

THE RELATIONALIST
MANIFESTO



weave

the social fabric project

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

WEAVE: THE SOCIAL FABRIC PROJECT BEGAN WITH THE IDEA THAT AMERICA'S SOCIAL FABRIC IS BEING RIPPED TO SHREDS BY DISTRUST, LONELINESS, ALIENATION, INEQUALITY, RACISM, SPIRITUAL EMPTINESS AND TRIBAL ENMITY. BUT WE ALSO KNEW THAT THERE ARE PEOPLE FIGHTING THESE SCOURGES, SUCCESSFULLY, AT THE LOCAL LEVEL ALL ACROSS AMERICA. WE WANTED TO LEARN WHAT THEY COULD TEACH US. WE WANTED TO SHINE A LIGHT ON THEIR EXAMPLES AND MAGNIFY THEIR EFFECT.

We traveled the country and found a movement that doesn't know it's a movement. In every city, neighborhood and rural small town, we found scores of people serving their neighbors and healing bonds. It wasn't hard to find such people. They are everywhere.

The actual work they do is amazingly diverse—some work with gang members in Chicago, some build gathering places in rural Montana, some work with single moms and malnourished infants in North Carolina. But deep down it is all the same work. It is building connection where there was no connection, creating relationships where there were no relationships, weaving thick neighborhoods where there were thin neighborhoods.

These people aren't doing their work because they are interested in making money, or acquiring political power, and they are certainly not interested in fame and celebrity. They are doing their work because they want to serve their town, unleash the promise in others, ease suffering, live good lives and help create a world in which love is plentiful, not scarce.

As we spoke with them and got to know them, we kept hearing the same phrases: "serve the whole person," "radical hospitality," "deep mutuality," "asset-based thinking," "deep relationality," "walkout experiences." Whether it was red America or blue America, we had same sensation—there are common values here, common actions, common goals. The social fabric is being ripped apart by a thousand forces, but these Weavers are a coherent movement of people trying to knit it back together.

But they don't have many of things most movements have. They don't have a common identity, a name, national publications, training academies, core texts or even an articulated set of principles or creed.

The most important thing these people do is their local work itself. But there is also power in coming together to realize: Our work is a part of a large, common work, our efforts are pointed to a common effort. We are one.

In 1960, almost nobody called themselves a feminist. By 1975 tens of millions of people did. The creation of that common social identity made all the difference.

This document is just one piece of the effort to create cohesion and a sense of common identity among the many Weavers across America. It's not an attempt to tell the common story or provide a common symbol or arouse common emotions. This is simply the beginning of an attempt to lay out a common creed. What you are about to read is the first draft, of what we think of as the Weaver's creed. It is a rough attempt to articulate the ideas behind this movement.

It's important to remember that this is a movement that existed in action before it existed in thought. The Weavers write their manifestos with the pens of their lives. But we listened to them and observed them and tried to mirror back a written creed that is implicit in who they are. We tried to name the core beliefs of this movement, provide the beginnings of coherence and direction. We hope that if people argue about and discuss this manifesto that will push this movement along, define its animating principles and make this movement contagious.

Social movements are not organized top-down anymore. These days they are radically decentralized, and the Weavers are radically decentralized. But there still have to be hubs—places that help provide coherence, centers of debate, centers of learning, where the common work and the common faith can be hammered out and clearly articulated. Weave: The Social Fabric Project hopes to be one of the hubs, not only with documents like these, but by telling stories, illuminating the work, gathering friends and encouraging others to Weave in their own ways, big and small. We hope you'll read this document and tell us how to make it better.



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HYPER-INDIVIDUALISM

1. There is always a balance between self and society.

In some ages the pressures of the group become stifling and crush the self, and individuals feel a desperate need to break free and express their individuality. In our age, by contrast, the self is inflated and the collective is weak. We have swung too far in the direction of individualism. The result is a loss of connection—a crisis of solidarity.

2. Hyper-individualism, the reigning ethos of our day, is a system of morals, feelings, ideas,

and practices based on the idea that the journey through life is an individual journey, that the goals of life are individual happiness, authenticity, self-actualization, and self-sufficiency. Hyper-Individualism puts the same question on everybody's lips: What can I do to make myself happy?

3. Hyper-individualism rests upon an emancipation story.

The heroic self breaks free from the stifling chains of society. The self stands on its own two feet, determines its own destiny, secures its own individual rights. Hyper-individualism defines freedom as absence from restraint.

4. In this way, hyper-individualism gradually undermines any connection not based on individual choice—the connections to family, neighborhood, culture,

nation, and the common good. Hyper-individualism erodes our obligations and responsibilities to others and our kind.

5. The central problems of our day flow from the excesses of this erosion:

social isolation, distrust, polarization, the breakdown of family, the loss of community, tribalism, rising suicide rates, rising mental health problems, a spiritual crisis caused by a loss of common purpose, the loss—in nation after nation—of any sense of common solidarity that binds people across difference, the loss of those common stories and causes that foster community, mutuality, comradeship, and purpose.

6. The core flaw of hyper-individualism is that it leads to a degradation and a pulverization of the human person.

It is a system built upon the egoistic drives within each of us. These are the self-interested drives—the desire to excel; to make a mark in the world; to rise in wealth, power, and status; to win victories and be better than others. Hyper-individualism does not

emphasize and eventually does not even see the other drives—the deeper and more elusive motivations that seek connection, fusion, service, and care. These are not the desires of the ego, but the longings of the heart and soul: the desire to live in loving interdependence with others, the yearning to live in service of some ideal, the yearning to surrender to a greater good. Hyper-individualism numbs these deepest longings. Eventually, hyper-individualism creates isolated, self-interested monads who sense that something is missing in their lives but cannot even name what it is.

7. Hyper-individualism thrives within the systems of the surface.

Consumerism amputates what is central to the person for the sake of material acquisition. The meritocracy amputates what is deepest for individual “success.” Unbalanced capitalism turns people into utility-maximizing, speeding workaholics that no permanent attachment can penetrate.

8. The hyper-individualist finds himself enmeshed in a network of conditional love.

I am worthy of being loved only when I have achieved the status or success the world expects of me. I am worthy of love only when I can offer the other person something in return. I am what the world says about me. In the end, hyper-individualism doesn't make people self-sufficient and secure. It obliterates emotional and spiritual security by making everything conditional. It makes people extremely sensitive to the judgments of others and quick to take offense when they feel slighted.

9. Hyper-individualism directs people toward false and unsatisfying lives.

Some people lead an aesthetic life. They get to taste a series of experiences which may be pleasant, but which don't accumulate into anything because they are not serving a large cause. Some people become insecure overachievers. They seek to win by accomplishment the love, admiration, and attachment they can't get any other way, but of course no amount of achievement ever gives them the love they crave.

10. When you build a whole society on an overly thin view of human nature,

you wind up with a dehumanized culture in which people are starved of the things they yearn for most deeply.

11. The uncommitted person is the unremembered person. A person who does not live for relation with others leaves no deep mark on the world.

12. Hyper-individualism leads to tribalism. People eventually rebel against the isolation and meaninglessness of hyper-individualism by joining a partisan tribe. This seems like relation but is actually its opposite. If the relationalist mentality is based on

mutual affection, the tribalist mentality is based on mutual distrust. It is always us versus them, friend or enemy, destroy or be destroyed. Anger is the mode. The tribalist is seeking connection but isolates himself ever more bitterly within his own resentments and distrust. Tribalism is the dark twin of community. The tragic paradox of hyper-individualism is that what began as an ecstatic liberation ends up as individual crushing war of tribe against tribe.

RELATIONALISM

1. The revolution will be moral, or it will not be at all. Modern society needs a moral ecology that rejects the reigning hyper-individualism of the moment. We need to articulate a creed that puts relation, not the individual, at the center, and which articulates, in clear form, the truths we all know: that we are formed by relationship, we are nourished by relationship, and we long for relationship. Life is not a solitary journey. It is building a home together. It is a process of being formed by attachments and then forming attachments in turn. It is a great chain of generations passing down gifts to one another.

2. The hyper-individualist sees society as a collection of individuals who contract with one another. The relationalist sees society as a web of connections that in many ways that precede choice. A hyper-individualist sees the individual as a self-sufficient unit; The relationalist says, A personality is a movement toward others.

3. As a child, each person's emotional and spiritual foundation is formed by the unconditional love of a caring adult. Each person's attachment style is formed by the dance of interactions between herself and a loving adult. "We" precedes "me."

4. As adults, we measure our lives by the quality of our relationships and the quality of our service to those relationships. Life is a qualitative endeavor, not a quantitative one. It's not how many, but how thick and how deep. Defining what a quality relationship looks like is a central task of any moral ecology.

5. The best adult life is lived by making commitments and staying faithful to those commitments: commitments to a vocation, to a family, to a philosophy or faith, to a community. Adult life is about making promises to others, being faithful to those promises. The beautiful life is found in the mutual giving of unconditional gifts.

6. Relationalism is a middle way between hyper-individualism and collectivism. The former detaches the person from all deep connection. The latter obliterates the person within the group, and sees groups as faceless herds. The relationalist sees each person as a node in a thick and enchanted web of warm commitments. She seeks to build a neighborhood, nation and world of diverse and creative people who have made commitments in a flowering of different ways, who are nonetheless bound together by sacred chords.

7. Relationalism is not a system of ideas. It is a way of life. Relationalism is a viewpoint that draws from many sources, from Edmund Burke and Martin Luther King, Jr., from Martin Buber and Dorothy Day and Walt Whitman, from Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier, Martha Nussbaum, and Annie Dillard to Gandhi and William James.

8. The hyper-individualist operates by a straightforward logic: I make myself strong and I get what I want. The relationalist says, Life operates by an inverse logic. I possess only when I give. I lose myself to find myself. When I surrender to something great, that's when I am strongest and most powerful.

RELATIONALISM IS NOT A SYSTEM OF IDEAS. IT IS A WAY OF LIFE.

THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A PERSON

1. The central journey of modern life is moving self to service. We start out listening to the default settings of the ego and gradually learn to listen to the higher callings of the heart and soul. Much of modern social thought, drawing on thinkers such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, and modern economics, sees human beings as fundamentally selfish. Children, Freud wrote, "are completely egoistic; they feel their needs intensely and strive ruthlessly to satisfy them." Most of modern thought was written by men, and often a certain sort of alpha men, who did not even see the systems of care that undergirded the societies in which they lived.

2. Relationalism asserts that human beings are both fundamentally broken but also splendidly endowed. We have egoistic self-interested desires, and we need those desires in order to accomplish some of the necessary tasks of life: to build an identity, to make a mark on the world, to break away from parents, to create and to shine. But relationalism asserts that there are other, deeper parts of ourselves. There are motivations that are even stronger than self-interest, even if they are more elusive. At the deepest center of each person there is what we call, metaphorically, the heart and soul.

3. The heart is that piece of us that longs for fusion with others. We are not primarily thinking creatures; we are primarily loving and desiring creatures. We are defined by what we desire. We become what we love. The core question for each of us is, Have we educated our emotions to love the right things in the right way?

4. The soul is the piece of us that gives each person infinite dignity and worth. Slavery is wrong because it obliterates a soul. Rape is not just an assault on physical molecules; it obliterates another soul. The soul yearns for goodness. Each human being wants to lead a good and meaningful life, and feels life falling apart when it seems meaningless.

5. A child is born with both ego and heart and soul on full display. But for many people, around adolescence, the ego begins to swell, and the heart and soul recede. People at this age need to establish an identity, to carve a self. Meanwhile, our society tells adolescent boys to bury their emotions and become men. It tells little girls that if they reveal the true depths of themselves, nobody will like them. Our public culture, normalizes selfishness, rationalizes egoism, and covers over and renders us inarticulate about the deeper longings of the heart and soul.

6. But eventually most people realize that something is missing in the self-interested life. They achieve worldly success and find it unsatisfying. Or perhaps they have fallen in love, or been loved in a way that plows open the crusty topsoil of life and reveals the true personality down below. Or perhaps they endure a period of failure, suffering, or grief that carves through the surface and reveals the vast depths underneath. One way or another, people get introduced to the full depths of themselves, the full amplitude of life. They realize that only emotional, moral, and spiritual food can provide the nourishment they crave.

7. When a person has undergone one of these experiences, which can happen at any age, she is no longer just an individual; she has become a person. Her whole personhood is alive and engaged. She has discovered, down at the substrate, her infinite ability to care. Relationalism guides us as we undertake this personal transformation, surpassing the desires of the ego and taking on a bigger journey.

8. The movement toward becoming a person is downward and then outward: To peer deeper into ourselves where we find the yearnings for others, and then outward in relationship toward the world. A person achieves self-mastery, Maritain wrote, for the purpose of self-giving.

9. An individual who has become a person has staged a rebellion. She rebels against the individualistic ethos and all the systems of impersonalism. Society tells her to want independence, but she has declared her interdependence. Society says we live in a materialist reality, but she says we live in an enchanted reality. Society tells her to keep her options open, but she says, No, I will commit. I will root myself down. Society says, Try to rise above and be better than; she says, No, I will walk with, serve, and come in under. Society says, Cultivate with the self-interested side of your life; she says, No, I will cultivate the whole of myself. Life goes well only when you are living with the whole of yourself.

12. The relationalist doesn't walk away from the capitalist meritocracy, the systems of mainstream life. But she balances that worldview with a countervailing ethos that supplements, corrects, and ennobles. She walks in that world, with all its pleasures and achievements, but with a different spirit, a different approach, and different goals. She is communal where the world is too individual. She is more emotional when the world is too cognitive. She is moral when the world is too utilitarian.

THE GOOD LIFE

1. The relationalist is not trying to dominate life by sheer willpower. He is not gripping the steering wheel and trying to strategize his life. He has made himself available. He has opened himself up so that he can hear a call and respond to a summons. He is asking, What is my responsibility here? When a person finds his high calling in life, it doesn't feel like he has taken control; it feels like he has surrendered control. The most creative actions are those made in response to a summons.

2. The summons often comes in the form of love. A person falls in love with her child, her husband, her neighborhood, her calling, or her God. And with that love comes an urge to make promises--to say, I will always love you. I will always serve you and be there for you. Life is a vale of promise making.

3. Or a summons may come in the form of a need. There is some injustice, some societal wrong, that needs to be fixed. A person assumes responsibility--makes a promise to fight that fight and right that wrong.

4. When a summons has been felt and a promise has been made, a commitment has been sealed. The life of a relationalist is defined by its commitments. The quality and fulfillment of her life will be defined by what she commits to and how she fulfills those commitments.

5. A commitment is a promise made from love. A commitment is a promise made without expecting any return (though there will be returns aplenty). A committed relationship is a two-way promise. It is you throwing yourself wholeheartedly for another and another throwing himself wholeheartedly for you.

6. The person makes his commitments maximal commitments. He doesn't just have a career; he has a vocation. He doesn't just have a contract marriage (What's in it for me?). He has a covenantal marriage (I live and die for you). He doesn't just have opinions. He submits to a creed. He doesn't just live in a place. He helps build a community. Furthermore, he is not just committed to this abstract notion of "community." He is committed to a specific community, to a specific person, to a specific creed--things grounded in particular times and places.

7. By committing and living up to the daily obligations of his commitments, the person integrates himself into a coherent whole. Commitments organize the hours and the days of a life. A committed person achieves consistency across time. His character is built through the habitual acts of service to the people he loves. His character is built by being the humble recipient of other people's gifts and thus acknowledging

his own dependency. A contract gets you benefits, but a commitment transforms who you are.

8. Relationalists prioritize those actions that deepen commitment, build relation, and enhance human dignity: giving, storytelling, dance, singing, common projects, gathering, dining, ritual, deep conversation, common prayer, forgiveness, creating beauty, mutual comfort in times of sadness and threat, mutual labor for the common good.

9. The relational life is an open adventure. There are always ups and down, the forces of impersonalization warring against the forces of personalization. What matters is how you serve relationships through the ups and downs. It's in the how. The profundity is in the adverbs.

10. A committed life involves some common struggles.

11. It is, for example, a constant struggle to see people at their full depths. In the business of daily life there is the constant temptation to see the other person as an object and not a whole. There is the constant temptation to label and generalize. There is the constant temptation to reduce people to data and to see them as data points. You can count apples with data. You can track human behavior in the mass. But there is something that is unique and irreplaceable about each person that data cannot see. The relationalist tries to see each individual as a whole person--as a body, mind, heart, and soul.

12. There is the constant struggle to communicate well. At every moment there is either a depth of communication or a shallowness of communication. The relationalist seeks conditions that will make communication deep and pure. This is hard because there's something in ourselves that eludes our ability to communicate it. There is something proper about modesty and the slow unveiling of one's self. To achieve I-Thou communication, even to glimpse it, the relationalist sits patiently as vulnerabilities are gradually revealed. She offers safety and respect. Sometimes what is deepest is related in the form of myth, story, and music. When communication fails or is corrupted, the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier says, I suffer a loss of myself. Madness and misery is a severance of communication with others.

13. There is the constant struggle to live as an effective giver and receiver of gifts. There are millions of people around us whose lives are defined by generosity and service. Personal being, Mounier continues, is essentially generous. But our society does not teach us how to be an effective giver of gifts. The schools don't emphasize it. The popular culture is confused about it.

14. It is a constant struggle to see life through a moral lens. The practical workaday world primes the utilitarian lens. Consumerism calls forth a self that is oriented around material pleasure. Money has an anonymous power and tends to render the person on the other side of a transaction invisible. Workplace rivalries and modern politics require armored individuals—human tanks with no exposure. The effort to fight the utilitarian lens and see daily life through a moral lens is a hard and never-ending struggle.

15. These struggles are not against other people. The line between ego and soul runs down the middle of every person. Most of us, from time to time, buy into a workaholic ethos that leaves us with little time for relationship. Most of us, from time to time, hue to a code of privacy that prevents us from actually

knowing the people who live right nearby. Most of us live with technology that aims to reduce friction and maximize efficiency. Relationship, though, is inherently sticky and inefficient. Most of us, daily, slip back into self-absorption, succumb to the hunger for status, and have to recognize that and dive back into relation.

16. The relationalist worldview is not about the forces of good conquering the forces of evil. It's always a competition between partial truths. It's always an evolving conversation between self and society. It's always balancing tensions and trying to live life in graceful balance.

17. The relational life is a challenging life but ultimately it's a joyful life, because it is enmeshed in affection and crowned with moral joy.

THE GOOD SOCIETY

1. As T. S. Eliot observed, the chief illusion of modern political activity is the belief that you can build a system so perfect that the people in it do not have to be good. The reality is that democracy and the economy rest upon a foundation, which is society. A society is a system of relationships. If there is no trust at the foundations of society, if there is no goodness, care, or faithfulness, relationships crumble, and the market and the state crash to pieces. If there are no shared norms of right and wrong, no sense of common attachments, then the people in the market and the state will rip one another to shreds as they vie for power and money. Society and culture are prior to and more important than politics or the market.

2. In this day and age, our primary problems are at the level of the foundations. They are at the level of the system of relationships. Our society has been spiraling to ever-higher levels of distrust, ever-higher levels of unknowing and alienation. One bad action breeds another. One escalation of hostility breeds another.

3. The call of relationalism is to usher in a social transformation by reweaving the fabric of reciprocity and trust, to build a society, as Dorothy Day put it, in which it is easier to be good.

4. The social fabric is not woven by leaders from above. It is woven at every level, through a million caring actions, from one person to another. It is woven by people fulfilling their roles as good friends, neighbors, and citizens.

5. Whenever I treat another person as if he were an object, I've ripped the social fabric. When I treat another person as an infinite soul, I have woven the

social fabric. Whenever I lie, abuse, stereotype, or traumatize a person, I have ripped the fabric. Whenever I see someone truly, and make them feel known, I have woven the fabric. Whenever I accuse someone of corruption without evidence, I have ripped the social fabric. Whenever I disagree without maligning motives, I have woven it. The social fabric is created through an infinity of small moral acts, and it can be destroyed by a series of immoral ones.

5. Personal transformation and social transformation happen simultaneously. When you reach out and build community, you nourish yourself.

6. The ultimate faith of relationalism is that we are all united at the deepest levels. At the surface we have our glorious diversity. But at the substrate there is a commonality that no amount of hostility can ever fully extinguish, that no amount of division can ever fully sunder.

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7. Relationships do not scale. They have to be built one at a time, through patience and forbearance. But norms do scale. When people in a community cultivate caring relationships, and do so repeatedly in a way that gets communicated to others, then norms are established. Trustworthy action is admired; empathy is celebrated. Cruelty is punished and ostracized. Neighborliness becomes the default state. An emergent system, a culture, has been created that subtly guides all the members in certain directions. When you create a norm through the repeated performance of some good action, you have created a new form of power. People within a moral ecology are given a million subtle nudges to either live up to their full dignity or sink to their base cravings. The moral ecology is the thing we build together through our daily decisions.

8. Rebuilding society is not just get-togetherism—convenering people in some intellectually or morally neutral way. There has to be a shift in moral culture, a shift in the definition of the good life people imagine together.

9. The state has an important but incomplete role to play in this process. The state can provide services, but it cannot easily provide care. That is to say, the state can redistribute money to the poor, can build homeless shelters and day care centers. It can create the material platforms on which relationships can be built. But the state can't create the intimate relationships that build a fully functioning person. That can only happen through habitual personal contact. It is only through relationships that we become neighbors, workers, citizens, and friends.

A DECLARATION OF INTERDEPENDENCE

1. A good society is like a dense jungle. There are vines and intertwining branches. There are enmeshed root systems and connections across the canopy. There are monkeys playing at the treetops, the butterflies darting below. Every creature has a place in the great ecosystem. There is a gorgeous diversity and beauty and vitality.

2. A good person leading a good life is a creature enmeshed in that jungle. A beautiful life is a planted life, attached but dynamic. A good life is a symbiotic life—serving others wholeheartedly and being served wholeheartedly in return. It is daily acts of loving-kindness, gentleness in reproach, forbearance after insult. It is an adventure of mutual care, building, and exploration. The crucial question is not, Who I am? but, Whose am I?

3. Most of us get better at living as we go. There comes a moment, which may come early or later in life, when you realize what your life is actually about. You look across your life and review the moments when you felt more fully alive, at most your best self. They were usually moments when you were working with others in service of some ideal. That is the agency moment. That is the moment when you achieve clarity about what you should do and how you should live. That is the moment when the ego loses its grip. There is a sudden burst of energy that comes with freedom from the self-centered ego. Life becomes more driven and more gift. That is the moment when a life comes to a point.

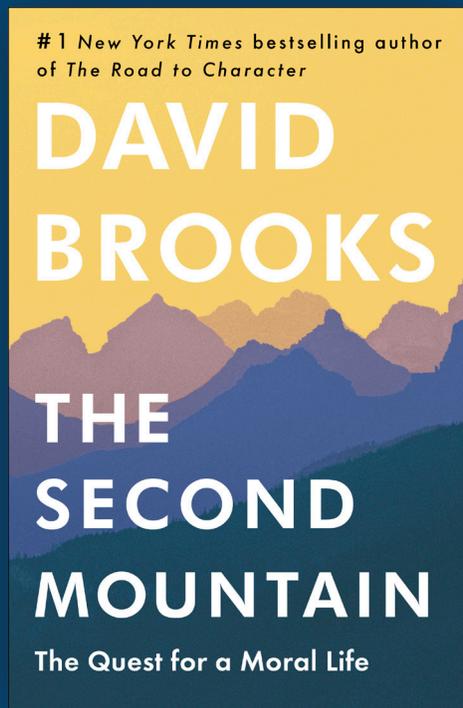
4. When you see people at that point, you realize they have an interior stronghold of values and devotions against which even the threat of death could not prevail. When you see people at that point, you see a generosity that radiates out into the world. You see people giving of themselves, not even in the grand ways, but just in the small favors and thoughtful considerations. This is how the jungle becomes thick and healthy.

5. When you see a group of people in that state, you see not just individuals but a people, a community, a flourishing society, where people help one another, magnify one another's talents, enjoy one another's creativity, and rest in one another's hospitality.

6. When you see people at the point, you see people with a power that overcomes division and distrust. Distrust is a perversity. No one wants to live in a distrusting place, or be lonely. Distrust comes about because of our own failings of relationship. But love has a redemptive power, Martin Luther King argued. It has the power to transform individuals and break down distrust. If you love a person and keep loving a person, they may lash out at first, but eventually they will break under the power of your care. Division is healed not mostly by solving the bad, but by overwhelming the bad with the good. If you can maximize the number of good interactions between people, then the disagreements will rest in a bed of loving care, and the bad will have a tendency to take care of itself. When trust is restored, the heartbeat relaxes, people are joyful together. Joy is found on the far side of sacrificial service. It is found in giving yourself away.

7. When you see that, you realize joy is not just a feeling, it is moral outlook. It is a permanent state of thanksgiving and friendship, communion and solidarity. This is not an end to troubles and cares. Life doesn't offer us utopia. But the self has shrunk back to its proper size. When relationships are tender, when commitments are strong, when communication is pure, when the wounds of life have been absorbed and the wrongs forgiven, people bend toward each other, intertwine with one another and some mystical combustion happens. Love emerges between people out of nothing, as a pure flame.

THE RELATIONALIST MANIFESTO



An earlier version of this manifesto appears as the conclusion of David Brooks' forthcoming book, "The Second Mountain."