

David Brooks's "The Moral Bucket List":
A Rhetorical Analysis

Because our economy is currently stalled, or downturned, depending on who you talk to, it is no surprise that David Brooks would dedicate an Op-Ed designed to ask us to reflect on the ways we achieve – or don't achieve – meaningful self-fulfillment. In "The Moral Bucket List," he **reflectively proposes** that we should care more about what people will say about us at our funerals than what is on our "marketplace"-based resumes. In an age that is focused on marketable traits, Brooks challenges us to examine ourselves on a deeper level and focus on what is truly important in life: our character.

[P] Brooks makes his persuasive case by using a range of **rhetorical strategies**. [I] For example, he establishes his **ethos** early by noting that even *he* doesn't possess all of the virtues that he proposes in the essay. And this is a particularly interesting **strategy**, because most readers know Brooks as the confident Op-Ed writer who tries to **persuade** us on social, cultural, and political issues twice a week. He exposes an element of vulnerability that even in the "strongest people" there is always a side that is always seeking to fix what's wrong with us. For instance, his list includes, "humility," "self defeat," "dependency," "love," a "calling," "conscience." [E] This an **ironic** list because at the same time, **he implies** we are stumblers, but should be prepared to fail at these virtues.

[P] Another compelling **strategy** is how Brooks connects with **readers**. His **tone** seems encouraging: [I] "wonderful people are made, not born" and "these are the very people we want to be." His **tone shifts** from admiring in the early part of the essay where he is commending those who seem to live virtuous lives, and then to a more **informal tone** when he refers to the rest of us as mere "stumblers" just trying to get through life. [E] The "stumbler" **appeal** is designed to show empathy for **readers** who might not be virtue rich.

This simultaneous **tone** of encouragement and informality is likely to **appeal** to NYT **readers**, who, it is safe to assume, are looking to improve themselves: "the stumbler doesn't build her life by being better than others, but by being better than she used to be." **Readers** of this essay are likely to be among those who are constantly bombarded with improving resumes and marketable skills: college students, young professionals, and business people.



One thing all those **readers** have **in common** is growth and the *need* to grow. The accompanying **illustration** mirrors the **rhetoric** of internal individual-based growth of the article. Consider the **position** in which the woman in the illustration is sitting on her knees: we know the process of growing is uncomfortable and slow. The large head **represents** *external*

growth and being in the world, while the woman kneeling with the plant is *internal* growth.

[Your individual conclusions] brainstorming:

A good conclusion should offer the reader a “so what?” payoff. Here are some possibilities, but you’re welcome to come up with your own:

- What’s the relationship between the issue (virtues) and the rhetoric (empathetic)?
- By focusing on “virtues,” is Brooks making a conservative argument? (Those with conservative ideologies tend to argue about virtues, so ...)
- Why would this essay appeal to contemporary college students who, for example, are assigned to read the *New York Times*?
- From the final paragraph: “Unexpectedly, there are transcendent moments of deep tranquility” – aren’t there moments of that tranquility in the essay itself? Is Brooks somehow modeling that tranquility with his language and rhetoric?

Brooks, David. “The Moral Bucket List.” *New York Times*. 11 April 2015. Sunday Review, 1. Print.