

# How Humanism Can Save the World

David Brooks

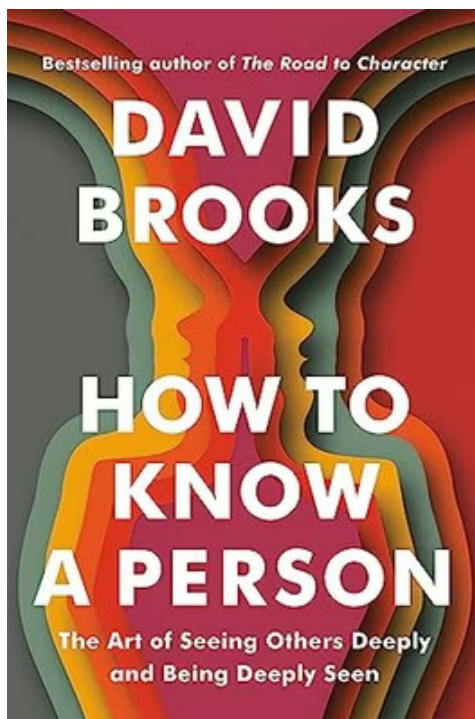
One evening not long ago, I was doomscrolling on social media, wading through the detritus of our present moment: Videos of terrorists in Israel decapitating a man with a garden hoe. A clip of Donald Trump being cruel and narcissistic. Footage of mobs physically assaulting some lone stranger they disagree with, pummeling him as he lies prone on the ground.

These are all products of the rising tide of dehumanization that has swept across the world. The famous dates of our century point to this great unfolding of barbarism—September 11, 2001; January 6, 2021; October 7, 2023. The causes of this rising culture of dehumanization are almost too many to count: tribalism, racism, ideological dogmatism, social media. All this amounts to the steady evisceration of the moral norms that can make our planet a decent place to live—and their gradual substitution with distrust, aggression, and rage. Dehumanization is any way of seeing and acting that covers the human face, that refuses to recognize and respect the full dignity of each person.

Then, as I was scrolling, I came upon a short video of an interview that the author James Baldwin gave many decades ago. “There may not be as much humanity in the world as one would like to see, but there is some,” he said. “There is more than one would think.” He spoke with gravity and moral conviction, his eyes boring into the interviewer, who was off-camera. “Walk down the street of any city, any afternoon, and look around you,” he continued. “What you’ve got to remember is what you’re looking at is also you. Everyone you’re looking at is also you. You could be that person. You could be that monster, you could be that cop. And you have to decide for yourself not to be.”

[Adrienne LaFrance: The coming humanist renaissance](#)

Here, amid the corrosive flow of dehumanization, was the very image of a defiant humanist. Here was a person who had organized his life around the great humanist endeavors: To try to see others in all their complexity and depth. To try to see yourself with humility, self-awareness, and compassion. To try to act in ways that are considerate, just, and discerning. Above all, to try to see the world from another person’s point of view.



In these violent, vicious times, this humanist gospel of curiosity and respect for others may seem hopelessly woo-woo and naive. But I assure you that humanism is a hardheaded and practical way of being. The ability to understand the people you're dealing with is practical. Leading with respect and curiosity is practical. Ravidly, the dehumanizers lead us down a death spiral of animosity and distrust. Bravely and effectively, the humanists try to brake that descent. At the center of every healthy family, organization, and nation is a core humanistic skill: the capacity to see others deeply, to understand them, and to make them feel seen, heard, and understood.

We sometimes talk about democracy as if it's just about voting, and the stuff that happens in legislatures. But, at its core, liberal democracy is a series of concrete human encounters: persuasion, argument, negotiation, compromise. It's one viewpoint encountering a bunch of other viewpoints in hopes of finding some positive way forward. For liberal democracy to function, we must be able to understand one another to some degree, to see one another's viewpoints, to project respect across difference and disagreement. All of this requires humanistic wisdom.

More mundanely, humanistic wisdom matters in your professional life. To work well with others, you have to show that you see them and recognize their worth. In a 2021 study, when the consulting firm McKinsey asked business executives why employees were quitting their firms, the executives said it was to make more money elsewhere. But when researchers asked the employees themselves why they quit, the most common answer was that they didn't feel recognized and valued by their managers. They didn't feel seen.

So how good are you at these humanist skills? Most of us are not as good as we think we are. William Ickes, a personality psychologist at the University of Texas at Arlington, has found that strangers having their first conversation read each other accurately only about 20 percent of the time—and that even friends and family read one another accurately only 35 percent of the time. Many of us spend our days awash in social ignorance. You probably didn't need an academic study to tell you this. How often have you felt stereotyped and categorized, misheard and misunderstood? Do you really think you don't regularly do this to others?

Why aren't we good at seeing one another? For starters, we're egotistical. We don't see others because we're too busy presenting ourselves. And some people are so narcissistically locked into their own viewpoint that they can't be bothered to see yours. Maybe you've heard the story about the guy standing by a river: A woman standing on the opposite shore shouts at him, "How do I get to the other side of the river?" He bellows back, "You *are* on the other side of the river!"

But we can get better. How? Well, if you are a young person, take as many courses as you can in the humanities. That's where you go to learn about *people*. If you can't understand the people around you, not only will *you* be miserable but you will make *them* miserable, too.

The humanities also train people to pay close attention to one another, the way actors do. "Actors walk through life so different because we have to be an observer," the actor Viola Davis once told an interviewer. "The way someone puts their head down if you say a certain word. And you think, 'Why did they do that? Is it something in their past?'"

The actor Matthew McConaughey once told me something similar. When he's trying to get into character, he said, he looks for some small gesture that epitomizes the character's overall nature, and then he expands out from there. One character might be a "hands in his front pockets" kind of guy. He goes through life hunched over, closed in. When he takes his hands out of his pockets and tries to assert himself, he's going to be unnatural, insecure, overly aggressive. McConaughey also tries to see every scene from his character's point of view. A killer is not thinking, "I'm a killer." He's thinking, "I'm here to restore order."

The novelist Zadie Smith has been a consummate humanist since she was a little girl. A few years ago, she wrote a piece for *The New York Review of Books* in which she recalled that, as a child, she was constantly imagining what it would be like to grow up in the homes of her friends. "I rarely entered a friend's house without wondering what it might be like to

never leave,” she wrote. “That is, what it would be like to be Polish or Ghanaian or Irish or Bengali, to be richer or poorer, to say these prayers or hold those politics. I was an equal-opportunity voyeur. I wanted to know what it was like to be everybody.” What a fantastic way to train yourself not just to be a novelist but to be capable of seeing others as well.

The paramount humanist goal is to learn to see people the way Rembrandt saw people. Not all of the subjects of Rembrandt’s paintings are remarkable, but as the late novelist Frederick Buechner once observed, even the plain faces “are so remarkably seen by Rembrandt that we are jolted into seeing them remarkably.” Humanism is built on this kind of reverence for the person, and on the recognition that everyone you meet is superior to you in some way. People are not problems to solve but mysteries whose depths can never fully be plumbed.

The hard sciences can tell us about our physical realities. Humanism focuses on the subjective realm—the way each person takes events and molds them into a point of view. Big data can help social scientists make generalizations about populations of people. But the humanist tries to see the subjective layer of one particular person, to understand this unique individual who, like you, is probably doing their best to see the world with more understanding, wisdom, humanity, and grace.

But how, specifically, can you understand the subjective workings of another person’s mind? Well, you don’t want to peer *at* them; you want to engage *with* them. Looking at a person is different from looking at a thing because a person is looking back at you. I’m getting to know you at the same time you’re getting to know me. To truly see someone else, you have to be willing to be seen. Thus the quintessential humanist activity is quality conversation.

How good a conversationalist are you? Again, probably not as good as you think you are. A group of people making a series of assertions at one another is not a good conversation—it’s a terrible conversation. A good conversation is an act of joint exploration. Somebody floats a half-formed idea. Somebody else seizes on the nub of the idea, plays with it, offers their own perspective based on their own memories, and floats it back so the other person can respond.

Arthur Balfour was an early-20th-century British statesman known for his skill at this kind of conversation. Balfour, his friend John Buchan observed in his autobiography, “would take the hesitating remark of a shy man and discover in it unexpected possibilities, would probe it and expand it until its author felt that he had really made some contribution to human wisdom.”

During World War I, Buchan, a Scottish novelist, would take American friends to lunch with Balfour: “I remember with what admiration I watched him feel his way with the guests, seize on some chance word and make it the pivot of speculations until the speaker was not only encouraged to give his best but that best was infinitely enlarged by his host’s contribution. Such guests would leave walking on air.”

The humanist wants his conversations to be storytelling conversations. In white-collar jobs, we spend our days in what the psychologist Jerome Bruner called “paradigmatic mode”—producing a strategy memo, or a legal brief, or a PowerPoint presentation. The language is impersonal. Paradigmatic thinking is great for understanding trends and making the case for a proposition. It is not great for getting to know a person or connecting with them. Paradigmatic mode is a way of communicating without having to expose anything real about yourself.

What’s necessary for understanding people is narrative thinking. Stories capture a person’s character and how it changes over time. Stories capture how a thousand little influences come together to shape a life, how people struggle and thrive, get knocked about by lucky and unlucky breaks. People also just speak more freely when you get them to tell stories about themselves. The journalist Kate Murphy, in her book *You’re Not Listening*, describes a focus-group moderator who was hired to figure out why people go to grocery stores late at night. But instead of asking that question directly, she asked people to tell her a story about the last time they went to a grocery store after 11 p.m. A shy, unassuming woman

who had said little up to that point raised her hand and responded, “I had just smoked a joint and was looking for a *ménage à trois*—me, Ben and Jerry.” The woman didn’t just talk about grocery stores; she told a story and offered a glimpse into her life.

As we get to know one another, we should aspire to be historians of one another. Every person you meet is an accumulation of the people, choices, and events that came before them, as well as the events of their childhood and their more recent past. If we want to see someone well, we want to know about their childhood, about the institutions that formed them, about their traumas and accomplishments. In our conversations, we should be exploring the depths of one another’s histories. What happened to you in childhood that makes you still see the world from the vantage point of an outsider? What was it about your home life that makes celebrating holidays important to you? Why is asking for favors hard for you? You appear to have it all and yet feel insecure—why is that?

Emotional intelligence can be developed, like athletic ability. Yes, people are born with a certain innate temperament and capacity, but you can get more emotionally proficient with practice. The key trait of a dehumanizer is emotional crudity. A humanist, on the other hand, has learned complex emotional responses.

Consider the capacity we call empathy. Some people see empathy as a formless gush of emotion. You open your heart, and empathy pours out. In fact, empathy consists of three distinct social skills. First, *mirroring*—accurately reflecting the emotions of the person in front of you. Second, *mentalizing*—using your own similar experiences to project a theory about what the other person is going through. Third, *caring*. Con artists are good at understanding what’s going on in others’ minds—but we don’t call them empathetic, because they don’t care. To care, you not only have to understand another person; you also have to perform an action that will make them know you understand how they feel.

People who are truly empathetic don’t just do things that are comforting to themselves; they do the very specific things that are comforting to the person in need. Rabbi Elliot Kukla tells a story about a woman who, because of a brain injury, would sometimes fall to the floor. “I think people rush to help me up because they are so uncomfortable with seeing an adult lying on the floor,” she told Kukla. “But what I really need is for someone to get down on the ground with me.” Sometimes you just need to get down on the floor with someone.

“Every epistemology becomes an ethic,” the educator Parker J. Palmer once wrote. “The shape of our knowledge becomes the shape of our living; the relation of the knower to the known becomes the relation of the living self to the larger world.” Palmer was saying that the way we attend to others determines the kind of person we become. If we see people generously, we will become generous. If we see them coldly, we will become cold. And if we see them stupidly and viciously ... well, we wind up with the world we’re living in now.

“Recognition is the first human quest,” the journalist Andy Crouch writes in his book *The Life We’re Looking For*. Babies come out of the womb looking for a face that will see them, know them, attend to their needs. When attention is not forthcoming, babies appear devastated. Maybe you have seen those “still face” experiments on YouTube in which researchers tell moms not to respond to their child’s bids for attention. The babies coo and cry out, but the mothers just sit there, with no expression on their face. At first, the babies are uncomfortable; then they squirm, wail, and dissolve into misery. Even at that early age, feeling unseen is an existential crisis.

The agony is the same for adults. Every society has what the philosopher Axel Honneth called a “recognition order.” In a healthy society, everybody is recognized to some degree. But in an unhealthy society, like the America of today, recognition is doled out to the few—the rich, the good-looking, the athletic, the successful. “When a society treats the mass of people in this way, singling out only a few for recognition, it creates a scarcity of respect, as though there were not enough of this precious substance to go around,” the sociologist Richard Sennett has written. When people feel ignored, they tend to lash out. They become lonely, isolated, and hypersensitive to slight. “When attention is depleted,

there can be no heightened passion, no true friendship, no love,” the philosopher Talbot Brewer wrote recently in *The Hedgehog Review*.

The only way out is the humanist way: To create more attention. To distribute it more fairly. To shine our full attention on those in darkness—which these days is pretty much everybody.

I’m trying to hold up an ideal here, the way of the modern humanist. I’ll close with a few of my role models. One is the essayist and poet David Whyte. The ultimate touchstone of friendship “is not improvement, neither of the other nor of the self,” Whyte observes. Rather, “the ultimate touchstone is witness, the privilege of having been seen by someone and the equal privilege of being granted the sight of the essence of another, to have walked with them and to have believed in them, sometimes just to have accompanied them for however brief a span, on a journey impossible to accomplish alone.”

Another is Frederick Buechner, the novelist I quoted earlier about Rembrandt. At age 9, Buechner lost his father to suicide. He shut down emotionally, unable to confront his grief. But eventually he came to realize that the problem with shutting yourself off from the harshness of reality is that you wind up shutting yourself off from other people and the beauty of life. “What we hunger for perhaps more than anything else is to be known in our full humanness, and yet that is often just what we fear more than anything else,” he wrote in his book *Telling Secrets*. “It is important to tell at least from time to time the secret of who we truly and fully are ... because otherwise we run the risk of losing track of who we truly and fully are and little by little come to accept instead the highly edited version which we put forth in hope that the world will find it more acceptable than the real thing. It is important to tell our secrets too because it makes it easier ... for other people to tell us a secret or two of their own.”

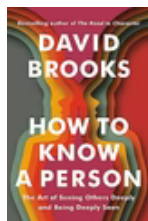
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Every person is sacred. Every person deserves to be seen, and given just and loving attention. We may later decide that the person we are looking at is venal or cruel or wicked—but at least we will have tried to fully understand them before making those judgments. The rot that pervades our democracy comes in large part from our failure to do this. Despite the prejudices of the postmodern ideologues, history shows us that it’s possible to enter into a compassionate understanding of people who are different from ourselves.

In our age of creeping dehumanization, humanism seems like the right banner to raise. It points us to the posture, the skills, the way of life that make us fit servants to the world—caring and effective co-workers, teachers, citizens, lovers, and friends.

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This essay is drawn from David Brooks’s [How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen](#).



By David Brooks

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