

Sermon: Evolutionary biology, social justice and music  
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In the book *Tribe* by Sebastian Junger, the author gives many examples of how war feels better than peace. He asserts that hardship can turn out to be a great blessing and disasters can be remembered more fondly than weddings or vacations. The essence of this book is that humans don't mind hardships, in fact they thrive on it. It makes people feel necessary and Junger says that modern society has perfected the art of making people feel unnecessary. Feeling disenfranchised, left out, not valued, less than. This is an important point in understanding social justice. I am going to take you back in time, through our evolutionary history to better understand some of the roots of social injustice today.

The book describes the defection of early American colonists to Native American tribes. This galled Puritan leaders who couldn't believe anybody would leave a civilized, Christian society for a heathen one. But leave they did. The defectors found Indian clothing to be more comfortable and Indian religion less harsh. Women had more say in the numbers of children they would have. Indian society was essentially classless and egalitarian

Because of these basic freedoms, tribal members tended to be exceedingly loyal. And so were the non-tribal members. Even when the colonists were rescued, they would escape to return once again to the tribes. Perhaps what they saw was a world that wasn't based on possessions, one with no need for greed or hunger. Perhaps they didn't have to imagine that world. It was real.

First agriculture and then industry changed two fundamental things about the human experience. The accumulation of personal property allowed people to make more and more individualistic choices about their lives, and those choices unavoidably diminished group efforts toward a common good which would be life in an egalitarian society. And as society modernized, people found themselves able to live independently from any particular group. They could buy what they wanted and not have to share or barter. A person living in a modern city or a suburb could and very much still can, for the first time in history, go through an entire day- or an entire life- mostly encountering complete strangers. They can be surrounded by others and yet feel deeply, dangerously alone.

“The evidence that this is hard on us is overwhelming. Numerous cross-cultural studies have shown that modern society- despite its nearly

miraculous advances in medicine, science and technology- is affected with some of the highest rates of depression, schizophrenia, poor health, anxiety and chronic loneliness in human history. As affluence and urbanization rise in a society, rates of depression and suicide tend to go up rather than down. Rather than buffering people from clinical depression, increased wealth in a society seems to foster it.” In fact, once a household income reaches \$100,000, research shows that happiness begins to decline. The hedonic treadmill actually erodes happiness.

“The economic and marketing forces of modern society have engineered an environment...that maximize[s] consumption at the long-term cost of well-being,” a study in the *Journal of Affective Disorders* concluded in 2012. “In effect, humans have dragged a body with a long hominid history into an overfed, malnourished, sedentary, sunlight-deficient, sleep-deprived, competitive, inequitable, and socially-isolating environment with dire consequences.” Ninety percent of all medical office visits in this country are stress related. It doesn’t matter whether you walk through the door of oncology, orthopedics, cardiology, obstetrics, surgery. We are all showing up with stress as a symptom if not the cause of our illness.

As modern society reduced the role of community, it simultaneously elevated the role of authority. Junger describes the two as uneasy companions. As one goes up, the other tends to go down. I can see that assertion in the Soviet Union of old. As the ultimate authority of the Kremlin increased, a sense of community decreased. Neighbors became suspicious of one another's activities. They were encouraged to be the eyes and ears of their neighbor's activities, not the heart that brings concern and empathy.

In 2007, anthropologist Christopher Boehm published an analysis of 154 modern foraging societies that were identified as representing our ancestral past. One of the most common traits of these societies was the absence of major wealth disparities between individuals. Another was the absence of arbitrary authority. Because tribal foragers are highly mobile and can easily shift between different communities, authority is almost impossible to impose on the unwilling. And even without that option, males who try to take control of the group- or the food supply- are often countered by coalitions of other males. This is clearly an ancient and adaptive behavior that tends to keep groups together and equitably cared for. In his survey of ancestral-type societies, Boehm found that one of the most commonly

punished infractions, besides murder and theft, was “failure to share.” Freeloading on the hard work of others and bullying were also high up on the list. Punishments included public ridicule, shunning and finally “assassination of the culprit by the entire group.” So the evolutionary basis for moral behavior seemed to stem from group pressure.

It’s revealing then, to look at modern society through the prism of more than a million years of human cooperation and resource sharing.

Subsistence-level hunters aren’t necessarily more moral than other people; they just can’t get away with selfish behavior because they live in small groups where almost everything is open to scrutiny. Modern society, on the other hand, is a sprawling and anonymous mess where people can get away with incredible levels of dishonesty and breeches of moral conduct, without getting caught. This might especially be true in the uses of social media, specifically in online bullying that has no face-to-face contact.

Junger writes that the kind of community-oriented behaviors that typically occur after a natural disaster are what brings us back to the possibility of living in an interdependent way in this modern world. Following the bombing of London in World War II, for example, a researcher in the

*Journal of Psychosomatic Research* stated that “when people are actively engaged in a cause, their lives have more purpose with a resulting improvement in mental health.” There was less depression during and for six months after the bombings of London and of New York decades later. There is a theory that modern society has gravely disrupted the social bonds that have always characterized the human experience, and that disasters thrust people back into a more ancient, organic way of relating. Let me repeat that statement. There is a theory that modern society has gravely disrupted the social bonds that have always characterized the human experience, and that disasters thrust people back into a more ancient, organic way of relating. In other words, we are de-evolving. We are losing a biological trait that is not worth losing.

During crisis, class differences are temporarily erased, income disparities become irrelevant, race is overlooked, and individuals are assessed simply by what they are willing to do for the group. It is a kind of fleeting social utopia that is enormously gratifying to the average person and downright therapeutic to people suffering from mental illness. As soon as relief flights began delivering aid to London, class divisions returned and the sense of brotherhood disappeared. The modern world had arrived. The beauty and

tragedy of the modern world is that it eliminates many situations that require people to demonstrate a commitment to the collective good, to the common good.

What catastrophes seem to do- sometimes in the span of a few minutes- is turn back the clock on ten thousand years of social evolution. Self-interest gets subsumed into group interest because there is no survival outside group survival, and that creates a social bond that many people sorely miss.

The worship committee has been grappling with how to address social justice through our services and our community life. We have considered how to create meaningful, reflective, action-oriented experiences for the community. During our meetings, I naturally kept thinking about the role that music can play and does play to create a bond for the common good. It reminds us of who we can be. It calls us to be better and to do better. It helps us imagine a better way. The essence of social justice is to even out the uneven for the common good. And how very lovely it would be if it did not include war or violence.

Ed, Sofie and I go to Panama every year to work with the jazz artist Danilo Perez and his wife Patricia Karate in their efforts to lift the impoverished children of this country to find a rightful place in society. This work is similar to the El Sistema program of Venezuela that you may be familiar with. The children of these countries have been given music education as a way to learn leadership, self-discipline and hope. They would then have an entry point to being a part of society, to have a place at the table of humanity and a chance to contribute to the common good.

So, what can we be called to do in our church community?

We can sing our way to stillness, allowing ourselves to deeply experience the inner peace circuitry of our brains. That practice changes the reactivity of our brain making us more aware and capable to bring peacefulness and empathy to the outer world. When we lose track of that, we can turn, turn and come around right. The music reminds us that we can reset ourselves to a higher sense of purpose toward the common good. 'Simple gifts' is a song of grace that keeps bringing us home when we lose our way.

The music events at the hall present us an opportunity to reach out to the broader community. To create happy, meaningful events that bind us together in a classless way would be a mitzvah to our town and county. We can be bound by the music no matter what our faith practices are, no matter what our incomes are.

As a community, we could extend the gifts of our music in interfaith activities. Since religion is a major divider in this society, let's be a beacon of ecumenical spirit through music.

For those with musical instruments in our closets and basements, we could bring them to WICN so that impoverished children in the Worcester area can have the same advantage that the children of Panama and Venezuela have. The slogan from Venezuela was: give a child a clarinet instead of a gun. Let's bring that sensibility to our neighborhoods.

Let us create community drumming events on our expansive front lawn. I used to drum on the full moons in Charlotte under the towers of Bank of America, First Union and Wachovia. We began with just a dozen or so of us and it grew to hundreds. The group included homeless people, bankers,

students, children, etc. A drum will always call people together and boundaries have no place in the music.

If violence and catastrophe bring us back to our evolutionary past, let us be emboldened and courageous to defy that as the only way. Let us look at natural experiences in music that create an egalitarian, classless, boundary-less group of happy, engaged people. Let us share our facilities, our talents and our vision toward social justice issues. Sitting at the table of diplomacy and hashing out our differences never seems to get us anywhere. It's exhausting, it's upsetting. Let us gently move around those obstacles with our eye on the prize and create community-based experiences open to all and work toward the common good with the beauty and power of music. Let us create a future that reminds us of the past, of the best parts of our past.

You may say I'm a dreamer, and I hope you will. But I do believe that the world can be a better place. And that freedom and justice is the melody that lets us shine on.