**Why Humans, Like Ants, Need a Tribe** (excerpt)

Religion. Sports. War. Biologist E.O. Wilson says our drive to join a group—and to fight for it—is what makes us human.

by [E. O. Wilson](http://www.thedailybeast.com/contributors/e--o--wilson.html)  | April 2, 2012 1:15 AM EDT, Newsweek Magazine

***Focus Questions: What needs did tribes serve in our early history? What needs do modern tribes satisfy? What evidence has demonstrated that forming groups is instinctive?***

Have you ever wondered why, in the ongoing [presidential campaign](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/11/18/obama-gets-a-gop-gift-for-the-2012-presidential-campaign.html), we so strongly hear the pipes calling us to arms? Or why team sports evoke such intense loyalty, joy, and despair?

The answer is that everyone, no exception, must have a tribe, an alliance with which to jockey for power and territory, to demonize the enemy, to organize rallies and raise flags.

And so it has ever been. In ancient history and prehistory, tribes gave visceral comfort and pride from familiar fellowship, and a way to defend the group enthusiastically against rival groups. It gave people a name in addition to their own and social meaning in a chaotic world. It made the environment less disorienting and dangerous. Human nature has not changed. Modern groups are psychologically equivalent to the tribes of ancient history. As such, these groups are directly descended from the bands of primitive humans and prehumans.

Today, the social world of each modern human is not a single tribe but rather a system of interlocking tribes, among which it is often difficult to find a single compass. People savor the company of like-minded friends, and they yearn to be in one of the best—a combat Marine regiment, perhaps, an elite college, the executive committee of a company, a religious sect, a fraternity, a garden club—any collectivity that can be compared favorably with other, competing groups of the same category.

Their thirst for group membership and superiority of their group can be satisfied even with symbolic victory by their warriors in clashes on ritualized battlefields: that is, in sports. The fans are lifted by seeing the uniforms, symbols, and battle gear of the team, the championship cups and banners on display, the dancing seminude maidens appropriately called cheerleaders. When the Boston Celtics defeated the [Los Angeles](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/01/18/occupy-wall-street-takes-aim-at-congress.html) Lakers for the National Basketball Association championship on a June night in 1984, the mantra was “Celts Supreme!” The social psychologist Roger Brown, who witnessed the aftermath, commented, “The fans burst out of the Garden and nearby bars, practically break dancing in the air, stogies lit, arms uplifted, voices screaming. The hood of a car was flattened, about thirty people jubilantly piled aboard, and the driver—a fan—smiled happily ...It did not seem to me that those fans were just sympathizing or empathizing with their team. They personally were flying high. On that night each fan’s self-esteem felt supreme; a social identity did a lot for many personal identities.”

Experiments conducted over many years by social psychologists have revealed how swiftly and decisively people divide into groups and then discriminate in favor of the one to which they belong. Even when the experimenters created the groups arbitrarily, prejudice quickly established itself. Whether groups played for pennies or were divided by their preference for some abstract painter over another, the participants always ranked the out-group below the in-group. They judged their “opponents” to be less likable, less fair, less trustworthy, less competent. The prejudices asserted themselves even when the subjects were told the in-groups and out-groups had been chosen arbitrarily.

The tendency to form groups, and then to favor in-group members, has the earmarks of instinct. We are inclined that way. Cognitive psychologists have found that newborn infants are most sensitive to the first sounds they hear, to their mother’s face, and to the sounds of their native language. Later they look preferentially at persons who previously spoke their native language within their hearing. Similarly, preschool children tend to select native-language speakers as friends.

The elementary drive to form and take deep pleasure from in-group membership easily translates at a higher level into tribalism. People are prone to ethnocentrism. It is an uncomfortable fact that even when given a guilt-free choice, individuals prefer the company of others of the same race, nation, clan, and religion. They trust them more, relax with them better in business and social events, and prefer them more often than not as marriage partners. They are quicker to anger at evidence that an out-group is behaving unfairly or receiving undeserved rewards. And they grow hostile to any out-group encroaching upon the territory or resources of their in-group.

When in experiments black and white Americans were flashed pictures of the other race, their amygdalas, the brain’s center of fear and anger, were activated so quickly and subtly that the centers of the brain were unaware of the response. The subject, in effect, could not help himself. Group-versus-group was a principal driving force that made us what we are. In prehistory, each tribe knew with justification that if it was not armed and ready, its very existence was imperiled. Throughout history, the escalation of a large part of technology has had combat as its central purpose. Today, public support is best fired up by appeal to the emotions of deadly combat, over which the amygdala is grandmaster. We find ourselves in the battle to stem an oil spill, the fight to tame inflation, the war against cancer. Wherever there is an enemy, animate or inanimate, there must be a victory.

Any excuse for a real war will do, so long as it is seen as necessary to protect the tribe. The remembrance of past horrors has no effect. It should not be thought that war, often accompanied by genocide, is a cultural artifact of a few societies. Nor has it been an aberration of history, a result of the growing pains of our species’ maturation. Wars and genocide have been universal and eternal, respecting no particular time or culture.

Civilization appears to be the ultimate redeeming product of competition between groups. Because of it, we struggle on behalf of good and against evil, and reward generosity, compassion, and altruism while punishing or downplaying selfishness. But if group conflict created the best in us, it also created the deadliest. As humans, this is our greatest, and worst, genetic inheritance.