is rare. But in the spring of 2018, I began a project called Weave: The Social Fabric Project at the Aspen Institute. The idea is to shine attention on the people who are doing the grassroots work of community building and relationship repair. In the course of that work I’ve found myself surrounded by incandescent people almost every day.

There is Stephanie Hruzek in Houston, sitting cross-legged on the floor with kids at FamilyPoint, her after-school program, gleefully repeating tongue twisters with them: “Say ‘Unique New York’ ten times fast!” There is Kate Garvin in Colorado, being greeted by squeals of delight when she comes across a Somali refugee she is helping to integrate into the local school system. There’s Don Flow, who owns a chain of car dealerships in North Carolina and who radiates a quiet satisfaction showing the community center he built in Winston-Salem. There’s Harlan Crow, a real estate developer whose every moment, it seems, is devoted to helping the people around him be more comfortable.

There is Mack McCarter, founder of Community Renewal International in Shreveport, Louisiana. Mack is in his seventies. He’s one of those people when the first time he walks into a coffee shop he learns everybody’s first name and has a joke and story for them all. By his third visit he’s everybody’s old friend. By his fifth, they want him to officiate at their wedding. People just want to be around the guy because he is flowing joy.

I ask these people what brings joy to their daily lives. The answer

is always a variation on the same theme—some moment when they brought delight to another. “There is joy in self-forgetfulness,” Helen Keller observed. “So I try to make the light in others’ eyes my sun, the music in others’ ears my symphony, the smile on others’ lips my happiness.”

Miroslav Volf is a professor at Yale who has made studying joy his specialty. Joy is not a self-standing emotion, he concludes. It is the crown of a well-lived life. “Joy is not merely external to the good life, a mint leaf on the cake’s whipped cream. Rather, the good life expresses and manifests itself in joy. Joy is the emotional dimension of life that goes well and that is led well, a positive affective response to life going well and life being led well.”

Happiness is the proper goal for people on their first mountain. And happiness is great. But we only get one life, so we might as well use it hunting for big game: to enjoy happiness, but to surpass happiness toward joy.

Happiness tends to be individual; we measure it by asking, “Are you happy?” Joy tends to be self-transcending. Happiness is something you pursue; joy is something that rises up unexpectedly and sweeps over you. Happiness comes from accomplishments; joy comes from offering gifts. Happiness fades; we get used to the things that used to make us happy. Joy doesn’t fade. To live with joy is to live with wonder, gratitude, and hope. People who are on the second mountain have been transformed. They are deeply committed. The outpouring of love has become a steady force.

PART I

The Two Mountains

ONE

Moral Ecologies

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG TV PUNDIT, I WORKED WITH JIM LEHRER, WHO cofounded a program that is now called the *PBS NewsHour*. When Jim was on the air and delivering the news, his face tended to be warm but stoical, because he did not think he should be the story; the news should be the story. But when the camera was not on him, his face was incredibly expressive. When I was talking on our segment and I said something cheap or crass, I would see his mouth turn down in displeasure. But when I said something that was useful, civil, or amusing, I would see his eyes crinkle with pleasure. For ten years, working with a man I deeply admired, I tried to behave in a way that would produce the eye crinkle and not the mouth downturn.

Lehrer never had to formally tell me how to behave, but in this subtle and wordless way, he trained me to meet the *NewsHour* standards of what is right. And he didn't offer these reactions just to me; he offered them to everyone on staff, show after show, year after year. In this way, he created the *NewsHour* way of being, a moral ecology in which certain values were prioritized, and certain ways of being ex-

pected. It's been several years since Lehrer retired, but the culture he instilled still defines the *NewsHour* today.

We all grew up in one moral ecology or another. We all create microcultures around us by the way we lead our lives and the vibes we send out to those around us. One of the greatest legacies a person can leave is a moral ecology—a system of belief and behavior that lives on after they die.

Some moral ecologies are local, in a home or office, but some are vast and define whole eras and civilizations. The classical Greeks and Romans had their honor code with its vision of immortal fame. In the late nineteenth century, Parisian artists invented a bohemian code celebrating individual freedom and wild creativity, while across the Channel, Victorian morality was beginning to form, with its strict codes of propriety and respectability. Moral ecologies subtly guide how you dress, how you talk, what you admire and disdain, and how you define your ultimate purpose.

Moral ecologies are collective responses to the big problems of a specific moment. For example, around the middle third of the twentieth century, people in the Northern Hemisphere faced a great depression and a cataclysmic world war. Big problems required big institutional responses. People joined armies, formed unions, worked at big companies. They bonded tightly together as warring nations. Therefore, a culture developed that emphasized doing your duty, fitting into institutions, conforming to the group, deferring to authority, not trying to stick out or get too big for your britches. This group-oriented moral ecology could be summed up by the phrase “We’re All in This Together.”

The spirit of this culture was nicely captured in a book by Alan Ehrenhalt called *The Lost City*, about some of the communities around and in Chicago in the 1950s. There wasn’t a lot of emphasis put on individual choice back then. If you were a star baseball player like Ernie Banks, you didn’t have the option of becoming a free agent. You spent your career as a Chicago Cub. If you had the wrong accent or the wrong skin color or were the wrong gender, you probably couldn’t get

a job at one of the fancy office buildings downtown. But people back then tended to have steady attachments and a stable connection to place. They did their duty for their institutions.

If you were a man who lived on Chicago's South Side, there's a good chance you followed your father and grandfather into the Nabisco plant, the largest bakery in the world at that time, and joined the union, the Bakery and Confectionery Workers International.

The houses were small, there was no air-conditioning, and TV had not yet penetrated, so when the weather was warm, social life was conducted on the front stoops, in the alleys, and with children running from house to house all day. A young homeowner was enveloped in a series of communal activities that, as Ehrenhalt puts it, "only the most determined loner could escape: barbecues, coffee klatches, volleyball games, baby-sitting co-ops and the constant bartering of household goods."

If you went to the bank you went to the local bank, Talman Federal Savings and Loan. If you bought meat you went to the local butcher, Bertucci's. Sixty-two percent of Americans in those days said they were active church members, and if you lived in that neighborhood in Chicago, you went to St. Nick's Parish, where you listened to the kindly Father Fennessy say mass in Latin. You probably sent your boys to the local parochial school, where they sat in neat rows and quaked under the iron discipline of Father Lynch.

If you went into politics, you probably couldn't win as a freelancer. But you could join Boss Daley's machine and thrive, provided you did what your authority figures told you to do. For example, John Fary served the machine in the Illinois state legislature, and when he was sixty-four he was rewarded with a seat in the U.S. Congress. When asked what he was going to do once elected to Congress, he told the press, "I will go to Washington to help represent Mayor Daley. For twenty-one years, I represented the mayor in the legislature, and he was always right." He did his duty.

The ethos nurtured the sort of rich, community life that many people pine for today. If somebody asked you where you were from,