
THEOLOGICAL HORIZONS

A Theological Horizons Group Discussion Guide to

HOW TO KNOW A PERSON:

The Art of Seeing Others Deeply
and Being Deeply Seen

by David Brooks

A companion resource for the
2024 Scoper Lecture in Christian Thought
“Know Better: Deepening the Bonds of Communal Life”
featuring *New York Times* columnist and bestselling author

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in conversation with

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www.theologicalhorizons.org/scoperlectures

LEADER NOTE

The Scoper Lecture in Christian Thought is an annual series of Theological Horizons that brings eminent speakers to the University of Virginia to deliver public lectures exploring the breadth of Christian expression in the arenas of scholarship, science and medicine, the arts, and culture. The 2024 academic lecture will illuminate David Brooks's foundational work on the complexities and urgencies of building a rich civic fabric to sustain our democracy.

Theological Horizons is an independent, not-for-profit, global ministry centered at the Bonhoeffer House at the heart of the University of Virginia community. Established in 1990 by Karen Wright Marsh and Charles Marsh, Theological Horizons cultivates an inviting forum (both in-person and virtually, online) at the intersection of faith, thought, and life for believers and seekers. Theological Horizons offers an array of dynamic programming including weekly community fellowship lunches, as well as sustained service learning and vocational mentoring fellowships, public lectures, workshops, dialogues and cultural events.

In light of the 2020 pandemic, Theological Horizons evolved in wonderfully unexpected ways. Even as Covid narrowed the scope of in-person gatherings, the ministry expanded online, to embrace anyone anywhere, including new participants around the world. Opportunities for continued growth of the ministry are unlimited. All are welcome. Always.

INTRODUCTION

In his book, *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*, David Brooks observes: "there is one skill that lies at the heart of any healthy person, family, school, community organization, or society: the ability to see someone else deeply and make them feel seen—to accurately know another person, to let them feel valued, heard, and understood." The problem is very few of us instinctually do this well.

But the good news is, as Brooks tells us, this is a set of skills people can learn.

A self-proclaimed emotionally detached person, Brooks set out to understand and grow into someone who illuminates others, understands empathy, and thus makes people feel seen, valued, and understood. This book documents his personal journey while providing an instructional resource to others wanting to develop this craft.

Brooks draws from the fields of psychology and neuroscience and from the worlds of theater, philosophy, history and education, ultimately presenting his hard won insights in a welcoming, hopeful and integrated approach to human connection and communal life. This book documents his personal journey while providing an instructional resource to others wanting to develop and hone the art of relationship understanding and connection with others, in any context.

Along the way, *How to Know a Person* offers a remedy for a society that is rife with fragmentation, hostility, and misperception. In order to build a richer, stronger civic fabric and democracy equipped for survival and flourishing in this polarized world, individuals must feel seen across differences of ideology, religion, race, ethnicity, etc.

Part One I See You

In this section, Brooks discusses how to train one's heart to see the full humanity in another. He explores this idea through the concept of Illuminators and Diminishers.

Diminishers make people feel small and unseen by seeing people as a means to an end. They talk at, and not with others. They fail to listen actively and well.

But Illuminators, Brooks says, "have persistent curiosity about others. They make people feel bigger, deeper and respected." Illuminators approach and relate to others by offering tenderness, being receptive, displaying active curiosity (with an "explorer's heart," as Brooks calls it), liberally offering affection, holding a generosity of spirit, and keeping a holistic attitude.

How would our world feel if we determined, like Brooks, to "double down on spending as much time as [we] can, as effectively [we] can, on seeing another person, on trying to understand their point of view, and trying to make them feel seen, heard, and understood?" Adopting this posture would fundamentally change our political conversation by softening the space between us in our differences.

We all want to shine a brighter light on others, allowing them to feel seen and allowing us to more deeply and fully see those and the world around us. The way to do this is to practice the art of becoming an Illuminator.

1. Share about a time when you felt seen. What was that experience like?
2. Are you more naturally an illuminator or a diminisher? How can you develop more illuminative practices?
3. Brooks describes the concept of constructionism as the process by which people use different models to construct reality. In order to know and see someone, we must understand their own sense of reality. In what ways do you find it difficult to step out of your own point of view and to enter into someone else's?

Part Two I See You In Your Struggles

In these chapters, Brooks discusses the loneliness epidemic in America. A recent Meta-Gallup poll finds that one in four adults feels “very or fairly lonely.” And US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy has sounded the alarm by naming the loneliness epidemic a public health crisis that increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, dementia and premature death. Indeed, deep human connection is what we need most, and yet many people lack the ability to develop these relationships. This is a vicious cycle that leads to an alarming increase in people who feel unseen and unknown. In response, Brooks offers readers tools to overcome this hurdle, contending that you can’t fully know someone without seeing and understanding their pain. This art of empathy is a powerful tool to connect with those both close to us and those we encounter more casually in our lives.

1. Have you walked with or sat with someone in their despair? How did Brooks’s thoughts – to not give advice, but simply be present – strike you?
2. Brooks says that every conversation takes place within a frame. And he gives two pointers: first, that we should stay in each other's frames longer. And second, that we should encourage people to go deeper into sharing what they believe. Do these practices come naturally to you? Why or why not?
3. As children we cope with harsh circumstances by building defenses. Brooks says, “to know someone well you have to know something about the struggles and blessings of their childhoods and the defensive architecture they carry through life.” In your close relationships, how well are you able to see the defenses you carry? How do you encounter the defenses of those you love?
4. Brooks encourages us to “take advantage of the fact that a rupture is sometimes an opportunity to forge a deeper bond,” offering specific examples of how to bridge to deeper understanding after working through a “rupture.” Can you remember a time in your life where a challenging interaction gave way to a deeper connection or bond? How did you bridge to this? How might you do so in the future, in light of Brooks’s insight?

Part Three I See You With Your Strengths

In this section, Brooks discusses how understanding another person requires you to know their personality type, their current developmental stage, and the context of their broader life story. This prevents reducing people to their categories and opens our eyes to see them as the intricate and unique individual that they are. The wisdom that comes from these skills allows us to truly know someone.

1. Brooks describes the five personality traits that psychologists use to map human personality. These are extroversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism, agreeableness, and openness. Which of these traits most resonates with you? Is there one you are hoping to grow or change in?
2. In chapter 14, Brooks describes a series of common human life tasks, each of which is marked by struggle. In which life task do you find yourself? How does this current task color the way you see those around you?
3. It's important to both know and understand our stories, which includes our trauma, unmet needs, and great loves. Have you delved into your story before? In what ways? How does your family history impact where you sit today?
4. Brooks notes that wisdom is no longer personified as the old sage on the hill who releases special knowledge. Rather, the wise person sees another deeply, and helps them gain a sense for how they should maneuver through the complexity of their life. Who has played this role in your life?

In the book, Brooks gives examples of how to ask “better” questions (and how to be a “Loud Listener!). Try some out now with the others in your group - as you practice the art of seeing and being seen together.

1. Introductory question: That's a lovely name. How did your parents choose it?
2. It's simple, but powerful: And then what happened?
3. Instead of asking “what do you think about [blank],” ask “how did you come to believe [blank]?”
4. Don't start a conversation with a vague “how's it going?” Instead, ask open-ended questions: How did you...? What's it like...? Tell me about....? In what ways...?
5. Bigger table questions:
 - a. What crossroads are you facing?
 - b. What would you do if you weren't afraid?
 - c. If you died tonight, what would you regret not doing?
 - d. If we meet a year from now, what will we be celebrating?
 - e. Can you be yourself where you are and still fit in?
 - f. What have you said yes to that you no longer really believe in?
 - g. What forgiveness are you withholding?
 - h. What is the no or refusal you keep postponing?
6. Deep conversations don't need to be sad or uncomfortably vulnerable. Make sure to also ask questions about the positive side of life:
 - a. Tell me about a time you adapted to change.
 - b. What's working really well in your life?
 - c. What are you most self-confident about?
 - d. Have you ever been solitary without feeling lonely?
 - e. What has become clearer to you as you have aged?

