

How Christian Colleges Can Fix What Ails America

David Brooks

David Brooks opens with humor and warmth, reflecting on his annual return to the West Coast and his evolving thoughts over the past year. He frames this first of three talks around a central concern: the moral unraveling of American life—and how Christian colleges are uniquely equipped to help restore what’s been lost.

The Moral Crisis and the Failure of Modern Moral Frameworks

America is facing a profound moral and relational crisis—one that David Brooks has been tracing for over a decade. The data tells a sobering story: depression, loneliness, and suicide rates are all rising dramatically. Nearly half of American high schoolers report feeling hopeless and despondent. The number of people with no close personal friends has quadrupled since 2000. Social trust—the basic belief that our neighbors are generally good and trustworthy—has plummeted. Only 30% of Americans say they trust their neighbors, and among Gen Z, 72% believe that most people are fundamentally selfish. It's not just that people are disconnected; they expect the worst in others. That mindset, Brooks argues, is a hard way to go through life.

How did we arrive here? Brooks turns to the work of moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre for a long view of this unraveling. In pre-modern societies—like ancient Athens—your purpose in life was given, not chosen. You were born into a role: warrior, teacher, priest, farmer. Excellence meant fulfilling that role with honor and integrity. Brooks points to a 2005 Hall of Fame speech by Ryne Sandberg as a modern echo of this ethos: “Play the game right and with respect... because that’s what you’re supposed to do.” That coherent moral code, rooted in duty and community, endured for centuries—until it was disrupted by the Enlightenment.

In the wake of religious wars, Enlightenment thinkers privatized morality, arguing that each individual should determine their own values. Democracy and the rule of law would provide the space for that private moral freedom. But MacIntyre believed this project failed: most people are not equipped to invent their own moral philosophy. In the absence of shared traditions, we default to *emotivism*—doing whatever feels right in the moment. Brooks cites a study in which most college students couldn’t describe a moral dilemma, only a minor inconvenience. They lacked even the vocabulary to articulate the difference between a deep moral wrong and a bad feeling. Without a framework, even trauma becomes unspeakable, as one young woman struggled to explain why rape was worse than getting punched in the arm.

The result is not freedom, but confusion—a society adrift in moral chaos. Walter Lippmann warned in 1955 that if right and wrong are determined only by individual feelings, we are outside the bounds of civilization. In contrast, figures like Martin Luther King Jr. drew power from the belief that morality is not subjective but woven into the fabric of the universe—that segregation and slavery are wrong *everywhere*, not just somewhere. Brooks concludes this section by suggesting that the collapse of a shared moral order has left Americans vulnerable and disoriented. And while this decline has many causes, it has been made worse—he argues—by changes in the way we educate and form young people. That’s the next story.

The Education System's Role in Social Fragmentation

Every society forms around an ideal type of person—the model citizen it seeks to produce. In ancient Greece, it was the warrior or the philosopher. In 19th-century America, it was the “well-bred man”—someone from the right family, educated in the right prep school, and accepted into Harvard or Yale based on bloodlines rather than brilliance. Success was measured not by achievement but by belonging to the right clubs—Porcellian, Skull and Bones, Ivy. These elite institutions functioned as gatekeepers for America's leadership class, producing presidents, diplomats, and bankers. But by the 1930s, Harvard president James Conant saw the flaw in this system: it was producing entitled mediocrity. In response, he championed a new social ideal—intelligence. The SAT became the tool for selecting high-IQ students regardless of lineage, and elite admissions shifted from heritage to measurable aptitude.

On the surface, this meritocracy seemed like progress. But over time, Brooks argues, it has warped both family life and the structure of American opportunity. Parents now organize their homes around “concerted cultivation”—SAT tutors, travel teams, and college prep activities designed to produce high-achieving children. Schools dropped recess and the arts in favor of test prep. Jobs that once required no degree now demand one. The result is a society obsessed with college credentials, particularly from elite schools. This obsession reinforces a rigid hierarchy: 54% of employees at top newspapers, law firms, and companies come from just 32 colleges. In this system, intelligence is the coin of the realm—yet it comes at a cost. We've trained students for intellect, not for soul. We've amputated emotional intelligence, moral imagination, and the basic art of being a good person.

The problem isn't just that we overvalue intelligence—it's that we confuse it with virtue. Brooks cites research showing that intelligence rarely correlates with good judgment, motivation, or collaboration. Most people are fired not for incompetence but for being uncoachable or unpleasant. And yet we've built an entire social sorting mechanism on standardized tests and academic achievement. Worse still, the system is deeply rigged: wealthy children benefit at every stage. They're more likely to attend preschool, test higher by sixth grade, and score 350 points better on the SATs. At elite schools, students from the top 1% far outnumber those from the bottom 60%. This educational divide has birthed a caste system where college graduates live longer, suffer less addiction, and report stronger relationships. Those without degrees are not only shut out—they're told from age nine that they're “less than,” and the system confirms it at every turn.

This, Brooks argues, has led to a cultural and political backlash. When people feel unseen, dismissed, and told their kids have no shot, they rebel. The deepest divide in modern democracies is no longer economic—it's educational. In America, that split shows up clearly in elections: Kennedy won by carrying high school graduates; Biden won while losing them by a 2-to-1 margin. And at the heart of this system is one bad idea: that the best way to organize society is by ranking 18-year-olds according to test scores. That's not just unjust—it's absurd. We've made the classic technocratic mistake: confusing what's easy to measure with what actually matters.

The Hope and Opportunity of Christian Higher Education

Despite their often marginal position in American culture, Christian colleges possess exactly what society needs most: a moral framework. In contrast to the students Brooks teaches at elite secular institutions like Yale, Duke, and the University of Chicago—bright, capable, but morally unformed—Christian colleges are still grounded in traditions that cultivate the inner life. Brooks shares a deeply personal moment with his own daughter, who confessed, “We don’t believe in religion or patriotism. We don’t have a moral framework.” Her words reflect the broader reality of a generation adrift. Young adults may be intellectually gifted, but few have been given language or guidance for shaping their souls. At their best, Christian institutions offer what no standardized test can measure: formation of the heart.

Brooks’s own journey from head to heart was shaped by moments of deep spiritual longing. Though raised in a hyper-intellectual environment, he began experiencing flashes of transcendence—in cathedrals, in the mountains, even in the ugliest subway station in New York. One day, he simply sensed that the strangers around him all had souls—souls that were suffering, striving, or soaring. If that was true, he thought, maybe someone had created those souls. His faith deepened not through certainty but through longing: a felt ache for perfect love. He quotes Dorothy Day, who described her life’s loneliness as “the ongoing love of God,” and Frederick Buechner, who said that true faith doesn’t mean believing every day—but longing, even three days out of ten, with joy. That longing, Brooks suggests, is what Christian colleges are uniquely positioned to nurture.

More than any credential, moral formation is what students truly need. That means forming the kind of people who are, as one old headmaster put it, “acceptable at a dance and invaluable in a shipwreck.” Most institutions no longer aim to do this. But Christian colleges still can—by emphasizing what Brooks calls the “eulogy virtues” over the résumé ones. They can form the heart (kindness, honesty, emotional intelligence), the mind (intellectual humility, curiosity), and the will (grit, courage, moral perseverance). It begins with attention: seeing others clearly and with compassion. He shares a vivid example—a 93-year-old teacher transformed into a radiant child by the warmth of a pastor’s affirmation. “That’s a great moral act,” Brooks says. “To bring out a different version of someone through your attention.”

Beyond cultivating character, Christian colleges also offer students a moral ecology—a place to encounter enduring traditions. Whether Christian, Stoic, or rationalist, students need not invent a moral code from scratch; they can inherit and inhabit one. Brooks urges every student to gather a “chorus of the dead”—intellectual and moral heroes to consult in life’s major decisions. These voices—Augustine, Burke, Hamilton, Murdoch—offer wisdom modern culture no longer provides. And finally, students need to learn the basic moral skills of life: how to comfort a grieving friend, how to end a relationship honorably, how to ask for forgiveness. These are acts of love, not just manners, and our institutions have too often failed to teach them.

In a world that sorts, ranks, and fragments, Christian colleges have the capacity to form whole persons—minds, hearts, and souls. While they may feel embattled by broader cultural currents, Brooks offers a word of deep encouragement: “Be not afraid. You have what everybody else wants.” In an anxious, rootless age, Christian education offers moral clarity, spiritual depth, and the training ground for a kind of leadership the world is starving for—not merely the intelligent, but the wise.