

SUMMARY

TRIBE

SEBASTIAN JUNGER



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Summary of “Tribe” by Sebastian Junger

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On Homecoming and Belonging

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Introduction

Author Sebastian Junger remembers growing up in a Boston suburb where people lived in homes set behind deep hedges and protected by huge yards. As a result, neighbors hardly knew each other and there was nothing that required them to work as a collective. When anything happened, they relied on the police or fire department to take care of it. American life in the suburbs is quite predictable, and he recalls hoping a hurricane, tornado, or *something* would happen that would require them to band together to survive. It wasn't destruction that he wanted, but solidarity. He craved a tribe. It was this craving that led him to Gillette, Wyoming in October of 1986 after hitchhiking across the country to California. With his pack full of gear and weeks' worth of food, Junger encountered a man with wild, matted hair and a union suit covered in filth and grease. He asked where Junger was headed, and when Junger replied with "California," the man asked how much food he had. Junger, taken aback and thinking the worst, lied and said he just had a little bit of cheese. The man said, "You can't get to California on just a little cheese," and proceeded to hand him a lunch box containing a bologna sandwich, an apple, and a bag of potato chips. Junger had no choice but to take it after finding out the man spotted him from half a mile away and approached him to make sure he was okay. The man took responsibility for Junger that day even though he was a stranger. For reasons Junger will never know, that man in Gillette decided to treat him like a member of his tribe.

You see, Junger isn't alone in craving a tribe. In fact, humans are wired to crave purpose and meaning, something that tribes offer. Tribes give people meaning, and they make them feel needed. This is why our modern society has a lot to learn from tribal societies. Unfortunately, "Modern society has perfected the art of making people not feel necessary. It's time for that to end."

European Settlers Preferred Life Among Native American Tribes

Three centuries after the English settlers first arrived in America, cities like New York City and Chicago were quickly growing. Factories were being built and slums were being established. Meanwhile, Native Americans were living communally in mobile or semi-permanent encampments that were largely egalitarian. There was a stark contrast between the two lifestyles, and it may come as a surprise to learn that many Americans - mostly men - preferred the Indian society rather than the modernized Western one.

On the other hand, Indians seldom ran away to join white society. Emigration always followed the pattern of going from civilized to tribal. In fact, white captives who were liberated from the Indians were almost impossible to keep at home. Even though white captives were taken into their old lives with tenderness and understanding, they inevitably would become disgusted by the modern way of life and retreat into the woods in search of a tribal community.

This became apparent in July of 1763 when general Henri Bouquet led a raid against Native Americans in response to frequent attacks on European settlements who were expanding into Native American territory. Within a few months, Bouquet's mission was a success and his first demand was the immediate return of all white prisoners. Over the next few weeks, around 200 captives were released, more than half of them women and children who were too young to remember life outside of the tribal community. Many were now married to Indian men and refused to leave their husbands, others were children who only kicked and screamed as they were torn away from their Indian family. Many had even forgotten their Christian names and went by names like Redjacket, Bighead, Soremouth, and Sourplums.

The reluctance to return to a Western society raised many questions. Of course, they understood why young children didn't want to return to their

original families, but numerous adults still seemed to prefer Indian society to their own. Benjamin Franklin questioned why people *voluntarily* joined the Indians. After former prisoners returned to the colonies, many of them grew tired of western life and walked beyond the tree line and never came back home. The frontier was full of men who joined Indian tribes and married Indian women, living their lives completely outside of civilization. But why?

Tribal Life was More Egalitarian

It was the French colonist named Hector Crèvecoeur who aimed to answer the question of why English men turned to tribal life. In 1782, Crèvecoeur lamented “There must be in their social bond something singularly captivating and far superior to anything to be boasted among us.” He seemed to understand that the communal nature of an Indian tribe was somehow far more appealing than the material benefits of Western civilization. In fact, it was as early as 1612 when Spanish authorities noted that forty or fifty Virginians had married into Indian tribes and that even English women were openly mingling with the natives. Even more surprising, settlers had only been in Virginia for a few years so those who joined the Indians would have been born and raised in England.

Take Mary Jemison, for example, who became so infatuated with Seneca life that she once hid from a white search party that had come looking for her. She explained, “We had no master to oversee or drive us so that we could work as leisurely as we pleased.” Back home, her duties would have been similar, she even states that the tasks of the Indian women were probably not harder than that of white women. The difference was that back home, she would be bossed around and unable to complete her duties in a more relaxed and leisurely manner.

The appeal of a relaxing life was often too much for settlers to ignore. Even the clothing of the Indians was more comfortable and free compared to the traditional garb that was worn in the colonies. Men were more interested in hunting than plowing fields, and sexual customs were more relaxed than in the colonies. For example, in the 1600s, colonial boys on Cape Cod were publicly whipped if they were caught talking to a girl they weren’t related to. But perhaps the biggest appeal of tribal life was its fundamental egalitarianism.

Personal property was limited to whatever could be transported by horse or on foot; therefore, gross inequalities of wealth didn’t necessarily exist.

Social status came through hunting and war, which all men had the opportunity to obtain. And women had more sexual freedom and bore fewer children than women in white society. One colonial woman stated, "Here I have no master. I am the equal of all the women in the tribe, I do what I please without anyone's saying anything about it, I work only for myself, I shall marry if I wish and be unmarried again when I wish. Is there a single woman as independent as I in your cities?"

Tribal Life Allows for More Leisure Time and Peace

So what is it about Western society that is so unappealing? I mean, on a material level western citizens are much more comfortable from the hardships of the natural world. But as societies become more affluent, they tend to require more. They require more time, commitment, and money. For instance, one study in the 1960s found that the nomadic !Kung people of the Kalahari Desert only needed to work twelve hours a week to survive. This is a stark difference from the average forty hours a week that many westernized societies require.

The camp of the !Kung people is an open collection of people who cooperate for survival. Each day they go out to hunt and gather and in the evening they return to the camp and divvy up the day's collected foods. This is so that each person receives the same amount. Because of this emphasis on sharing, the !Kung people don't accumulate more than one another and everyone acquires just enough. Even during times of drought, nearby farmers and cattle herders will abandon their livelihoods and join the !Kung in the bush because foraging and hunting is a more reliable source of food.

People largely believe that our modern lives have created a surplus of leisure time; however, this study showed that the exact opposite was true. Instead, we have created a desperate cycle of work, financial obligation, and more work. So while Western lifestyles might be much richer than the !Kung, they have sacrificed leisure time and personal freedom. Of course, many will argue that Western societies have allowed people to follow their own paths and create lives that our ancestors never dreamed of. This may be true, but humans still haven't evolved enough to thrive in an individualistic society.

You see, the !Kung live the same way our ancestors did for thousands of years before the arrival of agriculture 10,000 years ago. Genetic

adaptations take around 25,000 years to appear in humans, so the enormous changes that came with agriculture have hardly begun to affect our gene pool. In other words, even though we live in more complex societies, we are still hardwired to be hunter-gatherers and our DNA means we crave tribal communities like the !Kung. Tribal communities typically consisted of nomadic bands of around fifty people, and while they would have gone through many hardships, they would have also practiced extremely close and involved childcare and would've done almost everything in the company of others. They would have seldom been alone.

Today, people have the wealth and independence that allows them to accumulate personal property and live a more individualistic life. As a result, for the first time in history, a person can go through an entire day - or an entire life - mostly encountering complete strangers. They can be surrounded by others and yet feel deeply alone. This is why Western societies also have the highest levels of mental illness in human history; as affluence and urbanization rise in a society, rates of depression and suicide go *up* rather than down.

War Time Often Has Positive Psychological Effects

Oftentimes people believe that natural disasters and man-made disasters turn society into chaos and disorder. They think people will panic and turn to crime to survive. However, despite several erroneous news reports, New Orleans experienced a *drop* in crime rates after Hurricane Katrina, and people only “looted” when they were in desperate need of food. We can also see this in World War II when the British government predicted that German attacks would produce 35,000 casualties a day in London. Churchill worried that the public response would turn into mass hysteria as people panicked to survive.

These worries couldn't have been further from the truth. Beginning on September 7, 1940, German bombers dropped bombs on civilian areas and killed hundreds every day. The Blitz, as it was known, went on for fifty-seven consecutive days during which many Londoners continued to trudge to work in the morning, or to shelters, and continued their daily routines. When the sirens sounded, Londoners would retreat to their air-raid shelters without much commotion. Conduct was even so good in the shelters that volunteers never needed to call the police to maintain order. Millions of people endured the kind of aerial bombardment that even soldiers are rarely subjected to. Yet, as the horror continued and people died in their homes or neighborhoods while doing mundane things, the British people stayed psychologically resilient.

Before the war, the government predicted a psychiatric breakdown as high as four million people, but as the Blitz continued, psychiatric hospitals saw admissions go *down*. Emergency services saw only an average of two cases of “bomb neuroses” a week, long-standing patients saw their symptoms subside, and voluntary admission into the psychiatric wards noticeably declined. Even more so, epileptics reported fewer seizures. But why was this? Well, it was sociologist Emile Durkheim who first noticed the positive effects of war on mental health. Psychiatric wards in Paris were empty

during both world wars, and the same effect was later observed during civil wars in Spain, Algeria, Lebanon, and Northern Ireland.

Not only that, but suicide rates also drop drastically during times of war. For instance, Irish psychologist H.A. Lyons found that suicide rates in Belfast dropped 50 percent during the riots of 1969 and 1970. Meanwhile, homicide and other violent crimes also went down. County Derry, which suffered almost no violence at all, saw depression rates *rise*. Lyons hypothesized that men in peaceful areas fell into a depression because they couldn't help their society by participating in the war.

Disasters Force People to Revert to a Simplistic Life

As researchers continued to study the effects of war on mental health, they then turned their attention to natural disasters. Could places affected by natural disasters experience a similar phenomenon? Well, after studying natural disasters in the United States, sociologist Charles Fritz was unable to find a single instance where catastrophic events led to panic and anarchy. If anything, he discovered that people were overwhelmingly devoting their energies toward the community rather than just themselves.

In 1961, Fritz developed his theory that modern society has disrupted the social bonds that have always characterized the human experience, and disasters send people back into a more ancient, organic way of life. Disasters, he believed, create a “community of sufferers” that allow individuals to connect, and disparities such as race and income are temporarily erased. Disasters tend to simplify life and force people to return to an organic way of living.

These conclusions were later confirmed when the city of Yungay, in central Chile, was struck by a devastating earthquake and rockslide on May 31, 1970. Ninety percent of the population of Yungay died almost instantly, and 70,000 people were killed throughout the region. The rockslide that buried that city resulted in so much dust in the air that rescue helicopters couldn't land and survivors were left to fend for themselves for days. If they wanted to survive, they would need to work together. Suddenly, a new social order came to be as people were stripped of their possessions and status. Instead, they became a “Brotherhood of Pain” and the lower and upper classes collaborated to obtain what they needed to survive. But as soon as relief flights began delivering aid to the area, the class divisions returned and the sense of brotherhood disappeared.

Experiencing War can Lead to Mental Illness

While war can have a surprisingly positive impact on mental health during the struggles, war often harms those who come home. For instance, Junger was a war correspondent in Afghanistan and experienced the atrocities of war firsthand. After spending two months with Ahmed Shah Massoud, the leader of the Northern Alliance, Junger didn't yet understand how his experiences would affect him psychologically.

Massoud had been fighting to open up supply lines across the Amu Darya River before winter set in, and he was blocked by Taliban positions on a prominent ridge overlooking the Tajik border. Massoud's men were outnumbered three to one and they were in short supply of everything, including tank rounds and food. To survive the ordeal, the Northern Alliance had to curl up in slits in the trenches and simply wait for the Taliban to run out of rockets. Eventually, they managed to escape, and by the time Junger returned home, he'd stopped thinking about any of the horrific things he'd seen.

Months later he went into the subway during rush hour where he suddenly found himself backed up against an iron support column, convinced he was going to die. Everything from the people on the platform to the trains moving too fast and the lights too bright seemed like a threat. He couldn't explain what happened, but he was more scared than he'd ever been in Afghanistan. Junger was eventually diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, which is how your body reacts when your life is in danger. You experience hypervigilance, you want to avoid situations you can't control, and you sleep lightly to wake easily in case you find yourself in danger.

Other signs of PTSD include anger and depression, both of which are traits that are useful in combat but not in Western society. As a result, soldiers who return from war often have a hard time readjusting to a normal,

mundane life. In fact, many find that they miss the war after it's over. But why? Well, we will find out in the next chapter.

War Creates a Sense of Solidarity that is Often Missed

Unfortunately, one of the biggest traumas of war is giving it up. As a former gunner in the 62nd Coast Artillery, Win Stracke states, “For the first time in our lives... we were in a tribal sort of situation where we could help each other without fear. There were fifteen men to a gun. You had fifteen guys who for the first time in their lives were not living in a competitive society. We had no hopes of becoming officers... It was the absence of competition and boundaries and all those phony standards that created the thing I loved about the Army.” In other words, their sense of camaraderie and brotherhood simply cannot be translated into modern society.

Adversity leads people to depend on one another, and that closeness can produce nostalgia for hard times. Even civilians can experience this feeling. For instance, after World War II, many Londoners claimed to miss the exciting and perilous days of the Blitz, stating, “I wouldn’t mind having an evening like it, say, once a week - ordinarily there’s no excitement.” Similarly, one man stated, “I am a survivor of the AIDS epidemic. Now that AIDS is no longer a death sentence, I must admit that I miss those days of extreme brotherhood... which led to deep emotions and understandings that are above anything I have felt since the plague in years.”

Ultimately, people often miss the tight-knit community that brought them together, and they miss that sense of solidarity in today’s individualistic society. When soldiers suddenly find themselves in a world without a communal spirit, then mental health suffers. So it isn’t necessarily the war itself that leaves scars on many soldiers, but the experiences of mundane life that lead to mental health illnesses.

Western Society Can Learn From Native American Rituals

American Indians, proportionally, provide more soldiers to America's wars than any other demographic in the country. This is largely due to their ancient culture of warfare which makes them better equipped to handle recovery from war. For instance, many tribes forced their men to undergo a sixteen-day purification ritual before they could reenter society. The entire community participated in these rituals because they assumed every person in the tribe had been affected by the war. After the ceremony, those who engaged in combat were viewed as superior to their peers because war was thought to impart wisdom that nothing else could.

In other words, Native American tribes understood the importance of reintegrating combatants into normal life. Following both world wars, Indian veterans turned to traditional ceremonies on their reservations to ease the transition to civilian life. For example, the Kiowa Gourd Dance was popularized to heal the psychic wounds of war. Furthermore, during the 1980s, the Vietnam Era Veterans began holding a yearly summer powwow in Oklahoma that was open to veterans of all races. This is something that Western societies can take away from Native American ones.

Of course, contemporary America is a secular society that can't simply borrow from Indian culture, but they can create events to help heal the psychic wounds of war. You see, modern society rarely gives veterans opportunities to vent their feelings, so a good place to start would be to give veterans that opportunity by creating forums and events. One such event was held at a town hall in Marblehead, Massachusetts, on Veterans Day where veterans were able to gather and unburden themselves of the war.

One of the first to speak at this event was a Korean War vet who tried to join the Marines at age fifteen. While they turned him down, they took three of his friends who were all killed in combat and buried next to each other in Okinawa. Another was Junger's friend Brendan O'Byrne who

talked about meeting the mother of his friend who had been killed two months into their deployment to Afghanistan. His friend's mother asked if Brendan had forgiven her son's killer, and he replied that he hadn't. She told him he had to. Brendan then said "That's when I began to heal. When I let go of the anger inside me."

It's events like these that can rekindle the sense of solidarity that veterans and soldiers from war crave. "That sense of solidarity is at the core of what it means to be human... It may also be the only thing that allows us to survive it."

Final Summary

When it comes to natural disasters, wars, and tragedies, many believe that society turns to chaos and mayhem as people will do anything to survive. This is often believed because of our modern individualistic society. However, the opposite is true, and it is proven that communities and societies will come together during times of tragedy and suffering. Even more so, people are happier because they are forced to revert to a simpler life free of racial and social differences. Unfortunately, once peace is restored, our individualistic tendencies return and that solidarity is gone. As a result, many suffer from loneliness and isolation and may even suffer from PTSD. The solution, however, is to find ways to create a sense of tribal belonging during times of peace.



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