

Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging
Sebastian Junger

Tribe (and clan, and family) are vital elements missing from modern discussions of the human condition.

As evidenced by the 600+ reviews written to date, this is an important book. Junger's primary theme is that the sharing and altruism born of hardship is an essential glue to hold the society together. Modern American society is singularly wanting in these qualities. Although it is materially richer than any society in world history, it is far from the happiest and the indications are that things are getting worse.

Junger cites a lot of facts on evolution. Human nature reflects that of our primate ancestors and even more our humanoid ancestors up until modern times. Our ability to support one another in small societies was key to our success, the key to our rising to the top of the heap. Evolutionary psychologists – I provide links to their books below – credit human language with giving us the ability to work together for the common good. We became extremely effective at supporting each other in times of hardship such as war, famine, and natural disaster.

I have lived in Ukraine for 10 years. Our hardships are not as harsh as Junger describes, but certainly worse than the United States. Ukraine is relatively poor and somewhat more poorly governed. On the other hand it is ethnically homogeneous. The level of mutual support is a continual source of amazement. Just on the day I write this, the bus conductor flirted delightfully with my five-year-old son, I had the opportunity to help a grandmother put a stroller on a bus, and at that very same moment a young man was helping an older guy take a heavy suitcase off the bus. All of this is unremarkable, but it gives everybody involved the good feeling of a common undertaking. This, translated into much more severe circumstances, is what Junger is writing about.

It is a five-star book simply for raising an important topic that is not often discussed. It is a counterbalance to Stephen Pinker's excellent *The better Angels of our Nature*. Yes we have become more docile. No, it is not an unmixed blessing.

Here is my long review of the short book.

Chapter 1 – The men and the dogs

Indians and Europeans confronted one another over the course of three centuries, the early 17th through the early 20th. Although the Indians were still Stone Age, they managed to continue to fight as they were pushed back.

The Indians took many European Americans captive. Many of them were integrated into Indian society, some marrying Indians. Many observers, including Benjamin Franklin, noted that upon being "freed" from captivity a significant number refused to go. The children knew no other life than Indian, and could not be socialized into American life. Mixed marriage spouses grieved terribly at being separated.

At the same time, quite a few Indians were adopted and fostered into American families. This was a much less successful effort. Almost invariably, the Indians would slip away and returned to the tribes when they could.

Junger generalizes from North American Indians to all Indians. Indian societies such as the Maya, Aztecs and Inca were hierarchical. They were considered the most civilized. The Inca were certainly the most advanced in architecture and technology. They were the most socially advanced in terms of their numbers and geographical domination. Paraguay's Tupi Guarani adapted fairly well and are still very much around; theirs is the only Indian tongue to be used as a national language. Read Charles C. Mann's [[ASIN:1400032059 1491: *New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*]].

This is the basis for Junger's book, the observation that tribal affinity is very strong and the lament that it is missing from today's American society. In this he is right. All Indian societies were communal in a way that America never has been. Moreover, we are losing that of it which we once had.

Europeans loved the freedom of Indian life. It was not constrained by marriage – you could be married when you wanted and unmarried when it was convenient. If you are a good hunter you could have multiple wives. Women bore

fewer children. Junger does not go into why, but [[ASIN:0345408934 Mother Nature]] explains that primitive peoples suckle their children longer, preventing ovulation.

Junger asks "The question for Western society is not so much why tribal life might be so appealing – it seems obvious on the face of it – but why Western society is so unappealing.

Junger writes "Among anthropologists the common are considered to present a fairly accurate picture of our hominid ancestors lived for more than a million years before the advent of agriculture. Genetic adaptations take about 25,000 years to appear in humans, so the enormous changes that came with agriculture in the last 10,000 years have hardly begun to affect our gene pool." Note that this is in contradiction to Nicholas Wade's [[ASIN:0143127160 A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race and Human History]], Harpending and Cochran's [[ASIN:B0042FZRPC The 10,000 Year Explosion: How Civilization Accelerated Human Evolution]] and Philippe Rushton's. [[ASIN:0965683621 Race, Evolution and Behavior]]. As a counterpoint to the idea that it is all cultural, note the difficulty that American Indian children have even when adopted at birth.

Junger writes that agriculture and industry gave people more personal property and let them make more and more individualistic choices. Their choices unavoidably diminish group efforts toward a common good. Roy Baumeister would elaborate on this in [[ASIN:B003WT26I0 Is There Anything Good About Men?: How Cultures Flourish by Exploiting Men]]. The nature of our group efforts changed from hunting to military, corporate and ecclesiastical organizations. Broad nets of working relationships among men are the foundation of culture.

Junger says quote "self-determination theory holds that human beings need three basic things in order to be content: they need to feel competent at what they do; they need to feel authentic in their lives; and they need to feel connected to others. These values are considered "intrinsic" to human happiness and far outweigh "extrinsic" values such as beauty, money, and status.

Primitive societies are marked by strong egalitarianism and a lack of authority. Freeloading was not tolerated. In the extreme, other members of the group would assassinate the freeloader. It was all highly personal – there was no authority.

The costs of fraud in modern society are high. Welfare cheats cost an average of \$5,000 per year per household. At the top end, defense contractors and finance industry cheats may have cost \$45,000 per citizen in the last recession. We have no shame, and no collective will to prevent the cheating. He writes "The riots and demonstrations against racial discrimination that later took place. In Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore Maryland led to changes in part because they attained a level of violence that threatened the civil order."

Chapter 2. War makes you an animal

Junger's father supported him signing up for the draft. The Vietnam War may have been immoral, but one has a moral obligation to serve his country. Sign up, and then object if you must. His father's code of loyalty is admirable, but out of fashion.

War didn't call him, but Junger found himself in Sarajevo as a correspondent at the age of 31. He recounts how people held up even when life was reduced to the basics. The Serbs surrounded and isolated Sarajevo. Between snipers and tank fire killed 20% of the population. Nonetheless, the decency, the humanity of those who were left went up.

He cites as well an earthquake in Italy, Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, and the London blitz is bringing out the best in people. Emile Durkheim found that when European countries went to war, suicide rates dropped. Psychiatric wards in Paris were strangely empty during both world wars.

Junger writes a gripping account of the Springhill mine disaster of 1958 in Nova Scotia. He describes the leadership qualities in different phases – first the super macho heroes who led the trapped miners to investigate escape routes, then the gentler souls who sustained morale when nothing else could be done. Leaders rose to the occasion.

The chapter closes with a long account of his discussion with the woman he had known during the siege of Sarajevo 25 years earlier. However horrible things had been, there had been a camaraderie that made her nostalgic. "We were the happiest, and we laughed more."

Chapter 3 – In bitter safety I awake

The chapter title is taken from a Siegfried Sassoon, written as he was in a hospital, away from the front-line battalion he longed to rejoin.

Junger starts off with an account of post-traumatic stress syndrome. He encountered it after being under attack by the Taliban for a couple of months in an outpost in Afghanistan. He tells of other people he knew who suffered from it, and of the psychologists' analysis that it is a very reasonable product of evolution. It conditions its sufferers to endure that kind of hardship.

Most significant, PTSD does not set in immediately, but usually comes after the traumatic experience that triggers it. The person is thus not impaired at the time he needs his full faculties, but the later replay in his mind conditions him for the next time.

The irony is that PTSD affects people who were in war zones as support troops more than people who were on the front lines. The elite troops who take the highest casualties do not suffer as much. On the other hand, those in the rear echelons who did not see much action have higher claim rates.

Part of it is bogus. Junger reports that true victims of PTSD avoid the VA because they hate coming across the fakers who claim it simply to get \$3,000 a month for life. But he contends that the problem is real. It affects not only military veterans but also people returning home from the Peace Corps. His thesis is that reentry into a boring, regimented, depersonalized society is the major problem.

Junger concludes: "either way (PTSD or simple alienation), it makes one wonder exactly what it is about modern society that is so mortally dispiriting to come home to. Junger even quotes one man who says "now that AIDS is no longer a death sentence, I must admit that I miss those days of extreme brotherhood."

Israel has low rates of PTSD despite a high level of combat over its history. Junger credits this to the fact that Israeli soldiers return to a society that understands war and accepts what the men went through.

Junger reports how in Sierra Leone NGOs coming in to help former combatants reintegrate into life educated them with regard to the fact that they were victims. Victimhood brought benefits – they learned how to be victims. See Linda Polman's [\[\[ASIN:0312610580 The Crisis Caravan: What's Wrong with Humanitarian Aid?\]\]](#) for a horrifying account.

Junger concludes "unfortunately, for the past decade American soldiers who returned to a country that displays many indicators of low social resilience. "They take the disability pay – it would be stupid to refuse – but they are not integrated into society. Charles Murray describes how such people live in Fishtown, Philadelphia in [\[\[ASIN:030745343X Coming Apart -The State of White America, 1960-2010\]\]](#).

Chapter 4 – Calling home from Mars

Junger witnessed a bar fight in Pamplona between French-speaking Moroccans and Spanish, all of them drunk. The insight is that the fight was over nothing – a battered football helmet – and was resolved by everybody drinking out of the football helmet, after which they became drinking buddies and all was forgotten. The fighting is just a part of male culture.

Junger avows that there are many costs to modern society. Certainly there are great costs to the environment. The one that concerns him most is the cost to our humanity. There is little today that calls on our sense of altruism and sharing, or our sense of mutual defense. We are no longer tribal, and as primates we need the intimacy that comes with the tribal affiliation.

War provides this intimacy. However, when a soldier returns from war it is gone, and he may be at sea. As cited above in the case of Israel, some societies are better than others.

Junger offers an interesting observation that after 9/11 the rates of violent crime suicide and psychiatric disturbances dropped immediately. In many countries antisocial behavior goes down in wartime.

Junger goes into detail about Vietnam vet named Gregory Gomez, an Apache Indian who served as a Marine reconnaissance man in Vietnam. Indians are overrepresented in the American Armed Forces, and especially in elite units. It calls out the best characteristics from their warrior heritage.

Returning to the United States is always an ordeal for Junger. Americans speak with an incredible contempt about – depending on their views – rich, the poor, the educated, the foreign-born, the president, or the whole US government. It's a kind of contempt that is usually reserved for wartime enemies, except that is now applied to our fellow citizens. Junger writes that "unlike criticism, contempt is quickly toxic because it assumes a moral superiority. Contempt is often directed at people who have been excluded from a group or declared unworthy of its benefits.... Contempt is one of four behaviors that, statistically, can predict divorce and married couples. People who speak with contempt for one another will probably not remain united for long."

Junger contrasts Bowe Bergdahl, whose desertion of his post may have led to the deaths of six other soldiers, with the bankers who gamble trillions of dollars of taxpayer money on blatantly fraudulent more mortgages. Bergdahl got opprobrium, the bankers got a pass.

The book ends, rather abruptly, with the story of a Korean War veteran who asked his employees to take a pay cut and went without pay himself in order to keep company in business. It was at the time when bankers like Robert Rubin were taking multimillion dollar bonuses for bank profits realized by fraudulent activity.

Last two sentences of the book: that sense of solidarity is at the core of what it means to be human and undoubtedly helped deliver us to this extraordinary moment in our history. It may also be the only thing that allows us to survive it."