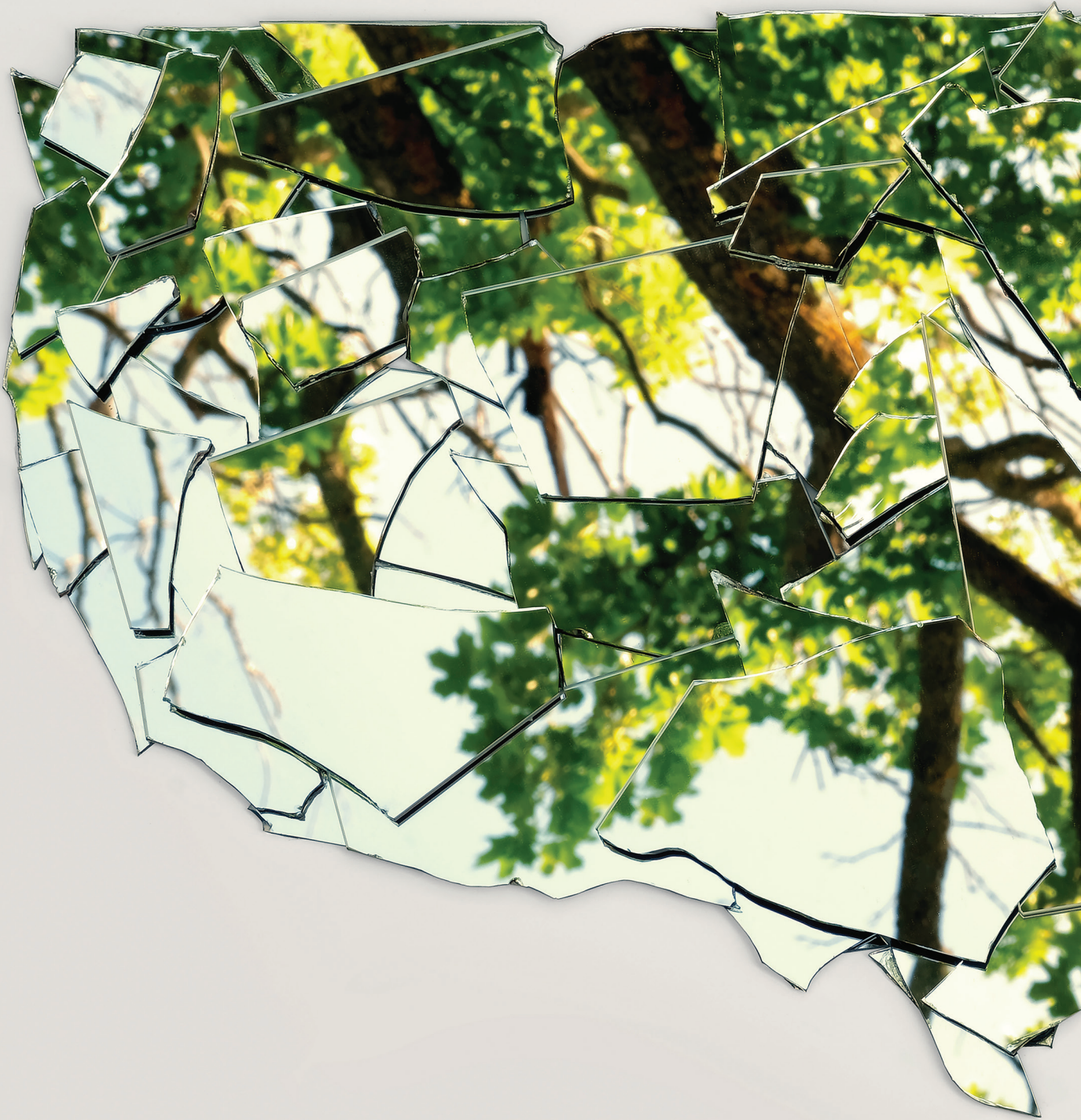


# How America Got Mean



*In a culture devoid of moral education,  
generations are growing up in a morally  
inarticulate, self-referential world.*

**By David  
Brooks**





Over the past eight years or so, I've been obsessed with two questions. The first is: Why have Americans become so sad? The rising rates of depression have been well publicized, as have the rising deaths of despair from drugs, alcohol, and suicide. But other statistics are similarly troubling. The percentage of people who say they don't have close friends has increased fourfold since 1990. The share of Americans ages 25 to 54 who weren't married or living with a romantic partner went up to 38 percent in 2019, from 29 percent in 1990. A record-high 25 percent of 40-year-old Americans have never married. More than half of all Americans say that no one knows them well. The percentage of high-school students who report "persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness" shot up from 26 percent in 2009 to 44 percent in 2021.

My second, related question is: Why have Americans become so mean? I was recently talking with a restaurant owner who said that he has to eject a customer from his restaurant for rude or cruel behavior once a week—something that never used to happen. A head nurse at a hospital told me that many on her staff are leaving the profession because patients have become so abusive. At the far extreme of meanness, hate crimes rose in 2020 to their highest level in 12 years. Murder rates have been surging, at least until recently. Same with gun sales. Social trust is plummeting. In 2000, two-thirds of American households gave to charity; in 2018, fewer than half did. The words that define our age reek of menace: *conspiracy, polarization, mass shootings, trauma, safe spaces*.

We're enmeshed in some sort of emotional, relational, and spiritual crisis, and it undergirds our political dysfunction and the general crisis of our democracy. What is going on?

Over the past few years, different social observers have offered different stories to explain the rise of hatred, anxiety, and despair.

*The technology story:* Social media is driving us all crazy.

*The sociology story:* We've stopped participating in community organizations and are more isolated.

*The demography story:* America, long a white-dominated nation, is becoming a much more diverse country, a change that has millions of white Americans in a panic.

*The economy story:* High levels of economic inequality and insecurity have left people afraid, alienated, and pessimistic.

I agree, to an extent, with all of these stories, but I don't think any of them is the deepest one. Sure, social media has bad effects, but it is everywhere around the globe—and the mental-health crisis is not. Also, the rise of despair and hatred has engulfed a lot of people who are not on social media. Economic inequality is real, but it doesn't fully explain this level of social and emotional breakdown. The sociologists are right that we're more isolated, but why? What values lead us to choose lifestyles that make us lonely and miserable?

The most important story about why Americans have become sad and alienated and rude, I believe, is also the simplest: We inhabit a society in which people are no longer trained in how to treat others with kindness and consideration. Our society has become one in which people feel licensed to give their selfishness free rein. The story I'm going to tell is about morals. In a healthy society, a web of institutions—families, schools, religious groups, community organizations, and workplaces—helps form people into kind and responsible citizens, the sort of people who show up for one another. We live in a society that's terrible at moral formation.

Moral formation, as I will use that stuffy-sounding term here, comprises three things. First, helping people learn to restrain their selfishness. How do we keep our evolutionarily conferred egotism under control? Second, teaching basic social and ethical skills. How do you welcome a neighbor into your community? How do you disagree with someone constructively? And third, helping people find a purpose in life. Morally formative institutions hold up a set of ideals. They provide practical pathways toward a meaningful existence: *Here's how you can dedicate your life to serving the poor, or protecting the nation, or loving your neighbor*.

For a large part of its history, America was awash in morally formative institutions. Its Founding Fathers had a low view of human nature, and designed the Constitution to mitigate it (even while validating that low view of human nature by producing a document rife with racism and sexism). "Men I find to be a Sort of Beings very badly constructed," Benjamin Franklin wrote, "as they are generally more easily provok'd than reconcil'd, more dispos'd to do Mischief to each other than to make Reparation, and much more easily deceiv'd than undeceiv'd."

If such flawed, self-centered creatures were going to govern themselves and be decent neighbors to one another, they were going to need some training. For roughly 150 years after the founding, Americans were obsessed with moral education. In 1788, Noah Webster wrote, "The *virtues* of men are of more consequence to society than their *abilities*; and for this reason, the *heart* should be cultivated with more assiduity than the *head*." The progressive philosopher John Dewey wrote in 1909 that schools teach morality "every moment of the day, five days a week." Hollis Frissell, the president of the Hampton Institute, an early school for African Americans, declared, "Character is the main object of education." As late as 1951, a commission organized by the

National Education Association, one of the main teachers' unions, stated that "an unremitting concern for moral and spiritual values continues to be a top priority for education."

The moral-education programs that stippled the cultural landscape during this long stretch of history came from all points on the political and religious spectrums. School textbooks such as *McGuffey's Eclectic Readers* not only taught students how to read and write; they taught etiquette, and featured stories designed to illustrate right and wrong behavior. In the 1920s, W. E. B. Du Bois's magazine for Black children, *The Brownies' Book*, had a regular column called "The Judge," which provided guidance to young readers on morals and manners. There were thriving school organizations with morally earnest names that sound quaint today—the Courtesy Club, the Thrift Club, the Knighthood of Youth.

Beyond the classroom lay a host of other groups: the YMCA; the Sunday-school movement; the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts; the settlement-house movement, which brought rich and poor together to serve the marginalized; Aldo Leopold's land ethic, which extended our moral concerns to include proper care for the natural world; professional organizations, which enforced ethical codes; unions and workplace associations, which, in addition to enhancing worker protections and paychecks, held up certain standards of working-class respectability. And of course, by the late 19th century, many Americans were members of churches or other religious communities. Mere religious faith doesn't always make people morally good, but living in a community, orienting your heart toward some transcendent love, basing your value system on concern for the underserved—those things tend to.

An educational approach with German roots that was adopted by Scandinavian societies in the mid-to-late 19th century had a wide influence on America. It was called *Bildung*, roughly meaning "spiritual formation." As conceived by Wilhelm von Humboldt, the *Bildung* approach gave professors complete freedom to put moral development at the center of a university's mission. In schools across Scandinavia, students studied literature and folk cultures to identify their own emotions, wounds, and weaknesses, in order to become the complex human beings that modern society required. Schools in the *Bildung* tradition also aimed to clarify the individual's responsibilities to the wider world—family, friends, nation, humanity. Start with the soul and move outward.

The *Bildung* movement helped inspire the Great Books programs that popped up at places like Columbia and the University of Chicago. They were based on the conviction that reading the major works of world literature and thinking about them deeply would provide the keys to living a richer life. Meanwhile, discipline in the small proprieties of daily existence—dressing formally, even just to go shopping or to a ball game—was considered evidence of uprightness: proof that you were a person who could be counted on when the large challenges came.

Much of American moral education drew on an ethos expressed by the headmaster of the Stowe School, in England, who wrote in 1930 that the purpose of his institution was to turn out young men who were "acceptable at a dance and invaluable in a shipwreck." America's National Institute for Moral Instruction was founded in

1911 and published a "Children's Morality Code," with 10 rules for right living. At the turn of the 20th century, Mount Holyoke College, an all-women's institution, was an example of an intentionally thick moral community. When a young Frances Perkins was a student there, her Latin teacher detected a certain laziness in her. She forced Perkins to spend hours conjugating Latin verbs, to cultivate self-discipline. Perkins grew to appreciate this: "For the first time I became conscious of character." The school also called upon women to follow morally ambitious paths. "Do what nobody else wants to do; go where nobody else wants to go," the school's founder implored. Holyoke launched women into lives of service in Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East. Perkins, who would become the first woman to serve in a presidential Cabinet (Franklin D. Roosevelt's), was galvanized there.

These various approaches to moral formation shared two premises. The first was that training the heart and body is more important than training the reasoning brain. Some moral skills can be taught the way academic subjects are imparted, through books and lectures. But we learn most virtues the way we learn crafts, through the repetition of many small habits and practices, all within a coherent moral culture—a community of common values, whose members aspire to earn one another's respect.

The other guiding premise was that concepts like justice and right and wrong are not matters of personal taste: An objective moral order exists, and human beings are creatures who habitually sin against that order. This recognition was central, for example, to the way the civil-rights movement in the 1950s and early 1960s thought about character formation. "Instead of assured progress in wisdom and decency man faces the ever present possibility of swift relapse not merely to animalism but into such calculated cruelty as no other animal can practice," Martin Luther King Jr. believed. Elsewhere, he wrote, "The force of sinfulness is so stubborn a characteristic of human nature that it can only be restrained when the social unit is armed with both moral and physical might."

At their best, the civil-rights marchers in this prophetic tradition understood that they could become corrupted even while

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serving a noble cause. They could become self-righteous because their cause was just, hardened by hatred of their opponents, prideful as they asserted power. King's strategy of nonviolence was an effort simultaneously to expose the sins of their oppressors and to restrain the sinful tendencies inherent in themselves. "What gave such widely compelling force to King's leadership and oratory," the historian George Marsden argues, "was his bedrock conviction that moral law was built into the universe."

A couple of obvious things need to be said about this ethos of moral formation that dominated American life for so long. It prevailed alongside all sorts of hierarchies that we now rightly find abhorrent: whites superior to Blacks, men to women, Christians to Jews, straight people to gay people. And the emphasis on morality didn't produce perfect people. Moral formation doesn't succeed in making people angels—it tries to make them better than they otherwise might be.

Furthermore, we would never want to go back to the training methods that prevailed for so long, rooted in so many *thou shalt not*s and so much shaming, and riddled with so much racism and sexism. Yet a wise accounting should acknowledge that emphasizing moral formation meant focusing on an important question—what is life for?—and teaching people how to bear up under inevitable difficulties. A culture invested in shaping character helped make people resilient by giving them ideals to cling to when times got hard. In some ways, the old approach to moral formation was, at least theoretically, egalitarian: If your status in the community was based on character and reputation, then a farmer could earn dignity as readily as a banker. This ethos came down hard on self-centeredness and narcissistic display. It offered practical guidance on how to be a good neighbor, a good friend.

AND THEN it mostly went away.

The crucial pivot happened just after World War II, as people wrestled with the horrors of the 20th century. One group, personified by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, argued that recent events had exposed the prevalence of human depravity and the dangers, in particular, of tribalism, nationalism, and collective pride. This group wanted to double down on moral formation, with a greater emphasis on humility.

Another group, personified by Carl Rogers, a founder of humanistic psychology, focused on the problem of authority. The trouble with the 20th century, the members of this group argued, was that the existence of rigid power hierarchies led to oppression in many spheres of life. We need to liberate individuals from these authority structures, many contended. People are naturally good and can be trusted to do their own self-actualization.

A cluster of phenomenally successful books appeared in the decade after World War II, making the case that, as Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman wrote in *Peace of Mind* (1946), "thou shalt not be afraid of thy hidden impulses." People can trust the goodness inside. His book topped the *New York Times* best-seller list for 58 weeks. Dr. Spock's first child-rearing manual was published the same year. That was followed by books like *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952). According to this ethos, morality is not

something that we develop in communities. It's nurtured by connecting with our authentic self and finding our true inner voice. If people are naturally good, we don't need moral formation; we just need to let people get in touch with themselves. Organization after organization got out of the moral-formation business and into the self-awareness business. By the mid-1970s, for example, the Girl Scouts' founding ethos of service to others had shifted: "How can you get more in touch with *you*? What are *you* thinking? What are *you* feeling?" one Girl Scout handbook asked.

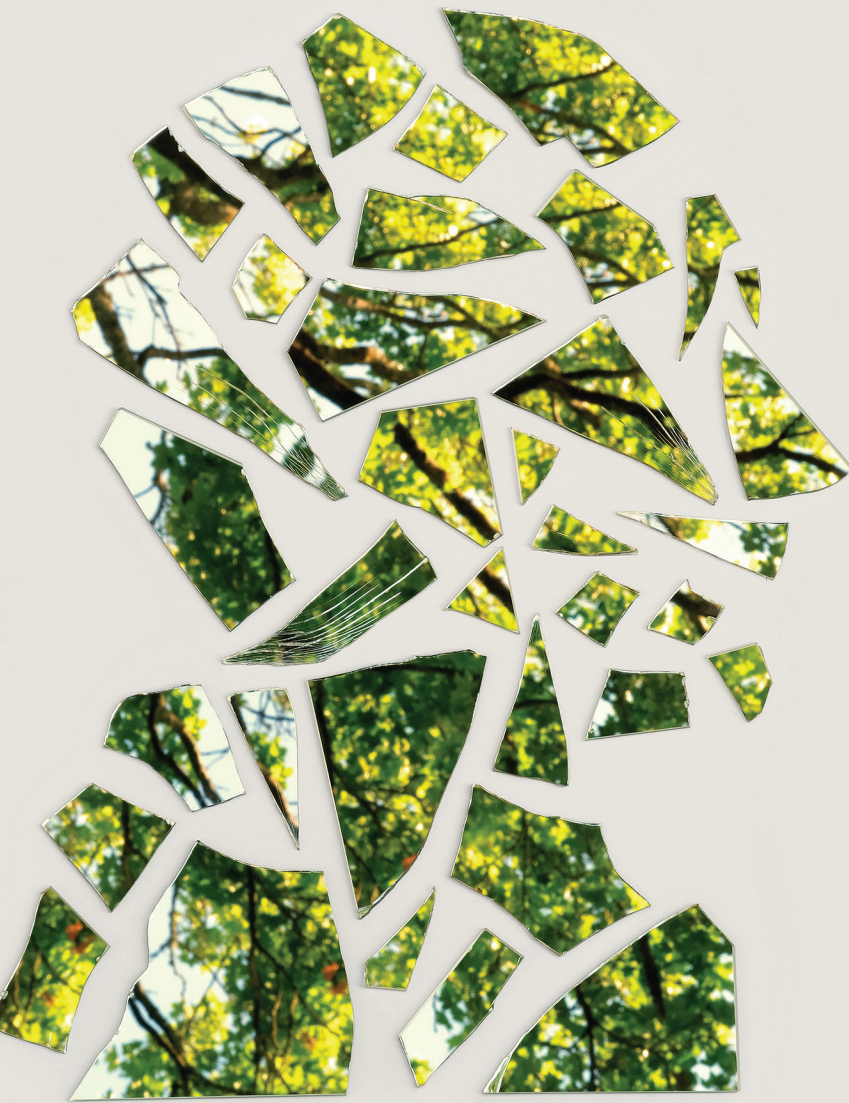
Schools began to abandon moral formation in the 1940s and '50s, as the education historian B. Edward McClellan chronicles in *Moral Education in America*: "By the 1960s deliberate moral education was in full-scale retreat" as educators "paid more attention to the SAT scores of their students, and middle-class parents scrambled to find schools that would give their children the best chances to qualify for elite colleges and universities." The postwar period saw similar change at the college level, Anthony Kronman, a former dean of Yale Law School, has noted. The "research ideal" supplanted the earlier humanistic ideal of cultivating the whole student. As academics grew more specialized, Kronman has argued, the big questions—What is the meaning of life? How do you live a good life?—lost all purchase. Such questions became unprofessional for an academic to even ask.

In sphere after sphere, people decided that moral reasoning was not really relevant. Psychology's purview grew, especially in family and educational matters, its vocabulary framing "virtually all public discussion" of the moral life of children, James Davison Hunter, a prominent American scholar on character education, noted in 2000. "For decades now, contributions from philosophers and theologians have been muted or nonexistent." Psychology is a wonderful profession, but its goal is mental health, not moral growth.

From the start, some worried about this privatizing of morality. "If what is good, what is right, what is true is only what the individual 'chooses' to 'invent,'" Walter Lippmann wrote in his 1955 collection, *Essays in the Public Philosophy*, "then we are outside the traditions of civility." His book was hooted down by establishment figures such as the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.; the de-moralization of American culture was under way.

Over the course of the 20th century, words relating to morality appeared less and less frequently in the nation's books: According to a 2012 paper, usage of a cluster of words related to being virtuous also declined significantly. Among them were *bravery* (which dropped by 65 percent), *gratitude* (58 percent), and *humbleness* (55 percent). For decades, researchers have asked incoming college students about their goals in life. In 1967, about 85 percent said they were strongly motivated to develop "a meaningful philosophy of life"; by 2000, only 42 percent said that. Being financially well off became the leading life goal; by 2015, 82 percent of students said wealth was their aim.

In a culture devoid of moral education, generations grow up in a morally inarticulate, self-referential world. The Notre Dame



his colleagues emphasized that the interviewees were not bad people but, because they were living “in morally very thin or spotty worlds,” they had never been given a moral vocabulary or learned moral skills.

**MOST OF US** who noticed the process of de-moralization as it was occurring thought a bland moral relativism and empty consumerism would be the result: *You do you and I’ll do me*. That’s not what happened.

“Moral communities are fragile things, hard to build and easy to destroy,” the psychologist Jonathan Haidt writes in *The Righteous Mind*. When you are raised in a culture without ethical structure, you become internally fragile. You have no moral compass to give you direction, no permanent ideals to which you can swear ultimate allegiance. “He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*,” the psychiatrist (and Holocaust survivor) Viktor Frankl wrote, interpreting a famous Nietzsche saying. Those without a *why* fall apart when the storms hit. They begin to suffer from that feeling of moral emptiness that Émile Durkheim called “anomie.”

Expecting people to build a satisfying moral and spiritual life on their own by looking within themselves is asking too much. A culture that leaves people morally naked and alone leaves them without the skills to be decent to one another. Social trust falls partly because more people are untrustworthy. That creates crowds of what psychologists call “vulnerable narcissists.” We all know grandiose narcissists—people who revere themselves as the center of the universe. Vulnerable narcissists are the more common figures in our day—people who are also addicted to thinking about themselves, but who often feel anxious, insecure, avoidant.

sociologist Christian Smith and a team of researchers asked young adults across the country in 2008 about their moral lives. One of their findings was that the interviewees had not given the subject of morality much thought. “I’ve never had to make a decision about what’s right and what’s wrong,” one young adult told the researchers. “My teachers avoid controversies like that like the plague,” many teenagers said.

The moral instincts that Smith observed in his sample fell into the pattern that the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre called “emotivism”: *Whatever feels good to me is moral*. “I would probably do what would make me happy” in any given situation, one of the interviewees declared. “Because it’s me in the long run.” As another put it, “If you’re okay with it morally, as long as you’re not getting caught, then it’s not really against your morals, is it?” Smith and

Intensely sensitive to rejection, they scan for hints of disrespect. Their self-esteem is wildly in flux. Their uncertainty about their inner worth triggers cycles of distrust, shame, and hostility.

“The breakdown of an enduring moral framework will always produce disconnection, alienation, and an estrangement from those around you,” Luke Bretherton, a theologian at Duke Divinity School, told me. The result is the kind of sadness I see in the people around me. Young adults I know are spiraling, leaving school, moving from one mental-health facility to another. After a talk I gave in Oklahoma, a woman asked me, “What do you do when you no longer want to be alive?” The very next night I had dinner with a woman who told me that her brother had died by suicide three months before. I mentioned these events to a group of friends on a Zoom call, and nearly half of them said

they'd had a brush with suicide in their family. Statistics paint the broader picture: Suicide rates have increased by more than 30 percent since 2000, according to the CDC.

Sadness, loneliness, and self-harm turn into bitterness. Social pain is ultimately a response to a sense of rejection—of being invisible, unheard, disrespected, victimized. When people feel that their identity is unrecognized, the experience registers as an injustice—because it is. People who have been treated unjustly often lash out and seek ways to humiliate those who they believe have humiliated them.

Lonely eras are not just sad eras; they are violent ones. In 19th-century America, when a lot of lonely young men were crossing the western frontier, one of the things they tended to do was shoot one another. As the saying goes, pain that is not transformed gets transmitted. People grow more callous, defensive, distrustful, and hostile. The pandemic made it worse, but antisocial behavior is still high even though the lockdowns are over. And now we are caught in a cycle, ill treatment leading to humiliation and humiliation leading to more meanness. Social life becomes more barbaric, online and off.

If you put people in a moral vacuum, they will seek to fill it with the closest thing at hand. Over the past several years, people have sought to fill the moral vacuum with politics and tribalism. American society has become hyper-politicized.

According to research by Ryan Streever, the director of domestic-policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, lonely young people are seven times more likely to say they are active in politics than young people who aren't lonely. For people who feel disrespected, unseen, and alone, politics is a seductive form of social therapy. It offers them a comprehensible moral landscape: The line between good and evil runs not down the middle of every human heart, but between groups. Life is a struggle between us, the forces of good, and them, the forces of evil.

The Manichean tribalism of politics appears to give people a sense of belonging. For many years, America seemed to be awash in a culture of hyper-individualism. But these days, people are quick to identify themselves by their group: Republican, Democrat, evangelical, person of color, LGBTQ, southerner, patriot, progressive, conservative. People who feel isolated and under threat flee to totalizing identities.

Politics appears to give people a sense of righteousness: A person's moral stature is based not on their conduct, but on their location on the political spectrum. You don't have to be good; you just have to be liberal—or you just have to be conservative. The stronger a group's claim to victim status, the more virtuous it is assumed to be, and the more secure its members can feel about their own innocence.

Politics also provides an easy way to feel a sense of purpose. You don't have to feed the hungry or sit with the widow to be moral; you just have to experience the right emotion. You delude yourself that you are participating in civic life by feeling properly enraged at the other side. That righteous fury rising in your gut lets you know that you are engaged in caring about this country. The culture war is a struggle that gives life meaning.

Politics overwhelms everything. Churches, universities, sports, pop culture, health care are swept up in a succession of battles

that are really just one big war—red versus blue. Evangelicalism used to be a faith; today it's primarily a political identity. College humanities departments used to study literature and history to plumb the human heart and mind; now they sometimes seem exclusively preoccupied with politics, and with the oppressive systems built around race, class, and gender. Late-night comedy shows have become political pep rallies. Hundreds of thousands of Americans died unnecessarily during the pandemic because people saw a virus through the lens of a political struggle.

This is not politics as it is normally understood. In psychically healthy societies, people fight over the politics of distribution: How high should taxes be? How much money should go to social programs for the poor and the elderly? We've shifted focus from the politics of redistribution to the politics of recognition. Political movements are fueled by resentment, by feelings that society does not respect or recognize me. Political and media personalities gin up dramas in which our side is emotionally validated and the other side is emotionally shamed. The person practicing the politics of recognition is not trying to get resources for himself or his constituency; he is trying to admire himself. He's trying to use politics to fill the hole in his soul. It doesn't work.

The politics of recognition doesn't give you community and connection, certainly not in a system like our current one, mired in structural dysfunction. People join partisan tribes in search of belonging—but they end up in a lonely mob of isolated belligerents who merely obey the same orthodoxy.

If you are asking politics to be the reigning source of meaning in your life, you are asking more of politics than it can bear. Seeking to escape sadness, loneliness, and anomie through politics serves only to drop you into a world marked by fear and rage, by a sadistic striving for domination. Sure, you've left the moral vacuum—but you've landed in the pulverizing destructiveness of moral war. The politics of recognition has not produced a happy society. When asked by the General Social Survey to rate their happiness level, 20 percent of Americans in 2022 rated it at the lowest level—only 8 percent did the same in 1990.

America's Founding Fathers studied the history of democracies going back to ancient Greece. They drew the lesson that democracies can be quite fragile. When private virtue fails, the constitutional order crumbles. After decades without much in the way of moral formation, America became a place where more than 74 million people looked at Donald Trump's morality and saw presidential timber.

**EVEN IN DARK TIMES**, sparks of renewal appear. In 2018, a documentary about Mister Rogers called *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* was released. The film showed Fred Rogers in all his simple goodness—his small acts of generosity; his displays of vulnerability; his respect, even reverence, for each child he encountered. People cried openly while watching it in theaters. In an age of conflict and threat, the sight of radical goodness was so moving.

In the summer of 2020, the series *Ted Lasso* premiered. When Lasso describes his goals as a soccer coach, he could mention the championships he hopes to win or some other conventional metric

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of success, but he says, “For me, success is not about the wins and losses. It’s about helping these young fellas be the best versions of themselves on and off the field.”

That is a two-sentence description of moral formation. *Ted Lasso* is about an earnest, cheerful, and transparently kind man who enters a world that has grown cynical, amoral, and manipulative, and, episode after episode, even through his own troubles, he offers the people around him opportunities to grow more gracious, to confront their vulnerabilities and fears, and to treat one another more gently and wisely. Amid lockdowns and political rancor, it became a cultural touchstone, and the most watched show on Apple TV+.

Even as our public life has grown morally bare, people, as part of their elemental nature, yearn to feel respected and worthy of respect, need to feel that their life has some moral purpose and meaning. People still want to build a society in which it is easier to be good. So the questions before us are pretty simple: How can we build morally formative institutions that are right for the 21st century? What do we need to do to build a culture that helps people become the best versions of themselves?

A few necessities come immediately to mind.

*A modern vision of how to build character.* The old-fashioned models of character-building were hopelessly gendered. Men were supposed to display iron willpower that would help them achieve self-mastery over their unruly passions. Women were to sequester themselves in a world of ladylike gentility in order to not be corrupted by bad influences and base desires. Those formulas are obsolete today.

The best modern approach to building character is described in Iris Murdoch’s book *The Sovereignty of Good*. Murdoch writes that “nothing in life is of any value except the attempt to be virtuous.” For her, moral life is not defined merely by great deeds of courage or sacrifice in epic moments. Instead, moral life is something that goes on continually—treating people considerately in the complex situations of daily existence. For her, the essential moral act is casting a “just and loving” attention on other people.

Normally, she argues, we go about our days with self-centered, self-serving eyes. We see and judge people in ways that satisfy our

own ego. We diminish and stereotype and ignore, reducing other people to bit players in our own all-consuming personal drama. But we become morally better, she continues, as we learn to see others deeply, as we learn to envelop others in the kind of patient, caring regard that makes them feel seen, heard, and understood. This is the kind of attention that implicitly asks, “What are you going through?” and cares about the answer.

I become a better person as I become more curious about those around me, as I become more skilled in seeing from their point of view. As I learn to perceive you with a patient and loving regard, I will tend to treat you well. We can, Murdoch concluded, “grow by looking.”

*Mandatory social-skills courses.* Murdoch’s character-building formula roots us in the simple act of paying attention: *Do I attend to you well?* It also emphasizes that character is formed and displayed as we treat others considerately. This requires not just a good heart, but good social skills: how to listen well. How to disagree with respect. How to ask for and offer forgiveness. How to patiently cultivate a friendship. How to sit with someone who is grieving or depressed. How to be a good conversationalist.

These are some of the most important skills a person can have. And yet somehow, we don’t teach them. Our schools spend years prepping students with professional skills—but offer little guidance on how to be an upstanding person in everyday life. If we’re going to build a decent society, elementary schools and high schools should require students to take courses that teach these specific social skills, and thus prepare them for life with one another. We could have courses in how to be a good listener or how to build a friendship. The late feminist philosopher Nel Noddings developed a whole pedagogy around how to effectively care for others.

*A new core curriculum.* More and more colleges and universities are offering courses in what you might call “How to Live.” Yale has one called “Life Worth Living.” Notre Dame has one called “God and the Good Life.” A first-year honors program in this vein at Valparaiso University, in Indiana, involves not just conducting formal debates on ideas gleaned from the Great Books, but putting on a musical production based on their themes. Many of these courses don’t give students a ready-made formula, but they introduce students to some of the venerated moral traditions—Buddhism, Judeo-Christianity, and Enlightenment rationalism, among others. They introduce students to those thinkers who have thought hard on moral problems, from Aristotle to Desmond Tutu to Martha Nussbaum. They hold up diverse exemplars to serve as models of how to live well. They put the big questions of life firmly on the table: *What is the ruling passion of your soul? Whom are you responsible to? What are my moral obligations? What will it take for my life to be meaningful? What does it mean to be a good human in today’s world? What are the central issues we need to engage with concerning new technology and human life?*

These questions clash with the ethos of the modern university, which is built around specialization and passing on professional or technical knowledge. But they are the most important courses a college can offer. They shouldn’t be on the margins of academic life. They should be part of the required core curriculum.



*Intergenerational service.* We spend most of our lives living by the logic of the meritocracy: Life is an individual climb upward toward success. It's about pursuing self-interest.

There should be at least two periods of life when people have a chance to take a sabbatical from the meritocracy and live by an alternative logic—the logic of service: You have to give to receive. You have to lose yourself in a common cause to find yourself. The deepest human relationships are gift relationships, based on mutual care. (An obvious model for at least some aspects of this is the culture of the U.S. military, which similarly emphasizes honor, service, selflessness, and character in support of a purpose greater than oneself, throwing together Americans of different ages and backgrounds who forge strong social bonds.)

Those sabbaticals could happen at the end of the school years and at the end of the working years. National service programs could bring younger and older people together to work to address community needs.

These programs would allow people to experience other-centered ways of being and develop practical moral habits: how to cooperate with people unlike you. How to show up day after day when progress is slow. How to do work that is generous and hard.

*Moral organizations.* Most organizations serve two sets of goals—moral goals and instrumental goals. Hospitals heal the sick and also seek to make money. Newspapers and magazines inform the public and also try to generate clicks. Law firms defend clients and also try to maximize billable hours. Nonprofits aim to serve the public good and also raise money.

In our society, the commercial or utilitarian goals tend to eclipse the moral goals. Doctors are pressured by hospital administrators to rush through patients so they can charge more fees. Journalists are incentivized to write stories that confirm reader prejudices in order to climb the most-read lists. Whole companies slip into an optimization mindset, in which everything is done to increase output and efficiency.

Moral renewal won't come until we have leaders who are explicit, loud, and credible about both sets of goals. *Here's how we're growing financially*, but also *Here's how we're learning to treat one another with consideration and respect; here's how we're going to forgo some financial returns in order to better serve our higher mission.*

Early in my career, as a TV pundit at *PBS NewsHour*, I worked with its host, Jim Lehrer. Every day, with a series of small gestures, he signaled what kind of behavior was valued there and what kind of behavior was unacceptable. In this subtle way, he established a set of norms and practices that still lives on. He and others built a thick and coherent moral ecology, and its way of being was internalized by most of the people who have worked there.

*Politics as a moral enterprise.* An ancient brand of amoralism now haunts the world. Authoritarian-style leaders like Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping embody a kind of amoral realism. They evince a mindset that assumes that the world is a vicious, dog-eat-dog sort of place. Life is a competition to grab what you can. Force is what matters. Morality is a luxury we cannot afford, or merely a sham that elites use to mask their own lust for power.

## *Healthy moral ecologies don't just happen. They have to be seeded and tended.*

It's fine to elect people who lie, who are corrupt, as long as they are ruthless bastards for our side. The ends justify the means.

Those of us who oppose these authoritarians stand, by contrast, for a philosophy of moral realism. Yes, of course people are selfish and life can be harsh. But over the centuries, civilizations have established rules and codes to nurture cooperation, to build trust and sweeten our condition. These include personal moral codes so we know how to treat one another well, ethical codes to help prevent corruption on the job and in public life, and the rules of the liberal world order so that nations can live in peace, secure within their borders.

Moral realists are fighting to defend and modernize these rules and standards—these sinews of civilization. Moral realism is built on certain core principles. Character is destiny. We can either elect people who try to embody the highest standards of honesty, kindness, and integrity, or elect people who shred those standards. Statecraft is soulcraft. The laws we pass shape the kinds of people we become. We can structure our tax code to encourage people to be enterprising and to save more, or we can structure the code to encourage people to be conniving and profligate. Democracy is the system that best enhances human dignity. Democratic regimes entrust power to the people, and try to form people so they will be responsible with that trust. Authoritarian regimes seek to create a world in which the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.

Look, I understand why people don't want to get all moralistic in public. Many of those who do are self-righteous prigs, or rank hypocrites. And all of this is only a start. But healthy moral ecologies don't just happen. They have to be seeded and tended by people who think and talk in moral terms, who try to model and inculcate moral behavior, who understand that we have to build moral communities because on our own, we are all selfish and flawed. Moral formation is best when it's humble. It means giving people the skills and habits that will help them be considerate to others in the complex situations of life. It means helping people behave in ways that make other people feel included, seen, and respected. That's very different from how we treat people now—in ways that make them feel sad and lonely, and that make them grow unkind. *A*

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