



## Sebastian Junger Lunch & Learn Audio Transcript\*

**Sebastian Junger:** Thank you. It's a real honor to be here. To find out more about this incredible institution, this incredible organization, the good works that they do. I was immediately struck by the Gargoyles. I don't know if you've noticed them but they're pretty remarkable, all throughout the building. I guess from 1925. They're worth looking at on the way out in the hallway. They depict clearly as a native versus European intruder, arms struggle. Just as a sort of reminder of what are some ways the human condition isn't always peaceful. But the trick is, how do we come out of those dark moments more enlightened and more compassionate? If we can keep doing that, we can keep getting through the bad parts.

I'm gonna mention, I'm gonna talk about my parents a little bit. My mother and father were very, very different. My father was a physicist. He grew up in Europe, came over here during World War II. Very, very brilliant man who had almost no understanding of how human beings worked. I mean, to the point where I have a younger sister, two years younger and when we were teenagers, something would happen at the dinner table and storm off and slam the door to stomp up the stairs and you'd hear the door slam and the dust. Her bedroom was right above the dining room table. The dust would drift down from the chandelier like snow onto the meal and my father would look at my mother so puzzled and say, "Is she upset?" Then there was my mother who was an artist, a painter. Is, she's still with us. My father made sense of the world through numbers. My mother made a different sense of the world, one that actually was more accessible to a child and probably more accessible to most people. We need both kinds of thinking. My father's brain, it's from brains like that that we got computers and GPS and advances in medicine and what have you. That kind of brain has made our lives much, much easier.

The kind of mind that my mother has, I would argue has made our lives more meaningful. Has helped us understand our lives. So she worked in a studio. This was my first exposure to the art what I would later understand is called the arts and the humanities. She had a studio and I would go in there and this sort of magic thing would happen where she would take oils or pastels or watercolor and she would render the world in these colors on canvas and I remember as a little kid that she'd drawn a painting, she'd made a painting of a tree. I was staring at it and I realized I was trying to figure out what art was. Finally occurred to me, art is when the thing that's represented is less interesting than the representation when you want it, look longer at the painting than at the tree itself. I really stood there looking at my mother's painting, thinking, why is it that the painting arguably, a perfect rendition of the real thing, why is it that the painting is more fascinating to me than the tree that she painted?

I started to understand, that's what art is. That's what people like my mother like many people in this room try to do with life, is illuminated in a way where you are actually more engaged with its translation than you might be with the thing itself. That's where we understand ourselves. That's where we understand life, understand existence, understand the universe in a completely different way than my father could.

Another quick story about my father. Just to illuminate the scope of the problem. When my mother was newly married, she was from the Midwest, she went to Boston to become an artist. Met my father who

was this very charming handsome European man and they got married even though all my mother's girlfriends warned her not to because he was a sort of, at that point a Veteran bachelor and it worked out. Early on in the marriage she's cooking dinner, he was in the rocking chair by the fire reading a book. This sort of idle I think in her mind of what married life would be like. She heard him say over and over again, as he was looking at this book, that's incredible. That's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. That's absolutely gorgeous. He was staring at this book. It was absolutely gorgeous. I've never ... he's saying out loud to himself. I've never seen anything so beautiful. Of course she was curious what he was looking at, right? She crept over and peeked over his shoulder and it was a book on mathematics and all he was looking at was numbers and equations. She realized, this is gonna be an interesting few decades.

She couldn't have survived without him and definitely vice versa. When we talk about the arts and the humanities, understand that invariably we're also talking about all these other parts of society that it's nestled into. The discipline that I'm familiar with in a practice is literature. Completely altered my life when I was young. I remember reading when I was a teenager a book by Peter Matheson, an amazing writer. It was a novel called, I Play in the Fields of the Lord. Takes place in the jungles of Peru or Brazil in the 1960s. I remember him. It was like the first adult novel that I read and I remember one sentence. He was describing the tropical sky. He said the sky was like cooked rubber and white like cooked rubber. I'd never been to the tropics but you know what? I didn't really need to go to the tropics. I was there with that sentence. I knew immediately what that sky looked like. What it would feel like to be in a place where the sky looked like that and could be described with those words.

So what Peter Matheson was doing, what I was trying to do, what my mother was doing, is what all of us are doing, every single one of us is try to make life easier and better for others and for those who were to follow us. I mean I think the core task for all of us is to do that.

One way to do that. There are many ways to do it. One way to do that is to translate experience into understanding. I myself am not religious. I don't go to church. I've been to church a couple of times out of curiosity. What the ministers were doing up there is exactly that. Taking the raw experience of life and translating to something that made sense and that you could make use of. That you could go forward with some tools but likewise with the arts, how do we ... what can we do with the image of a tree that makes us understand the essence of a tree. What kind of painting can you make that gets to the essence of a tree? What kind of novel can you write that gets to the essence of why there's suffering in the world? Or for that matter why there's happiness in the world. That is what the arts and the humanities are for and it really, life, I feel life is a futile existence if you don't have some understanding of life.

If you were just going through life. You risk a kind of futility. If you have an understanding now all of a sudden there's some enduring meaning. We don't know what our significance is in the universe. We have no idea. But what we can do is understand our lives more fully while we're here. That to me is the great service of scientists on the one hand and artists, writers, musicians on the other.

My whole life I've been affected by stories. That sort of illuminated for me how to be. How to think about the world, how to think about other people. Before they were books, there was an oral tradition that in every society in the world would pass along to the next generation these sort of guide for how to understand your life and how to act.

I was very, very fortunate when I was young. When I was in my late teens through into my early 30s to have a surrogate uncle mentor figure named Ellis Settle. He was half Lakota, half Apache. He was born literally on a wagon in 1929. He passed away in the early '90s. He was incredibly well educated. Brilliant

man. He read everything he could get his hands on and he gave me an incredible amount of instruction into how to be a human being. I grew up in a very affluent community buffered from most of the hardships of life and that kind of community, it actually in some ways is quite hard to figure out how to be a human being. If you are that protected as I was. Ellis helped me enormously and one of the anecdotes that he told me was, it was about some awful war between the English and one of the endless wars between the English and the French, hundreds of years ago. An English admiral pointed out to the king that the French were using ... there was a lighthouse off the coast of France that was aiding the navigation of the French war ships and that it would be possible to destroy that lighthouse and cripple, help cripple the French navy.

If I'm getting the story correctly, the king said to the admiral, "Sir, we are at war with the French, not with the human race." Amazing, right? My father would've appreciated that sentiment but there's no algorithm, there's no equation to articulate it with. That is the domain of speech, of literature, of art. That is, it's those disciplines that shine a light and allow us to see how to proceed.

My work is been not as a creative writer but as a journalist by the path that I chose was to try to understand human events and make some sense of them. The first war that I was in was Bosnia in the early '90s. One of the things I was in Sarajevo during the siege of Sarajevo before the U.S. was involved, obviously it was during the war. The thing I noticed immediately was that I mean there was no power, there was no running water, there was people who were growing vegetables in the median strips of the highways, the roads. Sheltering in basements during bombardments, organizing militias to defend their neighborhoods and one of the things I noticed about what arguably was hell. One fifth of the population of that city was killed or wounded by serve artillery and mortar and sniper fire. I'm sorry, one fifth. One fifth of the population. Men, women and children. It was hell. What I realized when I was there was that everyone was so close. I sort of thought about the town that I grew up in and the family that I grew up in. I loved my family and have many good qualities but closeness wasn't one of them. Neither in my community, my street, my town, my neighborhood. People were not close. They didn't need to be. They didn't need each other to survive. When you need each other to survive, you will be close.

I mean we're the descendants of people who figured out how to survive by banning together. That's what human beings are. And what I saw in Sarajevo was this incredible human capacity to come together and help each other. My book, Tribe, in some ways is about this sort of strange phenomenon of the worst the circumstances, the better people act. The better the circumstances, the easier the circumstances, the more poorly they can afford to act.

I think when Veterans come back, when soldiers come back from war, when Veterans make their home, make their lives back in civilian society, one of the things that they ... I mean they come back altered. Some of them arguably come back damaged. Many of them come back strengthened. I think all of them whether they're in a combat unit or not, all of them face this very difficult transition of going from a close, a kind of closeness with their platoon mates to this wonderful, wide open society that we have, but it's not very close. That transition I think is very, very painful for Veterans. It doesn't feel right.

Now our country as a whole feels, I think for many people whether you're a conservative, a liberal, I think on both sides of the aisle, the country feels like it's very divided and maybe kind of splitting. I think one thing that Veterans, one of the many things that Veterans have to offer this country, having served us overseas, having served their country overseas. What they, in some ways, the really crucial thing they have to offer is how to be a better citizen back home. That no foreign power can destroy this country can take away our democracy. We have the keys to that box. Nobody else does. We gave ourselves political freedom. We gave ourselves democracy. Only we can take it away. No Al Qaeda can't do that.

They can bring down some towers. ISIS can kill some people. Nobody can take away our freedom because freedom is self-granted in our case, at least. Democracy is self-granted. It can't be imposed and it can't be given by anyone else. People can only give that to themselves. One of the things I really liked about being with soldiers with combat soldiers in Afghanistan was they made absolutely no distinction about white, black, rich, poor, democrat, republican, I mean there were virtually no distinctions that we make here in this society were important over there or even really acknowledged except in a pretty joking way. There was a lot of joking. The only distinction really that people made over there was if you were willing to put the welfare of the group ahead of your own welfare. If you weren't, you were one kind of person and they didn't want you around. If you were, you were one of them. It was a very, very basic distinction and I think, maybe the most valuable thing that Veterans can bring back to this society is the power of looking around and thinking that way about other people.

I think we're losing that a bit in this country and the Veterans have the key to that. They understand it. I feel like saying to Veterans, "Well done on the war. We needed you. We really need you now, because the future of the country really is being, I think challenged in some ways." I think I would say, I happen to be a democrat. I think I would say that as well if I was a republican. I don't think it has to be with party affiliation. I'll end with this and hopefully some of you have questions. I love questions. When we call for questions, if no one raises their hand, I'm just gonna start calling on people so ...

But I think I'll end with this. There are many ways for ... it's very hard to communicate an experience to another person. I'll never know what, I cannot know what childbirth is like. I'm sorry, I'm a man. There's some gap between what I can understand and what childbirth is. I will never cross that gap. I can be told about it. I can emphasize, I can, whatever. But I will not know what it's like to give birth. Civilians will not know what it's like to be in combat. It's impossible and I'm not even sure it's desirable to have them know, have civilians know what that kind of intimacy, what combat is like. And I don't think it's necessary. But one of the things that art is for and the humanities are for. One of the things for that matter that language is for is to take a set of experiences and communicate them to other people who are important to you so that they can make use out of what you learned. You can spare them going through what you went through and give them the knowledge you got, that you got from it. That is the thing I would say that makes humans different from every other species on the planet. It's a spectacular thing. It's a beautiful thing.

And so when Veterans come back and when they try to form their experiences into a song, into a painting, into a book, into anything, they are serving their country, every much as just as much as they did when they were in a trench. Just in a different way.

So thank you for the opportunity to talk to you all. Real pleasure to be here. I hope I inspired some questions. Thank you very much. We are recording this session.

**Question 1:** When you were in Bosnia, did you think anyone had the moral high ground?

**Sebastian:** The moral high ground. Well, God, that's a ... morality is very hard thing to tease out. But, once a war starts people on all sides wind up eventually acting badly. There is no way to engage in something as ugly as war without transgressing human morals or God's morals, however you choose to see it.

What I would say historically is that the fault of that war in my opinion, mostly with the Bosnian Serbs, certainly the majority of the armament lay with them and they were very clearly using it to try to annihilate a civilian population of 350,000 and they managed to get one fifth of them. Men, women,

children, right? So now had the Bosnians, had the armament to do that back, would they have? Yeah, probably. So in some ways they were in a more moral position because they are well less armed.

But that's a bit of a nuance point. If you look at how that war unfolded I would say you really ... you know it's like when they try to sort out car accidents. Who's the last person to be able to avoid the accident and the blame rests with them? I would say that that was true of the Bosnian Serbs.

**Question 2:** So in your book, Sebastian, you were, the story about the Papago tribe and that they had this long ritual purification ritual which the community must do with the returning warriors. And because they believed that everyone was affected by the war. That left a really big impression on my and I'm ... when I look at the state of our world right now, our society in terms of how it's we're now fighting each other. I can't help but think about if we are suffering from these wars because we haven't dealt with them properly, is that accurate? How do you think about that?

**Sebastian:** Well yeah, thank you. The problem is that for most of human history, if you believe the anthropologists and I happen to, we lived in groups of typically of 30, 40, 50 people. Communities of 100, maybe 200 people. Maybe a few hundred maximum for hundreds of thousands of years. It's not that hard to work out a problem or to undergo a group process like bringing warriors back from combat or reintegrating them into society. It's not that hard to do it, when you're doing it in a group this size and you're related to half the people and you know everybody's name and you know, whatever. Or a high school class or something. It's not ... that's the scale of human group that typifies most of our history. Right now what we're doing is we're trying to make something work for the first time in human history on a scale of several hundred million people, right? So we're doing something, we're trying to do something that's never been done before. We're doing a pretty good job of it, considering the fact that after 200 plus years we still describe ourselves in the same way. We are Americans. We have some basic accords that we most of us respect.

I mean if you think about our history, it's pretty extraordinary that it's even going this well. The emotional processes that happen in a small group and that are required in a small group to deal with life, to deal with hardship and trauma, those processes are just impossible to do on a scale like this. It has to be done in smaller groups. But the nation can institute that as a norm. I would say that mandatory national service, I don't mean the draft. I think there's a real moral problem with forcing someone to fight a war that they do not believe in. I think it is entirely moral for a nation to say to it's citizens, it's young people, you have to do something for this country for a couple of years. It's your ... thank you.

There's so many benefits from that. One is the nation needs a lot of work, right? There we have a workforce that might be able to do it of young people. But also, it takes ... it would help this terrible divide of this country. I mean one of the great things about the military at least in my outsider experience of it. My observation of it, was that it really did seem to take every different kind of American and put 'em in a pot and stir 'em up. And of course, national service would do that. Psychologists will tell you that the more you sacrifice for something, the more you value it, we are very, very lucky in this country that we are insulated from the chaos of the world pretty much insulated from it by a couple of huge oceans. We don't have any enemies on our borders. We're an affluent country. We are fortunate in that we actually don't as individuals all of our time is our own. Our nation actually does not demand any of our time. We do not have to contribute anything to be part of this country. We're just here, right? Benefiting from it and really not contributing to it unless we choose to.

That's a great liberty, that's a great good fortune but it also, there's a loss there. It means that many Americans will not value citizenship, will not value inclusion in this country the way they might. So I

think national service with the military option would be great and in my book, *Tribe*, I talk about Veteran Town Halls. They're sort of modeled on some of the ceremonies that Native American people used to reincorporate warriors back into the sort of fabric of normal life. Basically, the idea is, that if you get up in front of the people you fought for and tell them what you did on their behalf. What you went through and what you did, is it part boasting? Yeah, of course it's part boasting. Is it part lament? Yeah, probably. But you tell them what you did on their behalf and it serves to unburden the warrior but it also allows or forces everyone else to participate in the moral burden of violence. Sometimes violence is necessary.

I mean, my father would remind ... he was a tremendous pacifist but his pacifism did not prevent him from telling me over and over again that when America entered the war, World War II, it saved the world from fascism and he couldn't imagine a world had we not done that, what the world would've been like. He was a refugee from two wars. From Spain and they left Spain when the fascist took over and then France and they left when the Germans rolled in.

Sometimes violence is necessary. The problem is when violence happens on a state level, on a national level and the population thinks that the war belongs to the soldiers, it doesn't. It belongs to us. And these Veteran Town Halls ... I won't go on too much about it but you can read about it in my book. You can go to my website [sebastianyounger.com](http://sebastianyounger.com) there's a page on this process. Very, very simple to set up. You basically create a forum on Veteran's Day in the town hall or the city hall of your community where any Veteran of any war, served in any capacity has the right to stand up for 10 minutes and say anything truthful that they feel moved to say. And if you support the troops and whatever like all those slogans, you should really be there to hear what these people say, for at least a couple hours. We've done it and the cathartic energy in the room was absolutely extraordinary. You wouldn't believe the variety ... in some ways you wouldn't believe the variety of Vets, right? And if you're like, sort of a good patriot and support the troops and believe in the war and etc, etc, you'll hear Vets who were enraged that they had to fight this war. Whatever war it was.

If you're a good liberal like the kind of people that I grew up with, who absolutely are [inaudible 00:39:50] war, you'll be uncomfortable when someone stands up and says, "You know, serving in the military and serving in combat was the best thing that ever could've happened to me. It changed me and in good ways." That's gonna make you uncomfortable so it just forces the nation to understand what war really is in real terms. So when Veterans come back they're coming back to a population as they do, as Veterans do in Israel. They're coming back to a population that actually has some real understanding. Not cliched understanding but some real understanding of the nature of all this. That's enormously helpful. I think.

### **Question 3:** Inaudible

**Sebastian:** Yeah, so the question is about the suicide rate in the Veteran population. So those statistics are very complicated and it really, it deserves some discussion. Apparently, and this is just the research that I've read. I haven't done my own research on this. I've read other people's studies. The majority of Veteran suicides are Vietnam era Veterans. So there's clearly if you want to stop those tragedies and of course we all want to, you're gonna have to consider the possibility that there is something other than a war time experience which is causing people to take their life. That the war time experience becomes part of a larger complicated problem that results in that terrible decision. That even with the tragedies of younger Veterans, Veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq, the link with combat is not super strong. So if you really wanna save lives, what we have to do is stop thinking, war traumatizes people and then trauma gets them to kill themselves. That might be true for some people and that understanding might

save some lives but it will not prevent a majority of Veterans from killing themselves. Because there are other issues involved in the problem.

Likewise, PTSD, it's what causes trauma and who gets trauma and who doesn't is very complicated. One of the predictors of having a long term traumatic reaction is trauma during childhood. I mean one of the things that makes people vulnerable to long term PTSD is having trauma when you're a kid. So when you try to solve the PTSD problem in this country, one of things you really have to be talking about is the welfare of children, a decade before they have gotten it in their hands or overseas. If you don't address that, you will not solve PTSD. If you just think about it as this is a battlefield problem, we gotta solve it like that, you will not solve it.

Likewise with suicide, I have a number of suicides in my life, people I really love who I lost. It's an incredibly painful topic individually for people and I think for the nation. So talking about it in rational, statistical terms feels a little bit profane. Feels a little bit like a disrespectful, and I feel it even when I do that when I talk like this, I feel it. I feel like this sort of uncomfortableness in me, in myself like am I being disrespectful? No. These problems need an enormous amount of compassion and empathy and human connection and really rigorous science. If we solved the suicide problem, I think one of the ... people are often at risk of suicide when they feel disconnected from other people, from their community. Ultimately, combat or no combat, the thing you have to solve is that disconnect. That's a societal problem. Small scale tribal societies have virtually no suicide and very, very low rates of depression. So really, when you talk about Veteran suicide, really at the end of the day, the big conversation is suicide in general. We have astronomical levels of it. Ironically, as affluence goes up in society, suicide goes up. As affluence goes up, depression goes up. So there's a very complicated conversation that Veterans are just a part of.

#### **Question 4:** Inaudible

**Sebastian:** Yeah I understand. You know I think actually what happens in the Veteran Town Halls that I've been part of, I partner with Seth Molton who's a representative from a democratic representative from Massachusetts who is a Iraq War vet, combat vet. He was a Lieutenant in was it [inaudible 00:45:56] or [inaudible 00:45:56]? I don't know. He was in a lot of combat and went through a lot. Now he's in Congress, great. Amazing guy. So we partner on this and held the first town hall a few years ago on Veteran's Day. One of the things that happened ... honestly, I'm not sure that there was certain knowledge that left the room that will change the society in profound ways. I'm not sure. But certainly what happened was the people in that room, had an experience, a human experience that changed them as human beings. That's different than coming away from something with information, right? It's a different thing. You need information, too. That's my dad, right? That's the 'my dad' side of the equation. But you also need my mom's side of the equation. What does this feel like as a human being?

Not, what is a tree? But what's it feel like to look at a tree? That's what a painting is. It's what it feels like to look at a tree. So when you go to a town hall like this, if you do one and you know, I urge it. I mean, my dream is that every town hall in the country every Veteran's Day does this. Then you are doing something intimate and communal on a national level. That's how you scale up from a small community to a nation of 320 million. That's how you scale it up. It's by community by community. That's my dream. I think it would overall affect the nation in incredible ways. But what happens in that room is that you get to ... did you experience the war as a civilian listening to these stories? Oh you didn't experience the war. But you got to have an understanding of what it feels like, of what war feels like.

The intoxication, the tragedy, the terror, the excitement and the end of the day, any discussion about war will work through all of those human reactions and eventually if it's an honest conversation, any conversation about war will land at a state of sorrow. If you haven't landed in a state of sorrow in your conversation about war, you haven't talked about it long enough.

I got out of the war reporting business. Something that I would never trade for anything, right? But I got out of it when I sort of, my reactions to war wound up in that sort of place of sorrow. That this just happens at all. And then once you're there, you really can't ... you're stuck there. You really can't get back out of it and climb back up to, oh this is exciting. Or this is meaningful. It is all those things. But once you get down there into sorrow, you're not climbing back up that ladder. One of the things that happens in the room, I think in a town hall is that it allows everybody, the Veterans, the community to sort of get to that place. We are gonna have to probably wage war at our future. As a country we are right now on some scale we are waging war. We may wind up waging war on a very large scale, who knows? I don't know. It's possible.

That's not, as my father would explain, that's not the crime. The crime is to do it without being morally conscious about what war is. That's the only wrong doing, I think in all this.

**Question 5:** Yeah I was just curious about the role of vulnerability in your work and how you approach building trust with people who are, could be really guarded about being vulnerable? As well as maybe sharing some personal vulnerability on your writing creative process. And how you bring together various narratives and people and describe a war so to speak.

**Sebastian:** So the safer your circumstances, the more vulnerable you can afford to let yourself be. So in a situation like I was in [inaudible] they were not safe circumstances and acknowledging your vulnerability and engaging with it was arguably a very dangerous unwise thing to do. One of the reasons I think people have war time trauma is they put all of the normal human reactions to loss, to danger, to horror. All the normal human reactions that you have, you put them on hold as long as you're in a situation of crisis where lives are on, including your life, lives are on the line.

It's like a credit card debt. You just hand over the piece of plastic, you're not paying anything right now but you're paying 30% more later. It's the emotional equivalent of a credit card. So when I was out over Streppo, those guys weren't vulnerable. I mean they shouldn't have ... like they couldn't afford to be. I didn't want them to be, right? It wasn't an encounter group out there where I was trying to get their deepest feelings. I wanted to know what it was like to be in combat. One of the hallmarks of combat is that you try your damndest not to let your vulnerability leak out because once that happens, you don't know where it's gonna end. And you know, likewise, myself. I did my best to contain those reactions and then I watched, after I came home, for the next year or two, that stuff was leaking out all over the place. It cost me my marriage among other things.

When you're engaging with Veterans in this country, I mean the thing that keeps you alive in combat is the thing that's gonna kill you back here and vice versa. So if you can't, when you come back, if you're exploring your vulnerability in combat, it's just like bad idea, right? If you're not exploring your vulnerability when you come home, it's an even worse idea. I mean that's really dangerous, right? So one of the things you have to do I think, if you're working with Veterans or if you are a Veteran, is understand that your life depending on filling sand bags and not falling asleep on guard duty and a million other things. Your life depended on those things in combat. Well just as much, and your life depended on not being connected to your feelings, right? Just as much, your life now back home depends on connecting to your feelings. And to not set up a situation where you think you're invulnerable. Of



course it's a natural instinct. You come home, you wanna feel like you're invulnerable, right? Don't do it. That is actually what will kill you.

And so I think the conversation to be had with Veterans for anyone who's gone through something hard is to sort of explain to them like, look, your safety lies in actually feeling like you're in danger and then realizing you're not in danger and then talking and thinking about what this new situation that you're in. It's a very profound process. But a really important, a really, really important one.

*\*Audio and transcript are property of the Minnesota Humanities Center.*