

Them: Why we hate each other and how to heal

by Ben Sasse 2018

The following notes were taken by Dr. Jerry Nelson Feb 2019

“Right now the partisan tribalism is statistically higher than at any point since the Civil War. Why? It’s certainly not because our political discussions are more important. It’s because the local, human relationships that anchored political talk have shriveled up. Alienated from each other, and uprooted from places we can call home, we’ve reduced to shrieking.” 13

“So the first third of this book is about the collapse of the local tribes that give us true, meaningful identity – family, workplace, and neighborhood. It’s about the evaporation of social capital – the reservoir of relationships that help us navigate the world – and about the precipitous decline in recent years of the institutions that Alexis de Tocqueville, nearly two hundred years ago, saw as the heart and soul of America.” (Scouting, VFW, bowling leagues, church, Rotary, etc. 13

The second part (of the book) will... “explore how anti-tribes – of news consumption more than political activism – have cropped up to fill the void left by the collapse of the natural, local, embodied, healthy tribes people have traditionally known.” 14

“The third and final part of the book asks what we can do about it. 14

“Our world is nudging us toward rootlessness, when only a recovery of rootedness can heal us. What’s wrong with America, then, starts with one uncomfortable word. Loneliness 15

Chapter 1 “Our Loneliness Epidemic”

From 1990s Robert Putnam (Bowling Alone)“chronicled the collapse of neighborly America.27

- “The number of Americans who count no friends at all...has soared.” 29
- The number of two-parent families (mothers and fathers) has declined in America 33

Success sequence: “Finish high school; Get a job; Get married before having children.” 35

Failure to follow the success sequence results in a 50/50 likelihood you will be poor. 38

Women with a high school education or less experience their first pregnancy, on average, at 18; women with higher education experience it at age 27. Nearly a decade difference. It is also noted that more educated parents by using more sophisticated language and reading more to their children rear higher achieving children (socially, academically and economically. 39

Chapter 2 “Strangers at Work”

“...Our work used to be a noun: Mr. Smith. Coach Sasse. But work is likely going to become a verb. We will do many different important things but rarely with permanence. And that means losing a sense of

identity that a job once brought. S jobs last a shorter time, and become less connected to tangible communities, we can hardly be surprised that people are feeling more detached and rootless. “ 67

We’ve lost that “Friday night in the hometown gym” opportunity that many formerly had.

So we turn to “anti-tribes,” identifying ourselves by what we are against. 72

Chapter 3 “The Comforts of Politainment”

Not having real “tribes,” we turn to mainly electronic media to identify with others who we think are like ourselves because we are against the same things.

“We’ve erased the distinction between “news” and “opinion”; and we’re losing the habits that could help us make calm, considered decisions.” 79

“...People filter out most information that conflicts with their presuppositions or desired conclusions.” 82

We seek “coherence” and “correspondence.” 84

Correspondence contains the information that matches reality.

Coherence speaks to what I already believe (before receiving new information).

Humans find coherence more powerful than correspondence. We don’t want to receive anything which contradicts the views or ideas we already have. 85

So much of the national media has resulted in a “selection bias ...about what news is news” that it has “led tens of millions of Americans to divorce from the mainstream media, citing irreconcilable differences. “ 98 Illustrations: Clarence Thomas hearings, Civil Rights Commission, Candy Crowley in the 2012 election debate, Little Sisters of the Poor, Doctor Gosnell, etc.)

The problem is that the “right wing” media uses some of the same misreporting. But our preference for “coherence” (see above p 84) results in the following: ‘Don’t make me doubt Fox,’ one lady responded when I debunked an inaccurate story. ‘They’re the only channel I can trust.’ This is a common sentiment among people who have televisions – electronic hearths – going all day in their living rooms.” 102

“And so we fall into anti-tribes, defined by what we’re against rather than what we’re for.” 103

“And so, liberals and conservatives no longer believe the same things, we don’t understand how our opponents believe what they believe, and we soothe our lonely souls with the balm of contempt.” 103

Chapter 4 “The Polarization Business Model”

Sean Hannity “explained the core objective of his two different programs to the New York Times. It’s not to promote a particular conservative agenda or to encourage American patriotism, or even to offer coherent arguments against liberalism. Its core cause is to rage.” 105

“Each episode...begins with something that makes him mad enough to emote, mad enough to let others participate in a collective experience of catharsis.” “Most cable news and talk radio shows today – on both the left and right – operate this way.” “...There’s real money to be made in helping people keep their fears and hatreds aligned.” 106

“Sociologists who study the ‘psychology of enemies’ have learned that having foes has real psychic value. Enemies help give life coherence. They give us someone to blame.” 108

“In our digital age, provocative social media is the only profitable social media.” 109

Media organizations know the bottom line is profitability and profitability is driven by advertising and advertising is driven by listenership (audio/video) or readership (digital media) and their responses. The responses are measured by “clicks” (if on-line). 110

The more outrageous the headline or discussion the more outraged we are and the more likely we are to “click” to learn/hear more. Media outlets know this and use this to gain or hold their audience. 112

“One-hump” v. “Two-hump” theory of voter attraction:

“A one-hump theory assumes that there are many voters in the middle, and a candidate succeeds by persuading more of these movable people to join his side rather than his opponent’s. A two-hump theory assumes that there are very few undecided voters in the middle, so a candidate succeeds by stoking greater turnout among the voters already on his half of the political continuum.” 121-22

“The goal” (for a politician) “is to be seen as more ‘pure’ and more combative.” 122

So how do we fix this problem?

Chapter 5 “Becoming Americans Again”

Great chapter on basic “civics.”

“Two indispensable insights of the American experience are inextricably linked: each and every individual is created with dignity – and therefore government, because it is not the source of our rights, is just a tool.” 138

“Governments exist to do the work of securing our preexisting rights. Government – that is, power – cannot be absolute; it is only the instrument we use to secure the freedom necessary for the most important pursuits.” 139

“If we are going to preserve that freedom, we need to reflect fully on our limitations. The founder would be proud if we took more seriously, and taught our children deliberately, at least four core truths about human nature and government:

- We’re flawed – and naturally inclined to fight

- Those who wield government power shouldn't be trusted to resolve many fights or to declare many winners and losers.
- Politicians shouldn't confuse their temporary roles with ultimate meaning.
- Citizens in a republic must cultivate humility – or the experiment will collapse. 139

That is why our founders devised a system of government that is “anti-majoritarianism” - “a political philosophy that emphasizes constraint – constraint that applies as much to ourselves, with our tendency toward absolute certainty and self-righteousness, as to the government.” 139

“Anti-majoritarianism” means not fully democratic – not the rule of the majority.

All citizens must have a respect for the dignity of the other person and an humility that realizes there is more than one perspective.

“The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right said...Justice Leaned Hand.
 “The Spirit of liberty is the spirit which to understand the minds of other men and womeh; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interest alongside its own without bias.” 147

“The Founders established this system of limited (not necessarily small) government – that is, they imposed constraints on government coercion – in order to give every citizen the space to follow his or her conscience.” 149

Unfortunately our universities have become some of the most closed-minded spaces in our society. What used to be “liberal” (free to debate ideas) education has become indoctrination.

Andrew Sullivan wrote, “When elite universities shift their entire worldview away from liberal education as we have long known it toward the imperatives of an identity-based ‘social justice’ movement, the broader culture is in danger of drifting away from liberal democracy as well.” 154

“When one half of the nation demonizes the other half, tendrils of resentment reach out and strangle whatever charitable impulses remain in us.” 155

We now no longer engage our ideological enemy, we run over him/her!

Author Arnold Kling “suggests that each of the three major American political persuasions filters the world through a particular lens: Progressives see the world as a battle between victims and oppressors. Conservatives see the world as a battle between civilization and barbarism. Libertarians see the world as a battle between freedom and coercion” 162-3

“When we understand these different starting points, it’s easier to empathize with political opponents, even if we still passionately disagree with their policy preferences.” 163

Today, however, “Political opponents are now on the prowl for opportunities to mock or silence their opponents...” 164

“What binds us together as Americans is our unwavering conviction that, in spite of all our differences (some insignificant and some very significant)...we share a belief in freedom for all. We believe that every American should be permitted to follow her conscience, speak her mind, exercise her deepest beliefs... Our people and people everywhere are imbued with inalienable human rights. Government is our shared project to secure those rights.” 165 (GLN: I’m not certain all Americans share this sentiment.)

Chapter 6 “Set Tech Limits”

To allow for community to be reestablished we must get out of our small and large screens and into each other’s lives.

Digital Time, Real Friends, & What we care about:

1. Your thousandth social media friend won’t make you any happier. Your fourth real friend will.
2. Uninterrupted time is life’s most valuable limited resources.
3. Most news isn’t news.
4. Envy isn’t good therapy. Rage isn’t good therapy. Working out is good therapy.
5. Do something now you’ll want to talk about at the dinner table tonight.
6. Political addicts are weird (and there aren’t that many of them, they’re just loud).
7. I’d rather be with the people I’m with right now than with the people I’m not with.
8. If #7 is true, then spend more time with the right people.
9. Develop the right addictions (another word for addiction is habits. Habits determine character).
10. Not every bad thing in the world requires a response from you.
11. Not every mean thing said to you requires you to acknowledge it.
12. You’re not omniscient. Don’t assume your bubble of information is the whole story.
13. Sports twitter is infinitely better than political twitter.
14. Lots more social media is fake bots than social media companies admit.
15. The little old lady on your block probably has an important unmet need today.
16. Social media isn’t great for deep stuff. It’s great for humor. Let’s be known as a family that laughs hard.

“Socrates never had an iPhone, but he was right about this regardless: ‘Beware the barrenness of a busy life.’” 200

Chapter 7 “But a Cemetery Plot”

It is imperative that we build community. “The only community that exists is this one, here and now. But we have to choose to embrace it.” 213

“Contentment is a condition of the soul... The wise (person) learns how to grow where he’s planted. He chooses joy. He embraces the time and season, these people and this place.” 215

Chapter 8 “Be a Smarter Nomad”

In this digital age where jobs are transient and we are also transient, we must be smarter about building community. It is no longer automatic as it might once have been.

Adults living alone in 1940 was 4%; in 2000 it was 26%; in NYC it is 48% 221

“We are in a period of unprecedented upheaval. Community is collapsing, anxiety is building, and we’re distracting ourselves with artificial political hatreds. That can’t endure – and if it does, American won’t. The alternative is restoring community for our new moment (our new situation)... We need to figure out a way to realize a sense of home in a world that looks very different than anything we’ve seen before... It will require us to build new institutions of communication that can bond increasingly mobile people together. There’s no formula to do that. The only thing we can do is start, wherever we are... You’ll never start building community until you start building community.” 236

Conclusion “We Need More Tribes”

Reject anti-identities (anti-tribes).

Put politics in its proper place (it isn’t life – don’t let “news” dictate your attitude).

Live local. (Build relationship where you are).