

The Road to Character by David Brooks, Random House, New York, NY, 2015. (41 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

1. Two Natures in Conflict Part of Eisenhower’s Background

That concept—conquering your own soul—was a significant one in the moral ecology in which Eisenhower grew up. It was based on the idea that deep inside we are dual in our nature. We are fallen, but also splendidly endowed. We have a side to our nature that is sinful—selfish, deceiving, and self-deceiving—but we have another side to our nature that is in God’s image, that seeks transcendence and virtue. The essential drama of life is the drama to construct character, which is an engraved set of discipline habits, a settled disposition to do good. The cultivation of Adam II was seen as a necessary foundation for Adam I to flourish. [page 53]

2. Building Character Struggling against Internal Sins

The final reason sin is a necessary part of our mental furniture is that without it, the whole method of character building dissolves. From time immemorial, people have achieved glory by achieving great external things, but they have built character by struggling against their internal sins. People become solid, stable, and worthy of self-respect because they have defeated or at least struggled with their own demons. If you take away the concept of sin, then you take away the thing the good person struggles against. [page 55]

3. Eisenhower’s Mother – No Place for Temptation

Ida Eisenhower was funny and warm-hearted, but stood sentry against backsliding. She forbade dancing and card games and drinking in her home precisely because of her estimation of the power of sin was so high. Since self-control is a muscle that tires easily, it is much better to avoid temptation in the first place rather than try to resist it once it arises. [page 56]

4. Building Habits

In 1877, the psychologist William James wrote a short treatise called “Habit.” When you are trying to lead a decent life, he wrote, you want to make your nervous system your ally and not your enemy. You want to engrave certain habits so deep that they will become natural and instinctual. James wrote that when you set out to engrave a habit—say, going on a diet or always telling the truth—you want to launch yourself with as “strong and decided an initiative as possible.” Make the beginning of a new habit a major event in your life. Then, “never suffer an exception” until the habit is firmly rooted in your life. A single slip undoes many fine acts of self-control. Then take advantage of every occasion to practice your habit. Practice a gratuitous exercise of self-discipline every day. [page 57]

5. Rewiring the Brain

Change your behavior and eventually you will rewire your brain. [page 57]

6. Practice Self-control

Ida emphasized the importance of practicing small acts of self-control: follow the rules of etiquette when sitting at the table, dressing in one's Sunday best when going to church, keeping the Sabbath afterward, using formal diction in letter writing as a display of deference and respect, eating plain food, avoiding luxury. If you are in the army, keep your uniform neat and your shoes polished. If you are at home, keep everything tidy. Practice the small outward disciplines. [pages 57-58]

7. Living Life as an Offering

The parent focusing on the love of his or her children will drive them to events every day after day, will get up in the middle of the night when they are sick, will drop everything when they are in crisis. The lover wants to sacrifice, to live life as an offering. A person motivated by such feelings will be a bit less likely to sin. [page 59]

8. Live in a Sweet, Loving Way

The most powerful way to fight sin is by living in a sweet, loving way. It's how you do the jobs you do, whether it's a prestigious job or not. As others have noted, God loves adverbs. [page 59]

9. Rely on Planning

Later, in *At Ease*, he [Ike Eisenhower] wrote, "Always try to associate yourself closely and learn as much as you can from those who know more than you, who do better than you, who see more clearly than you." He was a fanatic about both preparation and then adaptation: "The plans are nothing, but the planning is everything," he would say. Or, "Rely on planning, but never trust the plans." [page 63]

10. Take Work Seriously

Always take your job seriously, never yourself. [page 64]

11. Accepting the Mistakes of Subordinates

Fox Connor served as the beau ideal of the humble leader. "A sense of humility is a quality I have observed in every leader whom I have deeply admired," Eisenhower later wrote. "My own conviction is that every leader should have enough humility to accept, publicly, the responsibility for the mistakes of the subordinates he has himself selected and, likewise, to give them credit, publicly, for their triumphs." Connor, Ike continued, "was a practical officer, down to earth, equally at home in the company of the most important people in the region and with any of the men in the regiment. He never put

on any airs of any kind, and he was as open and honest as any man I have ever known ...He has held a place in my affections for many years that no other, not even a relative, could obtain.” [page 64]

12. Logistics Were the Key.

He [Eisenhower] never greeted war with a sense of romantic excitement, the way his lifelong colleague George S. Patton did. He saw it as another hard duty to be endured. He had learned to focus less on the glamor and excitement of wartime heroics and more on the dull, mundane things that would prove to be the keys to victory. Preserving alliances with people you might find insufferable. Building enough landing craft to make amphibious invasions possible. Logistics. [page 66]

13. Not Good with Abstracts

Eisenhower’s disciplined and self-regulating life had its downsides. He was not a visionary. He was not a creative thinker. In war, he was not a great strategist. As president, he was often oblivious to the most consequential emergent currents of his time—from the civil rights movement to the menace of McCarthyism. He was never good with abstract ideas. He behaved disgracefully in failing to defend General George C Marshall from attacks upon his patriotism, to his great regret and shame later on. [pages 66-67]

14. Think of Future Consequences

Eisenhower warned the country against belief in in quick fixes. Americans, he said, should never believe that “some spectacular and costly action could become the miraculous solution to all current difficulties.” He warned against human frailty, particularly the temptation to be shortsighted and selfish. He asked his countrymen to “avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering, for our own ease and convenience, the precious resources of tomorrow.” Echoing the thrifty ethos of his childhood, he reminded the nation that we cannot “mortgage the material assets of our grandchildren without risking the loss also of their political and spiritual heritage.” [page 72-73]

15. Being Stewards of What We Possess

Like the nation’s founders, he built his politics on distrust of what people might do if they have unchecked power. He communicated the sense that in most times, leaders have more to gain from being stewards of what they inherited than by being destroyers of what is there and creators of something new. [page 73]

16. Chivalry, Self-control, and Honor

[George C. Marshall] He arrived at VMI in 1897 and was instantly drawn to its southern traditions. VMI had a moral culture that brought together several ancient traditions: a chivalric devotion to service and courtesy, a stoic commitment to emotional self-control, and a classical devotion to honor. [page 107]

17. Excellence Can Lift Ambitions

The work of the Roman biographer Plutarch is based on the premise that the tales of the excellent can lift the ambitions of the living. [page 107]

18. Vision of Greatness

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead argued, “Moral education is impossible without the habitual vision of greatness.” [page 107]

19. Do What Is Right Propels Doing Good

By cultivating the habit of reverence—for ancient heroes, for the elderly, for leaders in one’s own life—teachers were not only offering knowledge of what greatness looks like, they were trying to nurture a talent for admiration. Proper behavior is not just knowing what is right; it is having the motivation to do what is right, an emotion that propels you to do good things. [page 108]

20. Character Is Engraved

Character, James Davison Hunter has written, does not require religious faith. “But it does require a conviction of truth made sacred, abiding as an authoritative presence with consciousness and life, reinforced by habits institutionalized with a moral community. Character, therefore, resists expedience; it defies hasty acquisition. This is undoubtedly why Søren Kierkegaard spoke of character as ‘engraved,’ deeply etched.” [page 108]

21. Marshall Mastered Discipline

Marshall still did not excel academically at VMI. But he excelled at drilling, neatness, organization, precision, self-control, and leadership. He mastered the aesthetic of discipline, having the correct posture, erect carriage, crisp salute, direct gaze, well-pressed clothing, and the way of carrying the body that is an outward manifestation of inner self-control. [page 109]

22. Greatness Made Through Training

Those in Marshall’s military world were more likely to believe that great individuals are made, not born, and that they are made through training. Change happens from the outside in. It is through the exercise of drill that a person becomes self-regulating. It is

through the expression of courtesy that a person becomes polite. It is through the resistance to fear that a person develops courage. It is through the control of facial expressions that one becomes sober. The act precedes the virtue. [page 109-110]

23. Diaries Focus on Self

Marshall was not funny or emotionally vibrant or self-reflective. He refused to keep a diary, because he thought the exercise might cause him to focus too much on himself and his own reputation, or on how others might view him in the future. Diary keeping, he told Robert E. Lee's biographer Douglas Southall Freeman in 1942, might unconsciously cause "self-deception or hesitation in reaching decisions" when, in war, he needed to focus objectively on "the business of victory." Marshall never got around to writing his autobiography. *The Saturday Evening Post* once offered him more than \$1 million to tell his story, but he turned it down. He did not want to embarrass himself or any of the other generals. [page 110]

24. Leader of His Class

In his last year at VMI, Marshall was named first captain, the Institute's highest rank. He completed his four years without a single demerit. He developed the austere commanding presence that would forever mark his personality. He excelled at anything to do with soldiering and was the unquestioned leader of his class. [page 111]

25. Consistency and Self-controlled

At an astonishingly early age, Marshall had constructed the sort of ordered mind that military men and women have generally admired. "That person then, whoever it may be," Cicero wrote in *Tusculan Disputations*, "whose mind is quiet through consistency and self-control, who finds contentment in himself, who neither breaks down in adversity nor crumbles in fright, nor burns with any thirsty need or dissolves into a wild and futile excitement, that person is the wise one we are seeking, and that person is happy." [page 111]

26. Overcoming Difficulties

Each day passed to the rhythm of his daily chores and minor accomplishments. However, his attention to detail and endurance would serve him later on. As he later observed, "The truly great leader overcomes all difficulties, and campaigns and battles are nothing but a long series of difficulties to be overcome." [page 112]

27. Marshall Valued Rest from Work

Lily's [Marshall's wife] death changed Marshall. Once taciturn, he softened and became conversational, as if he could charm visitors into staying and filling the lonely hours. Over the years his letters became more thoughtful, more openly compassionate.

Despite his commitment to the service, and several periods when work consumed him, Marshall had never been a workaholic. Careful not to strain his own health, he broke off work in the late afternoon to garden, go horseback riding, or take a walk. Whenever possible, he encouraged, even ordered, his staff to do the same. [pages 118-119]

28. Politeness Prerequisite for Virtue

Marshall's polite social manner matched his polite inner makeup. The French philosopher André Comte-Sponville argues that politeness is a prerequisite for the great virtues "Morality is like a politeness of the soul, an etiquette of inner life, a code of duties." It is a series of practices that make you considerate of others. [page 119]

29. Doing the Hard Thing

Marshall observed, "It is not easy to tell men where they have failed...My days seem to be filled with situations and problems where I must do the difficult, the hard thing." [page 122]

30. Organizer of Victory

In a personal letter, Churchill wrote to Marshall, "It has not fallen to your lot to command the great armies. You have had to create them, organize them, and inspire them" Outshone by men he had promoted, Marshall had become known simply as the "organizer of victory." [page 125]

31. Augustine's Mother Strong in Personality

[Augustine's mother, Monica] She had a strength of personality, and a relentlessness in her convictions about her views, that makes your jaw drop. She was a force in the community, a peacemaker, above gossip, formidable, and dignified. She was capable, as the magnificent biographer Peter Brown notes, of dismissing the unworthy with biting sarcasm. [pages 186-187]

32. Samuel's Johnson's Family Life

Samuel Johnson was born in Lichfield, England, in 1709. His father was an unsuccessful book seller. His mother was an uneducated woman who nonetheless thought she had married beneath her. "My father and mother had not much happiness from each other," Johnson would remember. "They seldom conversed; for my father could not bear to talk of his affairs; and my mother, being unacquainted with books, could not talk of anything else . . . Of business she had no distant conception; and therefore her discourse was composed only of complaint, fear and suspicion." [page 213]

33. Prolific Writer

At those moments when he succeeded in conquering indolence and put pen to paper, his output was torrential. He could produce twelve thousand words, or thirty book pages, in a sitting. In these bursts, he'd write eighteen hundred words and hour, or thirty words a minute. Sometimes the copy boy would be standing at his elbow and would take each page to the printer as it was done so he could not go back and revise. [page 220]

34. Writer of Virtue

Johnson processed the world in the only way he could; with his (barely functioning) eye, with his conversation, and with his pen. Writers are not exactly known for their superlative moral character, but Johnson more or less wrote himself to virtue. [page 221]

35. Sayings Appeared to Be Spontaneous

Many of his most famous sayings feel as if they either emerged spontaneously during a tavern conversation or were polished to give the appearance of spontaneity: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel. . . . A decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilization. . . . When a man knows he is to be hanged in fortnight it concentrated his mind wonderfully. . . . When a man is tired of London he is tired of life." [page 221]

36. Making the World Better

He hoped to be counted among those writers who give "ardor to virtue and confidence to truth." He added, "it is always a writer's duty to make the world better." [page 224]

37. Honesty

"The first step to greatness is to be honest" was one of Johnson's maxims. [page 224]

38. Johnson's Clarity of Mind

Johnson's redeeming intellectual virtue was clarity of mind. It gave him his great facility for crystallizing and quotable observations. Most of these reveal a psychological shrewdness about human fallibility:

- A man of genius is but seldom ruined but by himself.
- If you are idle, be not solitary; if you are solitary, be not idle.
- There are people whom one should like very well to drop, but would not wish to be dropped by.
- All censure of self is oblique praise. It is in order to show how much he can spare.
- Man's chief merit consists in resisting the impulses of his nature.

- No place affords a more striking conviction of the vanity of human hopes than a public library.
 - Very few can boast of hearts which they dare lay open to themselves.
 - Read over your compositions, and wherever you meet with a passage you think particularly fine, strike it out.
 - Every man naturally persuades himself he can keep his resolutions; nor is he convinced of his imbecility but by length of time and frequency of experiment.
- [page 225]

39. The English Dictionary

In 1746, Johnson signed a contract to create an English Dictionary. Just as he was slowly bringing order to his own internal life, he would also bring order to his language. The French Academy had embarked on a similar project in the previous century. It had taken forty scholars fifty-five years to complete the task. Johnson and six clerks completed their task in eight. He defined 42,000 words and included roughly 116,000 illustrative quotations to show how the words were used. He culled an additional hundred thousand quotations that he ended up not using. [page 234]

40. Unitas Versus Namath

In January 1969, two great quarterbacks faced each other from opposite sidelines in the Super Bowl III. Both Johnny Unitas and Joe Namath were raised in the steel towns of western Pennsylvania. Both they had grown up a decade apart and lived in different moral cultures. [page 240]

41. Football Was a Job

Unitas was confident in his football abilities but unprepossessing in the way he went about his job. Steve Sabol of NFL Films captured some of his manner: “it’s always been my job to glorify the game. I’m such a romantic anyway. I’ve always looked at football in dramaturgical terms. It wasn’t the score; it was the struggle, and what kind of music could we use? But when I met Unitas I realized he was the antithesis of all that. Football to him was no different than a plumber putting in a pipe. He was an honest workman doing an honest job. Everything was a shrug of the shoulders. He was so unromantic that he was romantic in the end.” Unitas, like Joe DiMaggio in baseball, came to embody a particular way of being a sort of hero in the age of self-effacement. [page 241]