

The Life Worth Wanting

David Brooks

We know a lot about emotion, but desire remains strangely mysterious. What shapes it? Where does it come from? As Augustine proposed, we are not primarily thinking beings—we are desiring beings. What we want is the most important thing about us. That gleam, the desire to make a difference, is something every person can carry, not just for a season, but for a lifetime.

The Deep Roots of Desire

Desire isn't just a feeling, but a fundamental human trait. Brooks reaches back to early humans, tall and underdeveloped in brain power, did something extraordinary: they wandered. Without roads, maps, or clear reasons beyond survival, they traveled thousands of miles across continents. That impulse to go somewhere—to move toward something unseen—reveals what Brooks sees as a foundational human trait: **a deep, innate longing to explore, to discover, and to go beyond the horizon.** It's a trait shared by the Polynesians, whose sophisticated, compass-free navigation across vast oceans speaks to the same kind of mysterious, directional hunger. As historian Jackson Lears put it, "All history is the history of longing."

That longing, Brooks suggests, is not just about exploration—it's also about **understanding, belonging, and becoming.** Desire moves through us in many forms: we long for connection, purpose, and mastery. The brain includes a dopamine-based "**wanting system**" that fuels anticipation—not the fulfillment of pleasure, but the chase itself. We live in a perpetual state of forward-leaning expectation, always pulled toward some next thing. Brooks uses his own writing practice as an example: it's painful, daily, and unrewarding in the moment—but he can't *not* do it. The desire to write is part of his identity, not because it's pleasurable, but because it's essential.

This chase, however, demands discernment. Drawing from Augustine, Brooks notes that **not all desires are created equal.** We are constantly ordering our loves, whether we realize it or not. When we prioritize popularity over friendship, or comfort over calling, we commit what Augustine calls **disordered love**—a misalignment of our values. The journey of life, then, is not just to desire, but to desire *well*. That, Brooks suggests, is the path toward a life truly worth wanting.

Why Emotion Is Smarter Than Reason

Brooks challenges a long-standing assumption in Western thought: that reason is the highest faculty of human life, and that emotion must be tamed or ignored. Tracing this back to Plato's metaphor of reason as the charioteer controlling wild horses (our passions), he argues that this model has been disproven by neuroscience. The work of Antonio Damasio found that people who lose the ability to feel emotion due to brain damage also lose the ability to make decisions. They can't weigh value or prioritize options because, without emotion, the world appears flat. In reality, emotion is what enables reason to function. You're only as smart as your emotions, which means emotional formation is just as important as intellectual training.

The Calling Between You and the World

Desire isn't just a concept—it's a question: *What is the ruling passion of your soul?* Brooks often asks this of his students, even those in their 60s, and finds that many have never seriously considered it. We tend to suppress or misinterpret our deepest longings, either ignoring them or channeling them into surface-level pursuits. Like the man in a Wes Anderson film who survives a near-death experience but continues chasing business deals, we often don't understand what we're truly after. Yet desire is resilient. Like bamboo pushing through cement, it finds a way. That hunger, he says, built America. It's what drove figures like Alexander Hamilton—someone Brooks admires not only for his ambition but for wanting to build a world where ambition could matter.

But desire is not always pleasant. We're not wired to chase comfort; we chase struggle with meaning. Brooks points to people like Haruki Murakami, who runs daily and completes marathons not because he loves it, but because it helps him grow. He, himself, writes every day for the same reason. The key is building a structure of behavior around what you love, for the days when the feeling fades. Commitment, he says, is falling in love with something and then making a system to sustain it. Structure helps carry us when passion alone won't. When people talk about what shaped them most, it's rarely joy or success. It's hardship. Difficulty sharpens desire and refines identity. Brooks calls this contrast the difference between *prosaic* decisions—what kind of bread to buy—and *poetic* ones—what kind of life to lead.

The spark of calling often comes in early, unexpected “annunciation moments”—when something in the world speaks directly to you. His daughter discovered her lifelong love of hockey as a child. Einstein had his with a compass. EO Wilson found his when he saw a stingray and lost vision in one eye, which redirected him from birds to ants—and toward scientific greatness. Brooks argues that these defining passions aren't buried inside us, waiting to be uncovered. They're sparked by encounter. Passion is not introspective; it's interactive. You go to where the pain is, where the need is, and if your heart responds, that's where desire is born. The life worth wanting begins with that kind of connection between an internal hunger and an external need—and with the humility to admit, *I'm not yet who I want to be*. That gap is not failure. It's the beginning of transformation.

The Desire to Grow and the Power of Lifelong Motivation

One of our deepest longings, David Brooks argues, is the desire for competence—the sense that we're improving, even in small things. Whether it's slicing celery or building a tech empire, people often do things not for praise or reward, but simply because they love the craft. Mark Zuckerberg, for instance, dismissed portrayals of him as being driven by status or romance, saying he built Facebook because he liked to build things. This reflects a core truth: intrinsic motivation fuels our most meaningful accomplishments. Extrinsic rewards, by contrast, often diminish this inner drive. As Brooks explains, even something as mundane as mixing a sauce or balancing a bill can become transcendent when done with purpose. This absorption in meaningful action is what the Greeks called *schola*—the root of both “school” and the classical idea of leisure—not idleness, but focused, joyful work.

This kind of sustained purpose requires not just talent but determination. Ray Kroc found his calling selling milkshake machines and eventually built McDonald's, driven not by genius but sheer persistence. In Brooks's view, motivation is the "go" of personality—the engine behind every major life decision. But it matters not only *that* we love, but *what* and *how* we love. David Foster Wallace warned that if we worship money, beauty, or power, those things will consume us. St. Augustine made a similar point: we become what we love. C.S. Lewis, in *The Four Loves*, distinguishes between "need love," which arises from deficiency, and "gift love," which overflows from abundance. Conditional love, especially from parents, may look like care but often carries control and insecurity. When students experience that kind of love, Brooks says, they carry deep fragility into adulthood.

This leads to a final theme: how easily the love of curiosity can be lost. Children naturally ask questions, but schools often prioritize content over exploration, gradually extinguishing that spark. Brooks warns that curiosity must be nurtured or it will fade. He observes that his college students brim with questions, but by age 35, many are dulled by routine and conformity. Studies confirm that long-term success doesn't come from youthful brilliance alone. Olympic athletes and successful entrepreneurs often find their calling later, after trying multiple paths. Intelligence, Brooks insists, is not the best predictor of a good life. Rather, it's the capacity to grow—again and again—with age. The desire for competence and purpose doesn't diminish over time; it deepens.

Lifelong Growth

To close, Brooks offers three portraits of people who exemplify the lifelong "desire to grow." First is Warren Buffett, whose genius was not just in finance but in his relentless pursuit of self-development. Starting as a math-obsessed and socially awkward boy, Buffett learned to seek out teachers who offered him mental frameworks—from Dale Carnegie to Benjamin Graham to Charlie Munger. Each relationship gave him a new lens through which to understand the world. Even into his seventies, Buffett continued to evolve, building friendships with people like Katherine Graham and Bill Gates that expanded his emotional and intellectual horizons. What stands out is not his wealth, but the curiosity and humility that allowed him to keep learning—and growing—decade after decade.

Tina Turner's life was, likewise, a testimony to endurance and personal reinvention. After years of physical and emotional abuse under Ike Turner, she found the strength to leave—risking everything for the chance to rebuild herself. At 37, an age when most performers retire, she started over. Over the next several decades, she transformed into a global icon, commanding stadiums with over 100,000 fans. But her real triumph wasn't fame—it was becoming someone entirely new through the sheer will to grow beyond the pain that once defined her.

Finally, Brooks recounts the life of artist Paul Cézanne, who endured decades of rejection and self-doubt before his art was ever accepted. Mocked, ignored, and even betrayed by close friends like Émile Zola, Cézanne kept painting, quietly refining his vision well into old age. A month before his death at 67, he still felt he hadn't reached the depth he sought—but he also knew he was getting closer. That kind of persistent striving—the refusal to fade, the hunger to become more—epitomizes the ruling passion of a soul fully alive. Brooks ends by urging us to guard that inner fire, to pay attention to what truly calls us, and to keep growing all the days of our lives.