

THE BIG IDEAS

Whakapapa

Together, we are unbreakable.

The Mission

Defining a team's purpose.

Sacred Us Stories

And antifragile suffering.

Rehearsing Adversity

Is how we conquer it.

Integrating Opposites

Yin and yang, tapu and noa.

Belonging

The Ancient Code of Togetherness

BY OWEN EASTWOOD · MOBIUS © 2022 · 320 PAGES

“As our communities and teams become increasingly diverse this wisdom has never been more precious.

In the pages that follow, I identify the aspects of teaming that gave *homo sapiens* a competitive advantage. We'll see how these critical elements evolved over time into needs hardwired into our biology and our psychology and how they remain central to who we are today.

We will then see how our ancestors, from all over our world, converted these insights into wisdom.

Finally, we will take a glimpse into the dressing rooms of high-performing teams today to see how these insights continue to underpin great leadership and successful groups of *homo sapiens*.

I have written this book as a tradesman, not a philosopher. In the work I do, I always come back to the same question: *What is the optimal environment for this group to perform to their best?*

Over time, I've become uncomfortable with the idea that such a small number of people are exposed to these profound insights and our collective ancient wisdom. That does not feel right. All of us can perform at a high level and we should be empowered with the tools to give us that opportunity. In turn, we can unlock how to get the best out of the groups we belong to, from families to nations. Beyond performance, the environments we operate in have a profound impact on our emotional well-being. This has been glossed over for too long.”

~ Owen Eastwood from *Belonging*

“Wisdom is universal and is not confined by generations, by oceans or by cultures. It is part of the legacy of humankind.”

~ Sir Hirini Moko Mead

Owen Eastwood is one of the world's top performance coaches.

He's worked with some of the most elite teams and groups in the world, including the British Olympic team, the Command Group of NATO and the Royal Ballet School.

I was introduced to Owen and his work by a mutual friend who happens to be one of the world's most elite athletes. Owen and I connected in person on a recent Top Secret trip. He's an extraordinarily wise, humble, Heroic human being.

He's also one of the world's leading experts on the power of, as per the sub-title of the book, how to “Unlock Your Potential with the Ancient Code of Togetherness.”

This book is FANTASTIC. (Get a copy [here](#).)

As you'd expect, it's packed with Big Ideas. As always, I'm excited to share some of my favorites.

So... Let's get to work!

WHAKAPAPA

"I come from the south-west corner of the Pacific Ocean. It is a place where the three most powerful words that can be uttered to you are 'you belong here.'"

~ Owen Eastwood

"The emptiness I carried with me slowly started to subside. I recall a feeling of euphoria upon reading this, a deep sense of belonging to something greater than myself.

Over time, I have come to understand *whakapapa* in this way:

Each of us are part of an unbreakable chain of people going back and forward in time. Back to our first ancestor at the beginning of time and into the future to the end of time. Each of us in this chain of people have our arms interlocked with those on either side of us. We are unbreakable. Together, immortal.

The sun rose in the east and shone on our first ancestor. Here is our origin story. Just as happens with each passing day, the sun slowly moves down this unbreakable chain of people. Each of us will have our time in the sun. But the sun is always moving. Moving toward the west, where it will finally settle.

When the sun shines on us we are alive, we are strong. For we have had passed down to us a culture that immerses us in deep belonging. We feel safe and respected. We share beliefs and a sense of identity with those around us and this anchors us. We share a purpose with them. We share a vision of the future. We fit in here. Rituals and traditions tie us together. The experiences and wisdom of those who walked in the light before our time are passed on to us.

Whakapapa points a finger at us and tells us, You will not be judged by your money or celebrity or sense of self pride... you will be judged by what you did for your tribe.

When the sun is shining on us, we must be guardians of our tribe and of each other."

That's from the first chapter called "you belong here" in which Owen talks about the power of *whakapapa* (pronounced fah-kah-pah-pah).

Owen establishes the incredible power of feeling a sense of belonging in our lives by sharing his own remarkable origin story—weaving the threads of his Māori ancestors along with his Irish, English, and New Zealand ancestors.

I asked ChatGPT to define *whakapapa* for us.

Here's what I got: "*Whakapapa is a Māori term that refers to genealogy or lineage. It encompasses the concept of tracing family descent and connections, highlighting the importance of ancestry and heritage in Māori culture. Whakapapa is more than just a family tree; it represents the layers of identity, history, and relationships that connect individuals to their ancestors, their community, and the land. It is a foundational aspect of Māori society, helping to define an individual's place within their family and the broader community, as well as their responsibilities and roles.*"

Owen also shares how he has created this sense of belonging with a diverse range of groups—from some of the best professional sports teams to the Command Team of NATO.

He tells us: "*Whilst ideas like whakapapa are highly practical tools for us to build strong teams, they also have a powerful spiritual dimension. They explicitly connect us to something greater than ourselves.*"

And... When I read that final line about the fact "*when the sun is shining on us, we must be guardians of our tribe and of each other,*" I thought of [Rumi](#).

As we discussed in our Notes on [Rumi Daylight](#), he once told us: "*Travelers, it is late. Life's sun is going to set. During these brief days that you have strength, be quick and spare no effort of your wings.*"

Amen.

"Where there is no vision, the people perish."

~ Proverbs 29:18

*"Let me fall if I must fall.
The one I will become will
catch me."*

~ The Baal Shem Tov

Remember: "Whakapapa points a finger at us and tells us, You will not be judged by your money or celebrity or sense of self pride... you will be judged by what you did for your tribe."

THE MISSION

"Defining a team's purpose seems to have become unnecessarily complicated and convoluted.

Homo sapiens evolutionary story unequivocally tells us that the purpose of groups is to promote the well-being of their people.

That's it.

For most of human history this higher purpose has been translated into a mission to simply survive—*feed the village*. That has until relatively recently been a constant daily, weekly, seasonal struggle for most *Homo sapiens*. Survival is still the day-to-day mission of many tribes in the world, including many businesses. Survival means mouths are fed. It allows the venture to continue. It is a noble cause.

There is also the emotional well-being of a tribe in the sense of individual and collective self-esteem and the frequency and intensity of experiences of feelings of belonging, stress, sadness, and love.

'Success' of a group is an illusion without these core wellbeing markers being met."

That's from chapter 3.5: "the mission." That chapter is from part 3 of the book. The section name articulates the ultimate mission in its simplest possible terms...

"FEED THE VILLAGE."

In other words... Live for something bigger than yourself. Take care of your family. Your team. Your tribe.

And... Let's remember the fact that, in ancient Greece, the word *hero* didn't mean "tough guy" or "killer of bad guys." The word HERO meant "PROTECTOR." I repeat... A hero has strength for two. A hero's secret weapon is LOVE. It's LOVE that gives us the discipline to forge the strength for two. It's LOVE that gives us the courage to act in the presence of fear. It's LOVE that drives us to play our roles well so we can fulfill the ancient mission of humanity to...

"FEED THE VILLAGE."

Of course, it's not possible to type that without thinking about the Mission to which I have committed my life. As I look down at my left forearm, I see HEROIC tattooed to my body in inch-tall letters. Above the "IC" of "HEROIC," I see "51 | 2051."

Every morning (and every time I look down at my forearm), I say to myself: "*Hero, I see a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051.*"

From now on, every time I look down at my forearm to recommit to our Mission, I will remind myself of THIS wisdom. Here's to forging excellence and playing our roles as humbly yet Heroically well as we can to *feed the village*... TODAY.

P.S. The quote preceding that passage is a BRILLIANT one from Nelson Mandela. He once said: "*It always seems impossible, until it is done.*"

P.P.S. Shortly after meeting Owen, I was introduced to another world-class coach: Shaka Smart. I connected the two of them after I read this passage: "*If a team truly aspires to be high-performing, they have to find a way to get good at feedback, challenge sub-standard behaviors and address issues that are 'slowing the boat down.'* I agree with [Marquette University] basketball coach Shaka Smart: "*The most important component of accelerating growth is changing someone's relationship with feedback.*"

*"It always seems impossible,
until it is done."*

~ Nelson Mandela

*"We belong to a bundle of
life. Ubuntu says: a person
is a person through other
persons. It says: I am
human because I belong."*

~ Archbishop Desmond Tutu

SACRED US STORIES AND SUFFERING

"In Maori culture, a word for leader is rangatira, which itself consists of two words—arrange, meaning to weave, and tire, meaning a group, so rangatira literally means 'to weave a group of people together.'"

~ Owen Eastwood

"The Us stories were literally carved into the wooden hull of the [ancient Māori] vessel. An ornate carved godly head at the front acting as their guardian.

In constructing the vessels, the sacredness of the mission was evident in how they treated the trees chosen for the purpose. These trees were deemed living ancestors; they had shared the land and breath with generations of their kin. Trees were blessed before being felled and hollowed. Our ancestors foresaw the inevitable adversity ahead and took comfort that the heart of these great trees was not at their centre, but rather to the side that had faced the harshest force of nature. They understood that the most beautiful patterns in these trees resided in the places that had suffered the most."

That's from a chapter called "The Navigator" in which we learn more about the ancient mariners who would settle in New Zealand and become the Māori. As I read that passage, I thought of a couple things... antifragile coral reefs and antifragile pots.

First, the antifragile pots.

In his great book called [The Creative Act](#), [Rick Rubin](#) tells us: "In Japanese pottery, there's an art form of repair called kintsugi. When a piece of ceramic pottery breaks, rather than trying to restore it to its original condition, the artisan accentuates the fault by using gold to fill the crack. This beautifully draws attention to where the work was broken, creating a golden vein. Instead of the flaw diminishing the work, it becomes the focal point, an area of both physical and aesthetic strength. The scar also tells the story of the piece, chronicling its past experience.

We can apply this same technique to ourselves and embrace our imperfections. Whatever insecurities we have can be reframed as a guiding force in our creativity. They only become a hindrance when they prevent our ability to share what's closest to our heart."

Now for the antifragile coral reefs—which happen to be in the vicinity of where our ancient Māori navigators worked their magic...

In [The Psychology of Winning](#), [Denis Waitley](#) tells us: "One of the best ways to develop adaptability to the stresses of life is to view them as normal. Earl Nightingale tells of his visit with his son recently to the Great Barrier Reef which stretches nearly 1800 miles from New Guinea to Australia. Noticing that the coral polyps on the inside of the reef, where the sea was tranquil and quiet in the lagoon, appeared pale and lifeless... while the coral on the outside of the reef, subject to the surge of the tide and power of the waves, were bright and vibrant with splendid colors and flowing growth... Earl Nightingale asked why this was so. 'It's very simple,' came the reply, 'the coral on the lagoon-side dies rapidly with no challenge for growth and survival... while the coral facing the surge and power of the open sea, thrives and multiplies because it is challenged and tested every day. And so it is with every living organism on earth.'"

P.S. [Stephen Joseph](#) also uses the metaphor of a shattered vase in his great book on "The New Psychology of Posttraumatic Growth" called [What Doesn't Kill us](#).

He says: "At the core of this book is the theory of the shattered vase. Imagine that a treasured vase sits in a place of prominence in your house. One day, you accidentally knock it off its perch. It smashes. Sometimes when vases shatter, there is enough left intact to provide a base from which to start the process of reconstruction. In this case, however, only shards remain.

What do you do? Do you try to put the vase back together as it was, using glue and sticky tape? Do you collect the shards and drop them in the garbage, as the vase is a total loss? Or do you pick up the beautiful colored pieces and use them to make something new—such as a colorful mosaic?

"Somewhere in homo sapiens evolutionary story, this fundamental role of the leader—to take care of their people—has lost its sacred place."

~ Owen Eastwood

"Players don't remember what you say in team talks or practices—what they remember is how you made them feel."

~ Sir Alf Ramsey

"The first warrior looked out on the land that was his home. He saw the hills and the stars and he was happy. For giving him his home, the first warrior told the Great Spirit that he would fight and win many battles in his honor. But the Great Spirit said, 'No, do not fight for me. Fight for your tribe, fight for the family born to you, fight for the brothers you find. Fight for them,' the Great Spirit said, 'for they are your home.'"

~ Oglala Lakota Chief Henry Standing Bear

When adversity strikes, people often feel that at least some part of them—their views of the world, their sense of themselves, their relationships—have been smashed. Those who try to put their lives back together exactly as they were remain fractured and vulnerable. But those who accept the breakage and build themselves anew become more resilient and open to new ways of living. The guiding principle that underscores this book is the belief, drawn from years of research and clinical practice, that focusing on, and understanding, and deliberately taking control of what we do in our thoughts and actions can enable us to move forward in life following adversity."

REHEARSING ADVERSITY

"Micronesian ocean navigator Mau Pialiug, who as a teacher resurrected traditional way finding navigation in the Pacific in the 1970s, had an expression: 'fair weather does not make a master.'

This positive attitude to adversity reflects what is known as a 'challenge mindset,' as opposed to a 'threaten mindset.' Many studies have identified a 'challenge mindset' as a distinguishing feature of elite performers and teams. Leading performance psychologist Professor Marc Jones explains:

'In a challenge state an individual recognizes that the situation is important, believes success is possible and thinks they have sufficient resources to meet the demands. In this state, an individual is able to maintain performance, and even perform optimally under stress and adversity.'

A key aspect of building a 'challenge mindset' is time spent rehearsing adversity so that if/when it arises, it is already part of the mental pictures we have painted into our vision.

Again, we do this through the discipline of staying focused on what we can control. Whilst the cause of adversity may fall outside of our influence, our response is something we can control. This is what we rehearse and integrate into our vision."

That's from a chapter called "Rehearsing Adversity."

As I typed that, I thought of an elite athlete I happened to be trading texts with yesterday. We were discussing EXACTLY this: How do we deal with the adversity we face when competing? My #1 tip: EXPECT the adversity. Quit being surprised by it. And EXECUTE YOUR PROTOCOL (control the controllables!) when you INEVITABLY face setbacks.

Now... I also just happened to do a Note on a book called [10 to 25](#) by [David Yeager](#). Yeager is [Carol Dweck](#)'s protege. His book on the science of motivating young people is PHENOMENAL. He talks about the threat vs. challenge response and the studies he and his colleagues have conducted to help people move from the threat response to a challenge response.

Check out those Notes for the details but the short story is that we need to shift from what researchers call a "stress-is-debilitating" mindset to a "stress-can-be-enhancing" mindset. When we make that shift, we LITERALLY change our body's underlying physiology, using all the energy produced in peak performance pressure moments to show up as our best.

How's YOUR relationship to adversity and how can YOU optimize it a little more TODAY?!

YIN AND YANG + TAPU AND NOA

"Our ancestors have taught us that humans flourish when we are in spiritual balance: the *yin* and *yang*—light and dark—energy that comes from opposing forces that become complementary when in balance. In teams, this manifests itself in a harmony between boundaries and autonomy. Boundaries keep us safe and provide clarity, which lowers anxiety and enhances trust. Autonomy unlocks intrinsic motivation by giving us a sense of control and self-determination. Being given a sense of autonomy also signals that our leaders trust us, which, again, reduces our anxiety levels. ...

"Look at every path closely. Then ask yourself, and yourself alone, the question: does this path have a heart?"

~ Carlos Castaneda

"The first step we must take is not hard. We simply have to pause and find a moment of peace. Then, look again at those people we are with and see their mana, their spirit, their dignity. Then remind ourselves that whatever we do as a tribe, that must never be diminished. This is where we can start."

~ Owen Eastwood

Our ancestors passed down with care the need for balance between our boundaries and autonomy. In my own culture, two ancestral ideas that hold deep resonance with me are *tapu* and *noa*. *Tapu* describes those aspects of life that are sacred, restricted, prescribed and non-negotiable (this includes protocols around entering a meeting house and dealing with death). *Noa*, in contrast, describes those parts of life where there are no such 'rules' and we are free to determine how we express ourselves.

Tapu and *noa* drive trust by providing clarity of what is expected in the environment. When everyone understands and complies with what is *tapu* then we can more confidently predict the behaviors of others. Similarly, when we know what areas of life are *noa* then we can respect others' self-expression. When there is too much *tapu*, then trust is compromised by the individual's anxiety of not having a sense of autonomy. It sends signals they are not trusted. When there is too much *noa*, then the environment can become chaotic, confusing and impossible to predict what others will do, as they're making it up as they go. It is the balance between boundaries and autonomy, between *tapu* and *noa*, that produces nurturing conditions for trust to exist.

I use these concepts in all of my work. In every team or organization, we identify what is *tapu*—what is sacred and non-negotiable in this team—and what is *noa*—the spaces where individuals are free to express themselves. This harmony is for me critical in establishing an environment where people can thrive."

As I read that beautiful passage, I thought of a number of things.

First, right before I made that Top Secret trip to work with the elite athletes in Europe (where I met Owen!), I read his book. Alexandra was already familiar with Owen and told me that she thought we were kind of like the *yin* and *yang* to one another—I'm the "yang" individual-focused guy to his team-focused "yin." So it was quite remarkable when, IMMEDIATELY after I finished my talk, he told me EXACTLY what Alexandra said. (I just got goosebumps typing that.)

I also thought of our "River of Flexibility" metaphor—we want to find the dynamic, integrated balance between *structure* and *spontaneity*. Too much structure becomes rigidity. Too much spontaneity becomes chaos. The dynamic integration? FLEXIBILITY—a hallmark of flourishing.

Finally, I thought of that [10 to 25](#) book. Yeager says something VERY similar. He says we need to SIMULTANEOUSLY hold people to high standards *while* providing warm support. If all we have are the high standards, we're "Enforcers." If all we have is the warm support, we're "Protectors." When we have both high standards AND support? We're wise "Mentors."

How's YOUR *tapu* and *noa*? Your structure and spontaneity? Your high standards and warm support? Here's to embracing and integrating all the dynamic polarities of life as we create a sense of Belonging and activate our Heroic potential TOGETHER... Today!

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Co-Founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of [Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential](#). He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. Learn more at [heroic.us](#).

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