

Alison Jones:

"Am I a person to you? Do you care about me? Am I a priority for you?" According to our guest today, and I'm quoting here, "The answers to those questions are conveyed in your gaze before they're conveyed by your words. It's a gaze that radiates respect. It's a gaze that says that every person I meet is unique, unrepeatable, and yes, superior to me in some way. Every person I meet is fascinating on some topic."

That quote's from a book written by today's guest, David Brooks, he says, "There are connections between seeing others and strengthening our communities and in turn, democracy."

I'm Alison Jones. I'm sitting in today for Manoj Mohanan. I'm with the DeWitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy here at the Sanford School of Public Policy. Welcome to Policy 360.

David Brooks is an opinion columnist for the New York Times. He appears regularly on PBS NewsHour, NPR's, All Things Considered, and NBC's Meet the Press. His new book is titled, How to Know a Person, the Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen.

Today, we'll talk about what he thinks can improve democracy connection to others. Welcome to Policy 360, David.

David Brooks:

Good to be with you.

Alison Jones:

Why did you write this book?

David Brooks:

I wrote it to help myself so I could be more considerate person. I used to have these lofty goals about morality, but now I think mostly morality is just being considerate to people in the concrete circumstances of life. So knowing how to sit with someone who's depressed, knowing how to sit with someone who's grieving, knowing how to reveal vulnerability to a friend at the appropriate place. These are just basic low-level skills, but if you do these low-level skills, it turns out you become a decent person.

And so I thought if I worked on these skills, I could become/approach being a more decent person. So part of the reasons for personal, but part of the reason is sociological and political. I cover politics and if you cover politics, what you run into all day every day is distrust and a sense of isolation, a sense of disconnection, and a sense of bitterness.

And it seemed to me the only way to build trust is to build relationships. And the only way to build relationships is to get really good at knowing how to treat people well. And my hope is that if on the ground level people treat each other with kindness and respect and consideration, then they'll begin to trust each other more. And if trust goes up, then our society will be healthy on all sorts of domains.

Alison Jones:

So you clearly think we need to deepen our connection with others. How did we lose this?

David Brooks:

Yeah, there are a lot of reasons and listeners will be familiar with all of the statistics, the rising depression rates, the rising suicide rates, rising, loneliness rates. Vivek Murthy, the Surgeon General, talks about the crisis of loneliness. And it's by the way, very unevenly distributed.

So people with college degrees have a fair number of friends. People with high school degrees have far fewer friends, they're much less likely to be involved in hobby organizations. They're much less likely to go out in public places. So especially among the less educated and less privileged, their social lives are really much different than those of us who have college degrees.

And so I just thought, we all need to learn these skills somehow. It'll make us happier. There's a guy named Nick Epley who is a psychologist at the Booth School, the business school at the University of Chicago.

And he's a social psychologist, so he knows the thing that makes us happiest is talking to other people, we're social animals. And he was on a train one day and he looked around the car, the commuter train, and nobody was talking to each other.

So he's a psychologist, said, "I'm going to pay people to talk to each other." So as an experiment, he offered people 50 bucks to talk to strangers. And then he interviewed them afterwards and he said, "Did you enjoy it?" And people loved it. Introverts loved it. Extroverts loved it. People just loved that commute because they got to talk to a stranger. And so his finding is we underestimate how much we will enjoy it.

And so I think we've lost that skill in part because of there's a technological reason social media is driving us crazy. There's a civic and sociological reason. We're less active in civic life. There's an economic reason we have wider inequality and therefore more dissimilar lives.

But the story I tell is the most direct one, which was we've gone several generations not teaching people how to be considerate how to do these skills. And so I thought my little piece of solving this problem is to learn about myself and then teach these skills in the book.

Alison Jones:

You've alluded to this somewhat, but we're in a school of public policy. When you think about this book and public policy, how would you describe the connection?

David Brooks:

Yeah, a lot of people go into public policy, frankly, because they're too intimidated to talk about private policy. And so I live in Washington DC, and I often call it the most emotionally avoidant spot on the face of the earth. And people are very comfortable to talk about world affairs, but if you're going through some romantic difficulty or you're worried about one of your children, they don't want to have that conversation. They're terrified of private life.

And so, I'm generalizing, but it's not a totally invalid generalization. And yet I think all of politics and all of policymaking is downstream from culture, which is downstream from psychology. And so we form our political views and we perform our behavior in public based on our fundamental attitudes about life, our fundamental feelings about ourself, our fundamental feelings of either safety or danger or threat of belonging or alienation.

And so I was at a Christian nationalist church last week, and what struck me so powerfully about being in that congregation was there was real faith. They weren't just political, they were clearly very religious people, but there was just an attitude of dark world, that the world is out to get you, that even the people in your congregation are out to get you. And the pastor offered them strength, power, or warrior spirit because in a dark world, you need to be a monster to fight for your own.

And so I thought, and he was very -- that's the way Donald Trump talks, dark world, American carnage. We have to get our retaliation in first. And so those attitudes flow from the deep sense of psychological feeling of unsafety. And so I think public policy flows out of our spiritual, psychological, and cultural roots, and that culture drives public policy.

Alison Jones:

So our students will take on jobs in government, consulting, nonprofits, journalism, all kinds of organizations. How can they use your insights on building personal connections to create more trust in these various institutions?

David Brooks:

Well, one of the things I like about the younger generation, this generation of college students, is they demand more human connection in the workplace than my generation did. And for a lot of people, my generation, or the older generation, the boomers, you went to work because it's a job and you didn't want to bring your whole self to work. You might have to fire somebody.

But I find the young people I work with at my various workplaces, really they want to find purpose at work. They want to find a sense of friendship at work, and they want to have a deeper set of connections. So just to give an example, I founded a nonprofit about eight years ago called Weave, the Social Fabric Project. And I remember the first summer, it would've been about 2018, 2017, somewhere around there. We had 14 interns from various colleges.

And they came up to me one day and they said, "David, we don't think you know us well enough. We'd like to spend the day showing you pictures of our childhood photos." And when I was their age, my mentor was William F. Buckley. And so I try to imagine going to him when I'm 22 saying, "Bill, I want to spend a day showing you me in diapers." And his head would've exploded.

But I did it with the interns. We spent a day looking at their pictures and they told us about their childhoods, and it was worth it. I was a little uncomfortable. It was, but it was worth it. We actually did get to know each other a little better. So if you're a middle-aged person in the workplace and you're not feeling uncomfortable, you're doing it wrong. That's my rule.

Alison Jones:

That's very funny. Do you think highly empathetic leaders make a difference?

David Brooks:

Oh, tremendously. I do think, you just think of, I mean, one of the great empathetic documents in American history is Lincoln's second inaugural. So he's just winding down this brutal war with hundreds of thousands of deaths. And yet within that speech, there is a sense, we all caused this sin. And there's a sense it's not you did this, slavery is not a southern problem it's an American problem. And I just think in the course of his presidency, he was rendered so humble and so empathetic to the suffering, and it helped his attitudes about race by the way that he became more empathetic, not perfectly, but toward the black people around him.

And so I think he was a man who demonstrated something I fervently believe in that people don't stop growing no matter what age they are. They can change quite radically. And Lincoln was an example of somebody who, I think, changed quite radically, was changed by the war in the direction of humility, his own unique form of spirituality, and then empathy.

Alison Jones:

That's a great example. Do you think we are too far gone? Do you think we're too polarized for these kinds of ideas to bring Americans together?

David Brooks:

Yeah, I absolutely don't. I think we go through patterns. In the 1770s, believe me, we were plenty polarized. The vice president shot the former treasury secretary. That's pretty polarized. And you looked at the rhetoric back then. It was worse than today. In the 1830s, worse than today, 1860s go for themselves, speak for themselves. 1890s, 1960s, when you go back through history, if you think we're in uniquely bad times, I just think that's a poor reading of history.

World War I, the hundreds of thousands of deaths, the Great Depression. One of the things that has changed is that our media landscape has gotten more negative. Somebody did a Google NGRAM where they look at all the words that are in the newspapers magazine and books in a given year, and they researched this going all the way back to the 1850s. And from 1850 to about 2010, most American public conversation is very positive.

They looked for positive words and negative words. And all those years, the conversation there was more positive talk than negative talk. And around 2010, it just falls through the floor. And we are now in the most pessimistic, most negative public culture of any time in American history. More negative than the Great Depression, more negative than the Civil War when things were really bad.

And so I just think this is a bit of a media story. We've learned we can generate clicks by generating fear and hate and anger, and partly there's just pessimism feeds on itself. And people just being pessimistic becomes the mode to show your alert to what's going on in society.

Alison Jones:

That's really interesting. And it makes me think that there's a popular culture element to this too, isn't there?

David Brooks:

Yeah.

Alison Jones:

The popular culture is so dark. So many films that are post-apocalyptic that are doomsday scenarios, it's an interesting thought that it feeds on itself.

David Brooks:

I was reading an article, I forget, it was one of the online magazines, and it may have been Vox, and the writer was writing books about motherhood, and she mentioned some of the titles and they have very negative titles, Mom Rage. Screaming on the Inside, stuff like that. And so she's interviewing moms about how hard it is to be a mother these days and why these books are so negative.

And in the middle of the article, she writes, "I have to say, I was interviewing all these moms and a couple of them, they would frequently pull me aside and say, this is off the record, but I want you to know, I actually kind of like being a mom, and my partner is doing his fair share, but I don't want to say that in public because it would be insensitive to those who are not having a good experience."

So if you, in a public culture, a popular culture where you can't even say, "I like being a mom," then you're in a pretty negative public culture.

Alison Jones:

Right, that's amazing. So you say in the book that a healthy society depends on a wide variety of human types, organized people, curious people. And you also mentioned five core personality traits, extraversion, conscientiousness, openness, neuroticism, agreeableness. Why is it important to understand those traits?

David Brooks:

Because you should understand the people in front of you. And they're handy tools like nobody is reduced to a trait, you don't want to reduce anybody. But to show how little we know about other people, we have this system. I often go to audience and I say, "How many of you have heard of the Myers-Briggs system?" And 80% of the hands go up. And I say to them, "Well, you should know that's bogus, that that is not an accurate reflection. That's not how you understand a person." Because Myers-Briggs, for example, assigns dichotomies that don't really exist, like you're either a thinking person or a feeling person. But in reality, people who are good at feeling are also good at thinking. The separation between reason and emotion is a bogus separation. And then I say, "How many of you have heard of the Big Five?" And among psychologists, this is absolutely bedrock.

This is the core of their field. But among the general populace, maybe five or 10% raise their hand. Like extraversion, we think of it as liking other people, but really it's liking positive reward of any kind. An extrovert is excited to dive into the day, whereas neuroticism is highly responsive to negative emotion and so highly sensitive to threat and perception.

And the key thing to emphasize is none of these are good or bad. Each of these five things has good qualities and bad qualities. So if you want to be a leader like a CEO, CEO's are extremely extroverted, it's super helpful to go through your day. I want to meet the next person at the next meeting. I want to stand in front of thousands of people. That's what they're into. But if you want somebody to warn you, to be a prophet, to warn you of what's wrong with society, then neurotics are very handy.

They may make themselves miserable, but they're very good warning system. And so openness to new experience, if anybody remembers the singer David Bowie, every few years that guy was changing his persona. He just wanted a new adventure and new experiences.

Conscientiousness. If you want to run a bigger organization, you'd like to have conscious people who are super organized, who are super good at self-regulation. And I should say these are dials, not categories. So most of us are in the middle on most of these traits, but occasionally you'll have one trait you're really, really very high on. You can take advantage of that.

I'm reasonably high, I hope. I hope you don't think that I'm full of it now that we've met. I think I'm pretty high on agreeableness. I'm not a conflict person. I'm hopefully a nice enough guy. And so hopefully I can take advantage of that trait to show up in a certain way in the world. I'm not that high on extraversion, and so it's a bit more work for me.

Alison Jones:

Do you think that these principles of understanding individual character could be applied to international diplomacy, to negotiations?

David Brooks:

Yeah. First I will say the most intimate form of diplomacy is parenthood. And so there's a woman named Danielle Dick who wrote a book saying, "There's no right way to parent. There's only the right way to parent for your child." If you're low in agreeableness so you tend to be grumpy and your child is high in neuroticism, they perceive threat very quickly. When you say something of that child that to you sounds like normal voice, they hear it as screaming.

And so you've got to parent your child knowing how your traits interact with their traits. And I think it's the same in diplomacy that we think of great power rivalry is like a bunch of clever chess masters reading Machiavelli and strategizing. But a lot of it is who do I get along with? And even in the case of, let's say that we're talking at the tail end of the presidential campaign, in my view, Kamala Harris should have picked the governor of Pennsylvania, Josh Shapiro, because Pennsylvania's really important, but she didn't feel comfortable with the guy, so she went with Tim Walz.

And I think that's how a lot of public policy decisions are made. Who do I feel comfortable with? Like Reagan and Thatcher, they had the same sort of idea system, so that helped, but they just felt comfortable with each other. Or you think, for example, Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, these are two very dissimilar people.

Franklin Roosevelt was just cheerful. He had infinite faith in the future and his ability to handle whatever came his way, he was just very sunny. And Churchill was anything but sunny. And yet they established a rapport of true mutual respect because I think they weren't alike, but they understood each other. And Churchill worked really hard at it, and it was quite the important relationship to winning World War II.

Alison Jones:

You mentioned that you wish political talk show hosts would ask candidates, "Just tell me who you are?" Can you say some more about that and what you mean?

David Brooks:

Yeah. So for many years I worked on Meet the Press, and if you watch any of those shows, Face the Nation, ABC, the politicians going with their canned talking points, the journalists ask them, got you questions. And it's just rote. It's just like you don't learn anything about the person.

And I think if they just said, "Why'd you go into this? What motivated you? Was it your mom? What was it?" Then we'd learn about more about the people. And one of the things that I cover politicians, so I've gotten to know a lot of politicians, they're better in private than in public. That they're more uncertain about their positions. They're more humble, they're more supple, they're more sophisticated, and they're in a weird profession where they hide their virtues and display their vices. And that's because they're playing the party game and they've got talking points that they have to say.

And when they go on these shows, there's relatively little upside to them, but if they say something bad, it'll be really bad. I don't know why they do it, because it's a high-risk proposition. So we've sort of dehumanized them. I had a view of AOC based on her Twitter feed basically, and then I was seated next to her at dinner in DC, she was tremendously charming and warm, and just a very likable person.

But I might know that. I might not know that based on her public persona, but I found her just tremendously interesting and just a great person to be around. And people are like that. Once you get past the ideological label we put on people.

Alison Jones:

If you had hosted the presidential debate, what would you have asked the candidates?

David Brooks:

Well, the question I'm dying to ask Kamala Harris is, "When personally do you think life begins?" Because she talks a lot about abortion, and she has, I think this is the issue where she shows the most sincere passion, and she's a fervent defender of reproductive rights, and I get that. But one of the things that bothers me about the way the Democrats talk about this issue in a campaign season is they talk about it as if it's an easy issue.

To me, it's anything but an easy issue. I would totally understand them coming down where they come down, I'm fine with that, but I'd like to see them wrestle with the core issue, when does life begin? And so that would be the question for her.

Donald Trump is hard to ask a question of because he's not going to give you an honest reflection. But to be honest, the question I'd like to ask him is, "Do you feel your dad never loved you?" Because that's one of my diagnoses that his dad never loved him, and he needs a lifetime of affirmation to get over that void.

I had a research assistant many years ago who said, "We were all missing something as kids and as adults we're willing to do a lot in order to get it." And that's not always true, but it's true for a lot of people. And so I think it's that relationship between Donald Trump and his dad that I'd love to understand more of.

Alison Jones:

That's a great question. So final question for you. What would you say to students and youth here who are building the future of democracy not to be too grand. What is something they should take away from your book?

David Brooks:

Well, first, they should understand the honor and the virtue of being involved in politics. I have a friend who says, "If you're not involved in politics, you happen to be lucky enough to live in a society where you can afford to ignore politics. But if you live in a society with corruption where somebody's going to shoot you in the back of the head, you don't have that luxury."

And the second defense of politics I would make is I know a lot of people who served in government and their time in government was the most fulfilling time of their lives for most of them. I had a buddy who died two years ago named Michael Gerson, who was one of President Bush's speechwriters, W. Bush. But he was also heavily involved in a program called PEPFAR, which was a American program to send anti-HIV drugs into Africa. And I, in the early days, we'd travel, I'd travel with them to Africa, and you would just see people dying in droves of HIV.

And by the time we went there, four years later, after PEPFAR, you go to the hospital, it's like going to the CVS. They were just passing out these antiretroviral of drugs and people were living. And so Michael Gerson, he died of cancer, but he could look back on his life and say, "I was part of a program that helped save 25 million lives." That's a pretty rewarding thing to be doing. And so that's my defense of politics.

The second thing I'd say to students is, "Be aware of the defining challenge of your generation," and you might say, it's climate change is the defining challenge of my generation. I think every generation has a defining challenge. And in my view, the defining challenge of this generation, of Gen Z, is two interrelated things. One, the crisis of connection, the sense of alienation, loneliness, separation, distrust, and conjoined with that is the growing chasm between the educated class and the less educated class.

And if you're at Duke, you're like me, involved in the educated class. And so it seems to me one of the challenges in your own personal life and in your generation's life is to try to build bridges of respect and mutual understanding across this class chasm so we don't become permanently two nations.

Alison Jones:

I really wanted to ask you about this earlier, but I wanted to give a lot of room for the students because you've written about the fact that the Democratic Party, much of the insularity of the Democratic Party is born in elite institutions. What should those institutions be doing differently?

David Brooks:

Well, I think they should value ideological diversity as much in any other kind of diversity. So that when you go to a school like Duke or Yale, where I used to teach, or Chicago where I now teach, you know you're going to meet Trump people, non-Trump people. You're going to meet a lot of rural people. And I think the schools are trying, but it's harder. A lot of people who are Trump supporters would never go to an Ivy League school or they would think, Duke, I'm not going there. That's for those people. But so you got to work hard.

But I have found in my teaching at these elite schools, the people who find it the hardest are rural, lower middle class people. They're the ones who find it hardest to crack in. And one of the things these schools do as a matter of admissions, is that they want to get a lot of Pell grant students, the poorer students, but then to pay for the poorer students, they need a lot of rich students. And so there's a lot from the top 1%, a lot 10%, and there's a chunk from the bottom 10%, but the lower middle class, just above that Pell grant cutoff, they're out. And so that's a gap, and that becomes not only an economic gap, it becomes a class gap, and it becomes an ideological gap. And so getting those working class voices into places like Duke or Chicago, Yale strikes me as just tremendously important.

Alison Jones:

So as a side note, just as an FYI, it'll be interesting to see what happens at Duke because Duke you may know now gives free tuition to North Carolina and South Carolina students who have a certain, if they get admission, if they gain admission, it's free for them to come. So that would really be really interesting to see-

David Brooks:

It'll be interesting.

Alison Jones:

... what that does.

David Brooks:

Yeah, places like Princeton, which sort of do that, it doesn't, it hasn't had the big effect to get into Princeton, it's like a family operation, and you have to go to a pretty nice school and you have the whole family behind.

Alison Jones:

Yeah.



David Brooks:

And so it's made some difference, for sure, but it hasn't totally cured things.

Alison Jones:

There's the F, Yeah. So thank you so much for joining us today, David.

David Brooks:

Total pleasure. Thank you.

Alison Jones:

David Brooks is the author of, How to Know a Person. He's also the bestselling author of, The Social Animal, the Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement, and a number of other books.

He's on Duke's campus today to deliver the 2024 Rubenstein Distinguished Lecture.

Thank you for listening to this episode of Policy 360. We'll be back soon for more conversations related to media, democracy, and the 2024 election. I'm Alison Jones.