REVIEW OF *THE SECOND MOUNTAIN*

Brooks is great at both collecting and producing interesting quotes. Here are a few:

> …there is…this…kind of permanent joy that animates people who are not obsessed with themselves but have given themselves away.[1]

> Never underestimate the power of the environment you work in to gradually transform who you are. When you choose to work at a certain company, you are turning yourself into the sort of person who works in that company.[2]

> "Character" is no longer a moral quality oriented around love, service, and care, but a set of workplace traits organized around grit, productivity, and self-discipline.[3]

> …the meritocracy encourages you to drift into a life that society loves but which you don't.[4]

> I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about—quite apart from what I would like it to be about. — Parker Palmer[5]

> When you're deep in a commitment, the distinction between altruism and selfishness begins to fade away.[6]

[1] David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*, First edition (New York: Random House, 2019), xi.
[2] Ibid., 22.
[3] Ibid., 23.
[4] Ibid., 24.
[5] Quoted in ibid., 41.
[6] Ibid., 59.

> [Marriage] involves a set of far-reaching personal reforms, so that you might become the sort of person with whom it is possible to live.[7]

> The health of society depends on voluntary unselfishness.[8]

This book is about the idea of commitment, in a few different areas: vocation, marriage, philosophy, faith, and community. The section on vocation resonates with me. There's something incredibly freeing and satisfying about being able to throw yourself into a project with the total conviction that it is exactly what you ought to be doing. But this conviction has been difficult for me to find for a long time now: it requires not just identifying worthwhile pursuits (which is easy) but also choosing to prioritize one and let go of others (not so easy). I don't think the book gave me any breakthroughs toward accomplishing the latter, but I did like this bit:

> Simple questions help you locate your delight. What do I enjoy talking about? … When have I felt most needed? … What pains am I willing to tolerate? … Or there's Casey Gerald's question: What would you do if you weren't afraid?[9]

I think Brooks's description of current society is questionable at times. He says students are "drowning in freedom"[10] because society encourages them to follow their heart without giving them any guidance on who they should be. But is *ugh, my elders never tell me what to do* really a common complaint? My impression is that humans don't have that much trouble finding passions; finding the time and money to pursue those passions is what we struggle with.

Brooks complains that universities don't teach students "how to attach to things, how to admire, to swear loyalty to, to copy and serve."[11] But it seems to me that certain forms of attachment come naturally to most of us, and that this is a huge source of the world's problems. The average person will glom on to the first ideology that makes sense to them and the first community that accepts them. Then they'll (maybe) endure whatever suffering it demands of themselves and (usually) inflict whatever suffering it prescribes for others (or

[7] Ibid., 143.
[8] Ibid., 308.
[9] Ibid., 119.
[10] Ibid., 15.
[11] Ibid., 194.

at least vote accordingly). Commitments to very general and uncontroversial values like truth and love and goodness are great, but I think firm commitment to more specific beliefs should be actively discouraged. People need to remain open to revising their idea of what's right based on new information, arguments, and circumstances, because we have a track record of getting it wrong on the first try—and the second try, and the hundredth try. I can accept the claim that some level of commitment for some period of time is needed in order to get things done, but in the realms of politics and religion and philosophy it's dangerous to let those commitments become core, lifelong parts of your identity.

One idea in the book that rings true is that we need communities so attached to a specific place (neighborhood, city) that they feel invested in the long-term enrichment of that place. Many things that bring me joy in my day-to-day life are the result of such planning—the light rail line is always the first example that springs to mind—but I don't feel deeply invested in such planning for the future. The city I live in feels like home, but only in a provisional way; I moved here, and moving elsewhere remains an option. This presumably makes me less motivated to work for the city's long-term welfare than I would if I thought my and my descendants' fates would be tied up with the city for decades or centuries. *If* this is common—if this loose attachment to place is an increasing trend—then I think those of us involved have some responsibility to counteract it, whether that's by actually committing to stop moving around at some point, or by learning to adopt the mindset of a permanent resident no matter where we find ourselves or for how long.