

Sebastian Junger's New Book and Walter J. Ong's Thought

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Monday, May 30, 2016, was Memorial Day. Surely it is fitting for us to remember those American soldiers who died in combat. But Sebastian Junger's elegantly written new book *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging* reminds us not to forget the problems of post-traumatic-stress disorder (PTSD) and suicide among returning veterans of war. No doubt PTSD and suicide among returning veterans are big problems that we need to address. I commend Junger for addressing these problems to the best of his ability. And I hope that his elegantly written new book prompts further discussion of these big problems.

However, because I am a wee bit older than Junger (I was born in 1944; he, in 1962), I tend to use a larger conceptual framework of thought that he gives no evidence of knowing about. Let me explain certain key aspects of the larger conceptual framework of thought that I prefer to work with. Perhaps the larger framework of thought I explain below will help contribute to further discussion of the big problems Junger discusses. However, in what follows here, I do not make any specific concrete proposals for how we Americans collectively might help alleviate the problems of PTSD and suicide among returning veterans. But I think that the larger conceptual framework of thought that I explain here may help us collectively to better understand the big problems and certain issues Junger discusses.

C. G. Jung, M.D. (1875-1961), the Swiss psychiatrist and psychological theorist, claimed that the human psyche includes what he refers to as the collective unconscious. He famously worked out an approach (known as Jungian analysis) to helping individual persons integrate contents of the collective unconscious into their conscious awareness inasmuch as it is possible to do this.

But we should avoid romanticizing the collective unconscious, because not all impulses arising from the collective unconscious prompt us to engage in pro-social behavior. For this reason, we should carefully discern impulses arising from the collective unconscious. By discernment, I mean wrestling with impulses that come to us, as the biblical character Jacob famously wrestles with the angel of God who comes to him in his sleep.

Now, by definition, Jungian analysis involves one-to-one interactions between the analyst and the patient. However, Jung himself encouraged the formation of a social group known as a club in Zurich for various Jungian analysts and patients undergoing Jungian analysis.

The collective unconscious carries memories of our small-group hunter-gatherer ancestors that Darcia Narvaez in psychology at the University of Notre Dame writes about in her award-winning 2014 book *Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality: Evolution, Culture, and Wisdom* (Norton).

By definition, our small-group hunter-gatherer ancestors were pre-literate and pre-philosophical people. They lived in what the American Jesuit cultural historian and theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003) refers to as primary oral cultures. To spell out the obvious, Ong belonged to the religious order of men in the Roman Catholic Church known as the Jesuits (known formally as the Society of Jesus). Perhaps we can liken the Jesuits, at least in spirit, to the spirit of the club in Zurich that Jung helped found.

In addition, Narvaez writes skillfully about the work of the American neurosurgeon Paul D. MacLean, M.D. (1913-2007). MacLean refers to the oldest evolutionary layer, or part, of the human brain as the reptilian brain. The reptilian brain is the biological base of our fight/flight/freeze response. In short, our reptilian brains are oriented toward protectiveness and vigilance about possible perceived threats. However, when we are over-stressed, our reptilian brains may be triggered, sparking hyper-vigilance and aggressivity in certain circumstances when dynamic calm under the circumstances in question would be more desirable and effective. So the symptoms of post-traumatic-stress disorder involve the reptilian brain, just as fighting in combat involves the reptilian brain.

In the book *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (Cornell University Press, 1981), the published version of Ong's 1979 Messenger Lectures at Cornell University, Ong does not happen to advert explicitly to MacLean's work on the structure of the human brain. But the spirit of fighting for life is biologically based in the fight/flight/freeze response of the reptilian brain.

The part of the human psyche that Plato (428/427 to 348/347 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE) refer to as *thumos* (or *thymos*) is also biologically based in the fight/flight/freeze response of the human brain.

In the phenomenon known as male bonding, the males involved in the bonding are engaging their reptilian brains. No doubt our reptilian brains are also engaged in other forms of bonding as well. Perhaps the reptilian brain is involved in all different kinds of attachments we form. In any event, when we lose a significant attachment in our life, we need to mourn that loss in a healthy way. But if we are incapable of mourning our losses in a healthy way, we may go through life burdened by unresolved mourning issues.

By definition, post-traumatic-stress disorder involves traumas involving attachments and loss. Thus PTSD involves unresolved mourning.

But the attachment we form with our birth mother most likely begins in our mother's womb. As the fetus forms and grows in the mother's womb, brain forms and develops in the fetus, including of course the reptilian brain. The developing fetus in the mother's womb feels the mother's bodily chemistry and rhythms. The mother's bodily chemistry and rhythms register on the developing fetus in the womb. As a result, the developing fetus in the womb forms a deep bond with the mother. That bond with the birth mother is formed prior to birth and is deeper than attachments the baby forms after being born.

In Junger's terminology about belonging, our deepest sense of belonging evokes our experience in our mother's womb.

In Ong's terminology about the sound/sight contrast, sound also evokes our experience in our mother's womb. So when Ong heralds our contemporary communications media that accentuate sound, he in effect understands how sound evokes deeper human experiences than sight generally does. But of course both sight and sound as well as touch and taste and smell and possibly other sensory affects may be involved in evoking PTSD.

However, when we experience a deep sense of being at home in the cosmos, our experience is most likely evoking our experience of oneness with our mother in her womb. See, for example, David Toolan's book *At Home in the Cosmos* (Orbis Books, 2001).

Regarding attachments new-born infants form after birth, see the British psychiatrist and Jungian theorist Anthony Stevens' book *Archetype Revisited: An Updated Natural History of the Self* (Inner City Books, 2003).

Now, Junger repeatedly discusses American Indians as examples of people who lived and worked together in tribes – in Narvaez's terminology, small-group hunter-gatherers. His thesis is that soldiers in combat live and work together with one another in a way that he likens to American Indians living and working together with one another in a tribe. I understand the point of his analogy. However, as Junger understands, the draft would be a better analogy with tribal warriors than our all-volunteer armed forces are.

No doubt our small-group hunter-gatherer ancestors discussed by Narvaez lived and worked cooperatively with one another within their small groups in order to stay alive and perhaps flourish. No doubt they experienced a strong sense of belonging within their group – a sense of belonging that most contemporary Americans rarely experience in any group they may belong to.

But Junger argues that American Indian tribes had ways of reintegrating warriors returning from battle into pro-social life again within the tribe that we Americans today do not have for reintegrating combat veterans back into pro-social life in American society. Oftentimes, returning combat veterans do not experience a sense of homecoming and belonging back in American society that is comparable in spirit and intensity to group bonding of soldiers in combat.

After all, most contemporary Americans have been detribalized, to put it mildly, by their American upbringing and social and cultural and educational conditioning. Even those of us who have NOT experienced the group bonding of soldiers in war may NOT have experienced strong and intense bonding with others in small groups to which we belong.

Of course critiques of so-called individualism in American life are a dime a dozen. Basically, Junger is adding his voice to such critiques. Nevertheless, he works out a fresh framework of thought for discussing the serious problems of PTSD and suicide among returning veterans of war.

In addition to favoring so-called individualism, we Americans of European descent are so detribalized that we tend to refer pejoratively to real or imagined so-called tribalism. For example, certain critics of the billionaire developer Donald Trump of New York, the Republican Party's presumptive presidential candidate in 2016, tend to characterize him and his political

persona as representing authoritarianism and his enthusiastic supporters as representing the spirit of tribalism.

No doubt our current ideas about authoritarianism are based on the historical examples of fascism in Europe. No doubt fascism in Europe involved mass movements in which individual persons were submerged to the will of the political strong-man. But we Americans of European descent tend to think of such mass movements as involving tribalism, but writ large.

At times, for the purposes of waging war, American Indian tribes formed alliances. For example, Junger discusses how the American Indian leader and orator known as Pontiac (or Obwandiyag, 1720-1769) helped forge an alliance of American Indian tribes for the purpose of taking a stand against the British. Pontiac's War (1763-1766) is named after him.

Now, in the Hebrew Bible, after Jacob wrestles with the angel of God who came to him in his sleep, he receives a new name: Israel. He is portrayed as having twelve sons. We are told that each of the twelve tribes of Israel is named after one of the sons of Jacob/Israel. And the twelve tribes of Israel form an alliance to help fight against invading forces.

Now, the Canadian cultural historian and theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) uses the terms detribalization and retribalization routinely in his experimental but flawed book *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (University of Toronto Press, 1962).

What McLuhan means by detribalization is equivalent to what the Harvard sociologist David Riesman (1909-2002) means by inner-directed persons in his famous book *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (Yale University Press, 1950). With the memory of European fascism fresh in his mind, Riesman, who was himself undoubtedly an inner-directed person, discusses what he refers to pejoratively and apprehensively as the emerging other-directed persons in contemporary American culture. (However, Ong was quick to note that being other-directed is not necessarily something pejorative.)

McLuhan, who was also undoubtedly an inner-directed person (as most academics to this day tend to be), uses the term retribalization pejoratively and apprehensively. Because the mass movements of fascism in Europe can be characterized as representing retribalization writ large, Junger's use of the analogy with American Indian tribes will probably face predictable difficulties with Americans of European descent.

Now, in the article "World as View and World as Event" in the journal *American Anthropologist*, volume 71, number 4 (August 1969): pages 634-647, Ong describes two broad senses of life: (1) the world-as-view sense of life and (2) the world-as-event sense of life.

Also see anthropologist David M. Smith's 1997 essay "World as Event: Aspects of Chipewyan Ontology," reprinted, slightly revised, in the ambitious anthology *Of Ong and Media Ecology*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (New York: Hampton Press, 2012, pages 117-141).

The American Indian tribes discussed by Junger and the small-group hunter-gatherers discussed by Narvaez embody and manifest the world-as-event sense of life.

But the detribalized Europeans and Americans in modern culture in the West (in McLuhan's terminology, in the Gutenberg galaxy that emerged in the West after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the 1450s) embody and manifest the world-as-view sense of life. Typically, our American upbringing and social and cultural and educational conditioning today inculcate and habituate us in the world-as-view sense of life.

However, I assume that the world-as-event sense of life is remembered in the collective unconscious (in Jung's terminology). As a result, we American progressives and liberals today may want to access the world-as-event sense of life in the collective unconscious inasmuch as we can.

Please note that I do not think that anti-60s conservatives today would have any interest in accessing the world-as-event sense of life in the collective unconscious. Anti-60s conservatives have not yet effectively digested certain political and social and cultural changes in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, anti-60s conservatives tend to look back on the 1950s with nostalgia. However, in the 1950s, under the Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890-1969), the inter-state highway system emerged. Often enough, inter-state highways cut deep concrete strips into existing communities in urban areas, thereby effectively severing them into two parts. So progressives and liberals should beware of anti-60s conservatives with their endless cries for community and their selective memories of community before the inter-state highways emerged in the 1950s.

For a study of conservative anti-60s rhetoric, see Philip Jenkins' book *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

Now, Jung and his followers refer to forming an axis between ego-consciousness and the Self (capitalized to differentiate it from ego-consciousness, which others often refer to as the self [lower-case]). So perhaps we American progressives and liberals today can form an axis, as it were, between the conditioned world-as-view sense of life of our ego-consciousness and the world-as-event sense of life remembered in the collective unconscious.

But a word of caution is in order here. At times, unconscious contents can surface with such power that they overpower ego-consciousness, resulting in a psychotic episode. For understandable reasons, most people would prefer not to experience a psychotic episode. So before you try to undertake possibly working out and establishing an axis between your ego-consciousness and the world-as-event sense of life remembered in the collective unconscious, you should make sure that you have sufficient ego strengths to undertake such a possibly perilous inner journey. Even so, I do NOT recommend using the approach that Jung himself recklessly experimented with that he refers to as active imagination.

Because Jung recklessly favored what he refers to as active imagination, he often inveighs against the form of guided imagistic meditation outlined in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. But even that form of guided imagistic meditation can be dangerous for certain people, who can experience a psychotic episode as a result of using it. Let me briefly explain why even guided imagistic meditation can precipitate a psychotic episode in certain people.

Ong never tired of referring to Eric A. Havelock's book *Preface to Plato* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963). Havelock sets up and works with a contrast between the Homeric epics with their imagistic thinking and Plato's dialogues. Havelock sees the Homeric epics as representing oral tradition, basically pre-literate and pre-philosophical thought. Havelock sees the ancient Greek philosophical thought in Plato's dialogues as emerging historically as the result of phonetic alphabetized and vowelized writing in ancient Greek culture. Now, did Plato also occasionally use narratives and imagistic thought in his dialogues? You bet, he did. See John Alexander Stewart's compilation and translation in the bilingual edition titled *The Myths of Plato* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1905).

But the important point here is that Havelock see imagistic thought in the Homeric epics as expressing oral tradition (i.e., pre-literate thought, even though the Homeric epics obvious got written down). So guided imagistic meditations in Ignatian spirituality can potentially resonate with the world-as-event sense of life remembered in the collective unconscious. As a result of the potential danger of prompting a psychotic episode, I do NOT recommend making a 30-day retreat in silence following the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola, as Jesuit novices customarily do.

However, if you want to read about the perils of the perilous inner journey of one person who was acculturated in the world-as-view sense of life, check out the poems of the Victorian Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) that literary critics refer to as his "terrible sonnets" – not because they are terrible poetry (they are not), but because they describe inner experiences that sound terrible.

By today's standards, did Hopkins' terrible-sounding inner experiences show that he was clinically depressed? I don't know if he was clinically depressed technically, but he was undoubtedly struggling with depression to the best of his ability. But struggling with depression requires certain ego strengths to sustain the struggle. If we do not have sufficient ego strengths to sustain the struggle with depression, we may give up and commit suicide.

Now, in his first book *Frontiers in American Catholicism: Essays on Ideology and Culture* (Macmillan, 1957), Ong urges his fellow American Catholics to construct and work out and develop what he refers to as "a real Christian *mystique* of technology and science" (page 121; also see pages 123-125). Ong seems to believe that the Christian tradition of thought contains certain elements that could indeed be used to construct the new Christian mystique of technology and science that he envisions. He may be right about that much. But it is easier to envision this possible development than it is to do it. In any event, it has not yet emerged.

Nevertheless, Ong's repeated use of the term "mystique" suggests that he is deliberately echoing Lucien Levy-Bruhl's famous characterization of the "participation mystique" – in Ong's 1969 terminology, the world-as-event sense of life. See Levy-Bruhl's book *How Natives Think*, authorized translation by Lilian A. Clare, with a new introduction by C. Scott Littleton (Princeton University Press, 1985).

Now, I would say that the mystique Ong envisions as possibly emerging from certain elements in the Christian tradition of thought may still be desirable for Christians to work on. But I would also say that a new mystique of technology and science needs to emerge not only from Christian

resources of thought, but also from non-Christian resources of thought – and preferably one that secularists could also endorse.

Such an envisioned new mystique of technology and science should accompany our efforts to work toward a new cultural mix of our world-as-view sense of life with the world-as-event sense of life remembered in the collective unconscious.

Also see Ong's foreword to the book *Pius XII and Technology*, compiled by Leo J. Haigerty (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing 1962, pages vii-x). Basically, Ong is not a techno-phobe.

By way of digression, I want to call attention to the alleged spirit of academic freedom and tenure alleged in American institutions of higher education as analogous to certain pro-social features Junger mentions in connection with American Indian tribes and belonging. In addition, I want to call attention to how the Jesuit religious order that Ong belonged to is analogous to belonging to an American Indian tribe, as are all religious orders of men and women in the Roman Catholic Church. Arguably belonging to a church is also analogous to belonging to an American Indian tribe. But most Christian churches tend to give their members a strong sense of belonging in exchange for their thinking in certain ways dictated by the church authorities. In other words, most Christian churches tend to foster a community of affinity (like-minded people), but not a community of otherness, as the late American Buber scholar Maurice Friedman (1921-2012) describes these two kinds of community in his short book *Genuine Dialogue and Real Partnership: Foundations of True Community* (Trafford Publishing, 2011).

Now, Junger, rightly in my judgment, cautions us not to romanticize American Indian tribes. He says, "It's easy for people in modern society to romanticize Indian life That impulse should be guarded against" (page 13). Fair enough.

In his widely known book *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (London: Blond & Briggs, 1973), E. F. Schumacher (Ernst Friedrich, 1911-1972) does not happen to use imagery of a tribe explicitly.

In his widely discussed recent eco-encyclical, Pope Francis also criticizes modern capitalism for proceeding as if people didn't matter. Like Schumacher, he does not happen to use imagery of a tribe explicitly.

In American popular culture, the Lone Ranger is a masked man who fights for the common good with his American Indian partner Tonto. If the Lone Ranger symbolically represents American individualism, then his partnership with an American Indian symbolizes what – the psychological partnership that Jung and his followers refer to as the axis between ego-consciousness and the Self in the human psyche (in Jungian terminology, the Self in the human psyche symbolizes being in touch with the collective unconscious)? And what does the Lone Ranger's being masked symbolize?

In the title essay of Ong's 1962 book *The Barbarian Within: And Other Fugitive Essays and Studies* (Macmillan, pages 260-285), he works with the Greek/barbarian contrast to refer to outsiders inside society today. He constructs an extended comparison-and-contrast essay in which he articulates what he considers to be the Greek position and the barbarian position. What he considers to be the Greek position is deeply indebted to Pericles' "Funeral Oration" as

Thucydides (c. 460-400 BCE) remembers and reconstructs it from his memory in his famous *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Pericles (c. 495-426 BCE) was a political leader and orator in Athens during its famous experiment with participatory democracy.

In the Hebrew Bible, there is a famous injunction to remember that you were once strangers (outsiders in Ong's terminology) in a strange land.

It's not just that the so-called outsider is inside society today. The far deeper problematic for American individualism today is that the collective unconscious (in Jung's terminology) is inside the psyches of all Americans today.

Now, in the book *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (Oxford University Press, 2011), Grace Elizabeth Hale shows that Ong's imagery of outsiders has become rather popular. But what about his imagery involving the Greek position he articulates? Evidently, Ong's proverbial Greeks have become the political and cultural establishment against which Trump and Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont have inveighed in each of their respective presidential primary campaigns.

In Senator Sanders' oratory, he often makes it sound like Hillary Rodham Clinton symbolizes the establishment against which he is campaigning. In Trump's oratory, she is "crooked Hillary." Trump likes to use epithets to characterize individual persons he doesn't like and wants to diminish. Epithets are used extensively in the Homeric epics (e.g., wily Odysseus).

While white middle-class Americans were pursuing their fantasy lives about being outsiders in rebellion in postwar America, many of them also helped mainstream American Indian spirituality, as Philip Jenkins details in his book *Dream Catchers: How Mainstream America Discovered Native Spirituality* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

Now, at a later time, Ong himself shifted away from his earlier Greek/barbarian terminology in his "Introduction: On Saying 'We' and 'Us' to Literature" in the book *Three American Literatures: Essays in Chicano, Native American, and Asian-American Literature for Teachers of American Literature*, edited by Houston A. Baker, Jr. (Modern Language Association of America, 1982, pages 3-8). In his introduction, Ong, who served as president of MLA in 1978, says, "All of us want to realize ourselves as distinct person, but we also want others – lots of others – to know that we are our own distinct selves. We do not want to be unique all alone. Hence we negotiate. And so do cultures" (pages 3-4).

Perhaps American culture today is still engaged in negotiating with certain other cultures that many Americans previously thought of as outsiders (in Ong's 1962 terminology). In Ong's 1982 terminology, we Americans of European descent may be negotiating our identities of "we" and "us" to integrate pro-social features of American Indian tribes.

Trump has clearly been appealing to white identity politics that does not want to negotiate with the pro-social non-white political and social and cultural traditions also inside American society today. In this respect, white identity politics in American society today resembles the anti-Semitic identity politics of German Nazis.

But those white Americans today are descended from white strangers (outsiders) who were historically strangers in a strange land. Ironically, many white supporters of Trump claim to be Christians. However, like the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible contains the injunction to remember that you were once strangers (outsiders) in a strange land. But I guess that Trump's white supporters are Christians in name only (CINOs). In any event, Trump's white supporters do not appear to be ready to negotiate their white political and social and cultural identity with the pro-social features of any non-white traditions.

In conclusion, Junger deserves credit for calling our attention to the serious problems of PTSD and suicide among returning veterans. In addition, he deserves credit to calling our attention to the analogy between male bonding in combat and the warrior traditions among American Indians. I hope that his elegantly written book contributes to a national discussion of these two big problems and the issues he discusses.