

THE COST OF BELONGING: WHAT LEADERS MUST SACRIFICE TO BUILD A CULTURE THAT LASTS

By Dave Harvey

In his book *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, Sebastian Junger explores a fascinating phenomenon that unfolded during the early New World settlements — an anomaly rarely mentioned in our history books. Many of the early European settlers defected from their colonial camps to live among Native Americans. Crazy as it may sound to many of us, the settlers saw among the native tribes an experience of community, camaraderie, and unity. Some felt their New World was missing some old qualities like companionship and solidarity. The loss was too painful; dramatic action was needed. Junger describes the results:

“The intensely communal nature of an Indian tribe held an appeal that the material benefits of Western civilization couldn’t necessarily compete with. . . . As early as 1612, Spanish authorities noted in amazement that forty or fifty Virginians had married into Indian tribes, and that even English women were openly mingling with the natives. At that point, whites had been in Virginia for only a few years, and many who joined the Indians would have been born and raised in England. These were not rough frontiersmen who were sneaking off to join the savages; these were the sons and daughters of Europe.”¹

Junger goes on to explain how European settlements would send delegations to take back the defectors, but the attempts mostly failed. No one wanted to return. When settlers went to rescue someone back from a Native American tribe, the ex-settler was determined to stay. No rescue was necessary. They had found a home, and they were willing to make sacrifices to remain there.

There’s a leadership question buried in that strange piece of history: How do we cultivate cultures where people experience the kind of belonging that makes commitment worth the cost? Whether we are leading a church, a network, a ministry, a nonprofit, or another organization, we want to create cultures where people experience community and camaraderie that last. But cultures like that don’t simply happen. They are built by people willing to pay for them.

¹ Sebastian Junger, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, (New York: Twelve Hachette Book Group, 2016), p. 10.

And belonging has a price. Healthy cultures require us to surrender certain things we naturally want to protect: autonomy, turf, recognition, control, even the freedom to walk away when commitment becomes inconvenient. The very things we instinctively cling to can prevent us from experiencing the community we deeply desire.

Three impulses in particular threaten cultures of belonging: radical autonomy, tribalism, and corrupted ambition. Each offers leaders something attractive. And each eventually destroys the community we're trying to build.

The Cost of Radical Autonomy

The settlers' commitment to community stands in contrast to a larger reality rapidly expanding within the modern world: radicalized autonomy. Autonomy itself is not the enemy. Maturity involves differentiation, responsibility, and the ability to act with appropriate independence. But radical autonomy takes something healthy and infects it with a strain that elevates and engorges the self. Like a fanatical religious zealot, radical autonomy launches a jihad against personal sacrifice and communal commitments. When the individual grows large, love for the collective becomes small.

The radical autonomy we long for attacks the community we crave.

This phenomenon carries an irony. On one hand, radical autonomy is something we sinfully crave — it's at the very core of original sin (Genesis 3:6–7). Adam and Eve's bite introduced a godless individualism into our genetics (Romans 5:12). In Adam, our internal GPS was skewed by sin. Our sense of self no longer triangulates its position from God and, to a lesser extent, from others. Following in Adam's footsteps, we hide from God and throw others under the bus (Genesis 3:12).

That's how sin rolls when it goes unchecked in communities. Sin elevates the individual and calibrates everything to its interests. The virus of sin radicalizes individuals, making self-centeredness our default setting. When the virus goes undetected, the self swallows the whole. In our day and age, this curse is sometimes celebrated as the cure. When that happens, radical autonomy corrupts unity and community altogether.

Here's the ironic twist. Autonomy radicalizes creatures who are fundamentally wired for community. Being image-bearers of God means, in part, that we're created to thrive and flourish together. But sin makes community hard. To live, therefore, is to inhabit a tension: we want the freedom to arrange life around ourselves while simultaneously craving relationships that require us to arrange parts of life around others.

We end up with shadow, not substance. We occupy neighborhoods, but neighbors live isolated lives, separated by busy schedules and broken expectations. Today, we stand side-by-side among peers with our eyes glued to electronic devices. It's not hard for collective spaces to become lonely places. That's why the settlers ran away.

Don't get me wrong, self-interest is not, by itself, the virus. Jesus assumed we would love ourselves. He merely flipped the script and called us to use that self-commitment as the standard by which we loved others (Mark 12:31). Paul assumes we will look to our own interests. He simply encourages us toward a life where those interests break free from the gravitational pull of self: "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4).

The virus is not autonomy alone; it's autonomy jacked up on self-interest steroids. When the tongue of Self is loosed, it speaks the language of emancipation.² The heroic self has broken free from family, organizational, and institutional expectations. Self-destiny and self-determinism become the unexamined impulses behind this unshackling. Freedom means the absence of rules, restraints, and commitments. Obligations are replaced with rights; preferences displace responsibility.

When the ravenous Me moves to the center, communities lose their ability to find common ground. This is especially dangerous for leaders because leadership already provides opportunities for autonomy. We have influence, options, platforms, and often enough authority to arrange our environment around our preferences. If we are not careful, leadership can actually insulate us from the very sacrifices necessary for genuine community.

The first cost of belonging, then, is the surrender of radical autonomy. We cannot have both unlimited independence and deep belonging. Eventually one must give way to the other.

The Cost of Tribalism

Strangely, radical autonomy doesn't always leave us alone. Sometimes it gathers us into groups organized around ourselves. That's tribalism.

Tribalism happens when the collective itself bends inward. We can no longer see beyond our own borders. Self-infatuation dulls our drive to learn from those outside our stream. The exaltation of our ministry, organization, leader, or tribe becomes the driving ethos, and the culture becomes loveless and utilitarian — a spiritualized version of Lord of the Flies.

Leaders who serve themselves don't create healthy tribes; they cultivate tribalism.³ Self-obsessed leaders demand loyalty rather than winning it, and their teams demonstrate a predictable partisanship for the leader's way. In such cultures, dissent collapses and groupthink rises.

Gone is clarity about the common mission; gone is fruitful unity and a sense of solidarity that binds people despite their differences or backgrounds; and gone is a generous culture.

² Compare David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*, (New York: Random House, 2019), p. 281.

³ I'm making a distinction here between tribal cultures or communities referenced in my opening illustration and *tribalism*, the malady that results when tribes are infected by the virus of radical autonomy.

When hyper-individualists think about resources, the discussion inevitably moves toward me and mine. Hyper-individualist leaders push the communities they lead away from communion and toward consumerism.

A few years back, a group known as the Bolton Forgers produced a preponderance of fake sculptures and phony paintings. The group united for a single purpose — to con the art world out of serious sums of money. According to Scotland Yard, the ring made millions on their scams. At its worst, tribalism makes leaders like those forgers, uniting gifted teams merely for the sake of personal gain.

The trouble with forging is that it misapplies our gifts. When police eventually raided the Boltons' property, the work and tools they found there — a furnace for melting silver and even a bust of Thomas Jefferson tossed into the corner — became evidence used to indict them. When we team up to use our God-given gifts primarily for our own advancement, we do something similar.

We miss the sacrificial glory of interdependence, the Christlike display of service and humility, and the yearning to live in service of something larger than our own existence. Such gospel-conceived and grace-infused motivations simply lie dormant within tribalized leaders — if they live at all.

Belonging therefore costs us our tribal boundaries. Healthy cultures require leaders who can celebrate what God is doing elsewhere, learn from people who don't belong to their circle, share resources without calculating advantage, and pursue kingdom outcomes that may never strengthen their own platform.

Our field must always be bigger than our tribe.

The Cost of Self-Glory

Few things compromise a culture more than leaders who seek to use the collective for their own glory. For this person, community is measured by whether their agenda advances, their name grows, their turf is protected, and their gifts are recognized. Something good — the desire to do something that matters — has been corrupted by the object upon which it is fixed: the self.

Scripture does not condemn the desire for glory. It redirects it. Romans contrasts those who “seek for glory and honor and immortality” with those who are “self-seeking” (Romans 2:7–8). The problem is not ambition itself, but ambition that terminates on us.

In our desire to be great, we actually shrink.

Salmon Chase illustrates the danger. As Treasury Secretary in Lincoln's cabinet, Chase was exceptionally gifted and performed brilliantly during the financial pressures of the Civil War. But he also possessed what one colleague described as “inordinate ambition, intense selfishness for official distinction . . . and considerable vanity.” When Chase oversaw the

printing of currency, he even placed his own portrait on the one-dollar bill. As one historian observed, “he chose the most common denomination knowing that his image would reach the greatest number of people.”⁴ The drive that positioned him to make a difference also threatened to make everything about him.

James gives this glory-swiping a name: “selfish ambition.” And he warns that “where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice” (James 3:16).

That is the cultural danger. Selfish ambition never remains inside the ambitious person. It disorders relationships, breeds competition for recognition, and eventually turns colleagues into rivals. A culture cannot remain healthy when everyone is quietly auditioning for the starring role.

John Chrysostom, one of the great preachers of the early church, once said, “Men who are in love with applause have their spirits starved . . . when they fail to be constantly praised.”⁵ Have you ever met people starving their souls in their search for praise? I have. In fact, I see him in the mirror all the time. I’ve centered conversations around my ideas, paraded achievements, and felt the pull to make leadership another venue for self-promotion. In wanting to be big, I grow small.

Thank God for Jesus and his finished work. He steps into our delusions of self-glory and redirects our hearts away from the praise of men and toward the glory that comes from God (John 12:43).

The third cost of belonging, then, is our claim to the center.

The Pattern: Christ’s Other-Centered Life

If autonomy, tribalism, and corrupted ambition bend our hearts and cultures inward, how do they get untwisted? It takes an act of God. We aren’t merely thinking creatures who find our way forward by making rational calculations. We’re driven by what we love. Our passions form us. As James K. A. Smith says, “To be human is to love, and it is what we love that defines who we are.”⁶

Radical autonomy bends those desires toward self. We begin believing satisfaction can only be achieved by making ourselves strong and accumulating what we want. But Scripture calls us to a contradictory set of values. If I want to be great, I must become a servant (Mark 9:35). If I desire to be treated in a particular way, I should do unto others as I would have

⁴ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, NY: Simon & Shuster, 2005), p. 510.

⁵ John Chrysostom, “On the Priesthood,” quoted in Joost Nixon, “Pastor Traps: Glory, Part 2,” *Credenda Agenda*, vol. 13, no. 6.

⁶ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies, vol. 1, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009) p. 50.

them do unto me (Luke 6:31). I should look not merely to my own interests but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:4). To find myself, I must lose myself (Matthew 16:25).

This is where the cost of belonging finally comes into focus. The only vaccination against radical autonomy, tribalism, and corrupted ambition is to leverage our whole being for connection and service outside ourselves. That's the only way that we, as people created for the glory of God in community, can flourish in a fallen world.

But how does a heart warping inward get untwisted and redirected to such a radical degree? Only supernatural intervention can reverse self-obsessed drives so that they move upward toward God and then outward toward others. We were born with hearts that constantly curve inward toward self-love; we must be reborn to love others.

The starting point is Christ himself. Though the Son possessed every claim to the glories of heaven, he chose the path of other-centered humility:

“[He], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant . . . he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6–8 NIV).

As converted souls behold the humble and unselfish way Christ loved us, our souls are enlarged. Our stories of self-glory become less captivating. The interests and stories of other people begin to take on greater importance. Christ's love reverses the incurving of our fallenness, and we begin to love others because he first loved us (1 John 4:19).

That's the gospel's anti-virus.

The Practice of Humbling Ourselves

What does this look like among leaders?

First, it means honest self-appraisal before God. Humility is honestly assessing ourselves in light of who God really is and who we really are. In reality, humility is nothing more than seeing reality clearly. What I like about this definition is that the focus is Godward, not me-ward. Yes, I've got to look at myself, but only in comparison to the holy God who became man and suffered as our substitute. Ponder that and it'll make you humble.

But notice something else. There's nothing about humility that means we don't dream, aspire, and plan for great things. In fact, humility, biblically understood, should stoke a great ambition for new ways to bring God glory.

Second, humility means honest self-disclosure to others. Leaders, let's drop the illusion of having it all together. The only perfect man who walked the earth was Jesus. The rest of us are bumbling through life until we eventually discover what God already knows: we're weak and sinful and still need Jesus every day.

When was the last time you confessed a sin to another person? Confession matters not because it forces us to grovel but because it acknowledges the reality of our brokenness, humanity, and daily need for grace. When we confess our sins to one another, we discover again that there is nothing with which we struggle that is not common to man (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Shared weakness creates a strange kind of strength. We stop relating primarily through platforms, titles, accomplishments, and competencies and encounter one another again as people equally dependent upon grace. And because we confess our sins and receive God's forgiveness together, we develop a shared testimony — a story that unites us as we move forward on mission.

Lastly, humility makes sacrifices to become "we". When a leader begins to see the kingdom beyond himself, you know the gospel anti-virus is working. Such leaders begin saying, "The mission is bigger than me. Our field is bigger than our tribe." With that outward posture, collaboration finds purchase and begins to grow.

It's essential that when we talk about gospel-centrality we're thinking about the good news in a way that rejects the false doctrine of radical autonomy. We must affirm a vision that protects personhood while placing connection to God and others at the center of our functional worldview. Healthy cultures don't eliminate individuality. They locate it within something larger. The flourishing life cannot be lived alone or with us perpetually at the center.

Cultural commentator David Brooks observes, "A commitment to community involves moving from 'I' stories to 'We' stories."⁷ That's a crucial move for leaders. A commitment to community begins with beholding Christ's forgiveness and responding to this good news by humbling ourselves before each other and then locking arms together as we go on mission.

B. B. Warfield beautifully describes the result:

"Self-sacrifice brought Christ into the world. And self-sacrifice will lead us, His followers, not away from but into the midst of men. Wherever men suffer, there will we be to comfort. Wherever men strive, there will we be to help. Wherever men fail, there will we be to uplift. Wherever men succeed, there will we be to rejoice. Self-sacrifice means not indifference to our times and our fellows: it means absorption in them. It means forgetfulness of self in others."⁸

That's the culture Christian leaders should aspire to create: not one where people disappear into the collective, but one where people flourish because they have given themselves to something larger than themselves.

⁷ David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*, (New York: Random House, 2019), p. 281.

⁸ B. B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1950), p. 574.

The Commitment That Makes Belonging Possible

Common commitment is central to Christianity. In fact, it's central to any kind of societal health because commitment is central to what it means to be a healthy image-bearer. When love makes a promise, durable commitments are born. When those commitments are directed toward others, they raise us above our own maladies and absurdities to opportunities provided by the mission and the needs of others.

Before the Second World War, experts projected that as many as four million people in England would experience psychological breakdown during the air raids. But as the Blitz progressed, something unexpected happened. Psychiatric hospitals saw admissions decline. Some long-standing patients actually saw their symptoms subside. People who had struggled during peacetime found themselves driving ambulances and serving their neighbors.⁹

Sebastian Junger notes similar phenomena after disasters and during periods of war. He describes, for instance, the aftermath of the devastating 1970 earthquake and rockslide in Yungay, Peru, where survivors quickly developed a new social order marked by cooperation and a leveling of previous social divisions. When people encounter a compelling summons to meet an aching need, factors that normally divide them can suddenly seem less important.¹⁰

A common mission rearranges the self.

Christian leaders should understand this better than anyone. Conversion certainly begins as a God-and-me experience, but when we embrace the other-centered nature of the gospel, we move outward on mission. Churches do this. Ministries do this. Leadership teams do this. Networks of churches do this. Healthy communities form when people discover that the mission is too large to accomplish alone.

But commitment cannot remain sentimental. Commitments are mutual affirmation between people or organizations. To commit is to make and keep promises. Those promises give love concrete form by establishing appropriate mutual expectations. Commitments create rights and obligations, but their real glue is not the rights they establish. It is the love they call forth.

I've lost count of the pastors or network leaders who have been informed, suddenly and with no prior discussion — often by text or an unexpected phone call — that a member or church was leaving. The problem is not the decision to leave. We've all left somewhere or someone to arrive where we are today. The issue is how easily we unilaterally renegotiate commitments in loveless ways, making one-sided decisions that disregard our mutual obligations. Membership and partnership are downsized to functional arrangements that last only as long as they serve our needs or meet our expectations. Commitments become

⁹ Junger, *Tribe*, p., 47

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

tethered to how we felt when we made them. When the feeling changes, so does our conviction.

Most leaders bear scars from relationships where commitments proved to be little more than consumer arrangements.

God is most glorified, not when his people fastidiously calculate their relational ROI, but when committed people give themselves wholeheartedly to one another in fulfillment of their promises. Biblical love does not keep accounts or continually calculate who is more invested. It keeps sacrifice at the center. Because in keeping our commitments, we reflect something of our covenant-keeping God.

Building a Culture That Lasts

Healthy cultures flourish to the degree that leaders see the beauty of unity and sacrifice to embody it. The true tendons tying healthy teams and organizations together aren't merely structures, policies, strategies, or shared interests. They are trusting relationships among people.

Healthy cultures are places where we talk to each other and not about each other.

Convictions matter. Structures matter. Expectations matter. But the supreme stickiness that makes a culture durable is found in mercy, goodness, integrity, Christlike character, and reciprocal love. Without those qualities, movements become monuments within a generation.

Commitment also becomes a mirror that allows leaders to peer deeply into their souls. The true measure of a mature leader can often be seen in the commitments he makes and how diligently those commitments are fulfilled. Communities grow healthy when relationships of trust pass the test of time and become a shared history. They become textured with love as people are seen as souls to be nourished, not merely gifts to be utilized.

Mutual commitment born of genuine affection emerges as the norm — rejected by none, accepted by all. It's when our commitments become habits that we experience personal loyalty and institutional longevity. For this reason, commitments must become specific and defined. Vague affection rarely survives significant disagreement, disappointment, or cost.

Commitment also provides an ecosystem for growth and flourishing. Healthy organizations aren't merely collections of autonomous people pursuing parallel interests. They're communities of connected people growing together in an ecosystem where they can flourish.

While authority is necessary in any organization, the terrain of healthy culture should not be unnecessarily mountainous. The benefits of belonging shouldn't flow only downward from

leadership. In good organizations, the good flows up, down, and sideways through relational connections at multiple levels.

For cultures to last, commitment must be collaborative. In the healthiest communities, there is order and leadership without the hierarchies of tribalism. People are synchronized by convictions and relationships to achieve together what none could accomplish alone. The trust engendered by mutual care and connection stirs more noble desires: the longing to be known, the desire to contribute to a greater cause, the yearning to give and care, and the call to build something together that will serve the next generation.

These connections eventually change the key organizational question.

We slowly move away from “What do I get?” and toward “To whom do I belong, and what claim does that make upon my life?”

That second question is costly. But it’s also where flourishing begins.

Most of us treasure the times when sacrificing for others and with others made us better. These are moments when we feel most alive — when our gifts serve a greater cause and we behold the beauty and power of “we.” Deep down, we know there is an intrinsic value to human connection that can never be replaced. Though community can scare us and scar us, something within us still knows we were made to give ourselves to this biblical ideal.

And perhaps we know something more: Healthy cultures and robust communities depend on leaders with enough courage to be sinned against by people and institutions they love without surrendering their commitment to their good. They absorb the wounds without abandoning love. They remain willing to advocate, sacrifice, and hope for the future of something that has sometimes hurt them.

And so we must fight for this future. We give ourselves to imperfect people and imperfect communities — not because we expect perfect communion, but because we know the only life worth living is a life lived together. We find the courage to love boldly and suffer graciously, spending and being spent for those for whom Christ died.

What Will You Pay?

Remember those European settlers? When people came to rescue them, many refused to leave. They had discovered something they valued more than the material advantages they had left behind. They had found belonging.

Christian leaders should want to create cultures where something infinitely greater is happening — not merely human solidarity, but communities formed by people who have been loved sacrificially by Christ and are learning to extend that love to one another.

But we cannot create that kind of culture cheaply. It costs our radical autonomy, our tribalism, and our demand for recognition. It costs our insistence upon always protecting our interests, preserving our options, and keeping an escape route open. It costs vulnerability, forgiveness, sacrifice, commitment, and sometimes the willingness to remain faithful even after the institution or people we love have disappointed us.

Belonging is forged when love becomes costly — and we choose to love anyway.

But Christians shouldn't be surprised by that. The community we are trying to build was born from the greatest act of self-sacrifice the world has ever known. Christ did not save us by protecting his interests but by giving himself for ours.

As leaders behold him, we can become the kind of people who create cultures where others don't merely work, attend, participate, or consume. They belong. And when love binds us together, we want it to last.

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Additional Resources

This paper was revised and repurposed from an article originally published at gccollective.org under the title, "Recovering the Operating System For a Healthy Network."

For additional resources, visit RevDaveHarvey.com/LeadershipPerspectives.