



TITLE: What Happened to Character?

Speaker: David Brooks

Date:

Venue: RSA, 8 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6EZ

NB

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David Brooks: We live in a world of social media. You broadcast yourself, you go for likes. I was seated next to a young woman on a plane who spent the two hours of our flight looking at her phone, looking at videos of herself pulling faces – a level of self-interest that is unusual. And we've had a generation, a shift in moral philosophy from a culture that said you're broken inside, you have to work on your own weakness, we've gone to a culture that says, you're pretty wonderful inside. And the clichés of what we tell our young - follow your passion and be true to yourself - trust yourself, love yourself, have created an enlarged sense of self. We've told a couple of generations how great they are and they believed us.

And so in 1950 a polling organisation asked American 16 year olds, are you a very important person? And at that point 12% said yes. They asked the same question in the 1990s and at that point 80% said yes. Psychologists have a thing called the Narcissism Test where they say, I'm going to read you a bunch of statements - does this apply to you? And those statements include things like, "I find it easy to manipulate people because I'm so remarkable", or "somebody should write a biography about me"; "I love to look at my body"; and the median narcissism score has gone up 30% over the last 20 years.

And with this has gone an increased desire for fame. Fame used to rank at the bottom of what people wanted out of life, now it ranks second or third after financial security. And so junior high school girls in the US were asked, would you rather be a celebrity's personal assistant - Justin Bieber's personal assistant, or president of Harvard? And by three to one they'd rather be Justin Bieber's personal assistant. Though to be fair I asked the president of Harvard and she would rather be Justin Bieber's personal assistant. But the more serious effect is that people lose their capacity to conduct a sophisticated moral conversation. I don't think people are necessarily bad but I think they're morally inarticulate. A sociologist

named Christian Smith asked people: can you name your last moral dilemma? And 70% of them couldn't name a moral dilemma. They'd say, I pulled into a parking space but I didn't have any money. We can tell by looking at all the magazines, all the newspapers and all the books that get published what words are being used and over the last generation economic words have been rising in frequency, moral words have been dropping. Gratitude is down 49%. Humbleness is down 52% and kindness is down 56%. We're just talking about this stuff less and we talk about economics more.

And so we live in a romantic culture. We think we're wonderful inside and the problems of society are outside and the people of great character - it's not because they have great self-discipline, it's because they have an amazing ability to commit to other things.

The eulogy virtues are the things they say about you after you're dead, whether you're honest, courageous, straightforward, capable of great love and we'd all want to lead a life where the eulogy virtues are more important. We'd all want to be remembered for those. But we live in a society and certainly an educational system that spends a lot more time on the CV virtues and a lot of us are more clear on how to build a good career than how to build a good inner character.