

Rupture and Repair

How America Turns This Around

David Brooks

David Brooks opens his talk with a series of autobiographical stories that chart his ideological development—from a left-leaning New York childhood to a form of conservatism shaped by humility and institutional respect. As a student at the University of Chicago, he was still progressive, writing satire about conservative icons like William F. Buckley. Yet an unexpected moment—Buckley offering him a job after reading his parody—would later become a turning point. At the time, Brooks missed the offer because he was busy debating Milton Friedman on national television, an encounter he recalls with characteristic self-deprecation.

His real shift, however, came not through debate but experience. As a police reporter in Chicago, Brooks covered life in public housing projects like Cabrini-Green and the Robert Taylor Homes—places marked by material improvement but spiritual and social deterioration. Reading Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, he encountered the concept of “epistemological modesty”: the idea that society is too complex to be remade from scratch. The failures of central planning—and the inability to see what cannot be measured—convinced him that the social “underbrush” often dismissed by experts is actually essential. This realization anchored his turn toward a conservatism that values gradual reform, institutional wisdom, and the moral formation that comes through embedded community.

Although he still calls himself a conservative, Brooks distances himself from populist movements that dismiss institutions and cultivate certainty without humility. He shares how much he values spaces like Westmont, where intellectual and spiritual formation are taken seriously—where institutions shape character and ideas are pursued in service of the common good. While he jokes that he feels politically homeless, he feels at home in communities animated by what he calls “soulcraft”: grace, tradition, and a shared commitment to moral purpose. His journey has led him to embrace a form of conservatism that is deeply shaped by experience, tradition, and a belief in the formative power of community.

America at a Crossroads

David Brooks shifts from personal reflection to a broader meditation on America’s identity. Echoing Charles de Gaulle’s famous line about France, he shares that he, too, has always carried a certain idea about America—not just as a country, but as a moral cause rooted in freedom, equality, and the dignity of democracy. He recounts witnessing the devastation of the HIV crisis in Africa and how the U.S.-led PEPFAR initiative, launched by President George W. Bush, helped save millions of lives. For Brooks, that moment exemplified the kind of morally ambitious America he believes in. The Trump administration’s dismantling of PEPFAR, by contrast, marked a painful rupture—an act that, despite legitimate critiques of the program, sacrificed life-saving work for short-term politics and sent a disheartening message about the nation’s moral trajectory.

Brooks goes on to describe what he sees as a disturbing pattern: a growing disregard for democratic values and the institutional fabric that once defined American greatness. He laments the erosion of trusted institutions like the NIH and the cultural shift away from pluralism, curiosity, and respect for expertise. He likens America to a “crossroads nation”—one historically enriched by diversity and the influx of talent from around the world—and fears that we are turning away from that openness. Drawing on Peter Hall’s *Cities in Civilization*, he argues that history’s most vibrant societies were all crossroads cultures—places like Athens, Venice, Paris, and New York—where difference was not just tolerated but celebrated. That legacy of pluralism, he suggests, is now under threat.

This cultural and political retreat is part of a much larger global transformation. Brooks places our current moment within a lineage of historical eras: totalitarianism, welfare-state liberalism, the civil rights and liberation movements, and market liberalism. Around 2011, he argues, the world entered a new phase—defined by populist backlash, suspicion of elites, and institutional decay. America is no longer exceptional in this regard; recent data show that U.S. attitudes toward government, leadership, and democracy are now statistically average. From Italy to France to Poland, the rise of Trump-style populism is mirrored across the West. The problem, Brooks warns, is not just partisan—it’s civilizational. In this context, he argues, America doesn’t merely need new policies or leaders. It needs a new story. A new moral and cultural vision capable of meeting this global moment with humility, courage, and moral clarity.

Rupture and Repair

David Brooks turns his attention to the underlying forces driving global populism, arguing that beneath the economic and political discontent lies a deeper relational and spiritual crisis. He describes a cultural shift marked by rising loneliness, declining trust, and a pervasive sense of pessimism. Using data from Google’s Ngram project and mental health surveys, he shows how American language, media, and emotional life have grown markedly darker since 2011. Political polarization, he contends, is increasingly a form of social therapy—a substitute for the meaning and connection people can no longer find elsewhere. As people grow more isolated, their political identities harden into teams defined less by shared goals and more by shared enemies. The result is what Brooks calls an “over-politicized and under-moralized” society: one that is obsessed with scandal but forgetful of character, virtue, and the hard, personal work of friendship and trust.

He then explores what it means to live in a world where people no longer share a moral order. Drawing from attachment theory and the work of British psychologist John Bowlby, Brooks describes how human flourishing depends on a “secure base”—beginning with family, then place, and most crucially, a shared sense of right and wrong. Without that moral foundation, people lose their ability to trust, to belong, or to resolve differences. He warns that American society has embraced a radical individualism that privatizes morality and undermines the communal structures—faith, family, nationhood—that used to form character. Drawing on voices like George Marsden, Jonathan Sacks, and even Karl Marx, Brooks paints a picture of cultural unraveling: “All that is solid melts into air.” The result is not only instability, but disproportionate suffering among the less educated, who experience the deepest breakdowns in health, family, opportunity, and community.

And yet, Brooks insists, rupture is not the end of the story. Drawing from global examples and historical cycles, he suggests that societies—and individuals—can move from crisis to renewal. But recovery depends on a collective willingness to reform broken institutions and rebuild trust. The media, for example, must do a better job representing the full ideological spectrum of the country. Institutions of higher education must return to the task of moral formation. And communities must reclaim the power of covenantal relationships—those that are not chosen out of convenience, but entered into out of identity and commitment. While the pain of this moment is real, Brooks believes it also offers a generational opportunity: to rediscover the kinds of moral, spiritual, and civic ties that hold a society together.

Signs of Civic Renewal and a Hopeful Future

David Brooks opens this final section with a simple claim: we are already beginning to come back. Just as individuals often find their deepest growth through periods of hardship, so too do nations. Brooks shares his own season of personal rupture—an emotionally barren period marked by divorce, loneliness, and workaholicism—and how it opened him to a journey of spiritual awakening and relational repair. Through vulnerability, faith, and humility, he began to change. His personal story becomes a metaphor for national renewal: rupture, he argues, is not the end; it's the necessary beginning of repair.

He draws historical parallels from around the world—Britain after industrial collapse, Rwanda after genocide, and the U.S. during the Progressive Era—to show that societies can and do recover from profound moral and political breakdowns. Drawing from Samuel Huntington's theory of "moral convulsions," Brooks situates America's current turmoil in a recurring 60-year cycle of disruption and renewal. Though these periods are often painful—marked by protests, polarization, even violence—they give rise to new moral visions and reform movements. Brooks sees Donald Trump not as an originator of this moment, but as a symptom of it: someone who gives voice to real grievances, though not, in Brooks's view, the best answers to them. Still, the deeper shift must go beyond politics—it must be cultural, civic, and moral.

Signs of that civic revival, he argues, are already visible. Through his *Weave: The Social Fabric Project*, Brooks has met countless Americans quietly restoring their communities through acts of selfless service and neighborly trust. From a woman in Ohio who founded three nonprofits after a personal tragedy, to an Ethiopian parking attendant in D.C. who helps residents navigate local bureaucracy, Brooks lifts up ordinary people as evidence that a cultural shift is underway. These are the "weavers"—people building community not for praise, but because it's simply what neighbors do. Brooks believes we are moving from excessive individualism toward a renewed hunger for belonging. Though political renewal may lag behind, the cultural and relational groundwork is already being laid. America has recovered before, he insists—and we will again.