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Chapter 10: The Hive Switch

In September 1941, William McNeill was drafted into the U.S. Army. He spent several months in basic training, which consisted mostly of marching around the drill field in close formation with a few dozen other men. At first McNeill thought the marching was just a way to pass the time, because his base had no weapons with which to train. But after a few weeks, when his unit began to synchronize well, he began to experience an altered state of consciousness:

Words are inadequate to describe the emotion aroused by the prolonged movement in unison that drilling involved. A sense of pervasive well-being is what I recall; more specifically, a strange sense of personal enlargement; a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than life, thanks to participation in collective ritual.

McNeill fought in World War II and later became a distinguished historian. His research led him to the conclusion that the key innovation of Greek, Roman, and later European armies was the sort of synchronous drilling and marching the army had forced him to do years before. He hypothesized that the process of “muscular bonding” – moving together in time – was a mechanism that evolved long before the beginning of recorded history for shutting down the self and creating a temporary superorganism. Muscular bonding enabled people to forget themselves, trust each other, function as a unit, and then crush less cohesive groups...

McNeill studied accounts of men in battle and found that men risk their lives not so much for their country or their ideals as for their comrades in arms. He quoted one veteran who gave this example of what happens when “I” becomes “we”:

Many veterans who are honest with themselves will admit, I believe, that the experience of communal effort in battle... has been the high point of their lives... their “I” passes insensibly into a “we,” “my” becomes “our,” and individual fate loses its central importance... I believe that it is nothing less than the assurance of immortality that makes self sacrifice at these moments relatively easy... I may fall, but I do not die, for that which is real in me goes forward and lives on in the comrades for whom I gave up my life.

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Every Saturday in the fall, at colleges across the United States, millions of people pack themselves into stadiums to participate in a ritual that can only be described as tribal. At the University of Virginia, the ritual begins in the morning as students dress in special costumes. Men wear dress shirts with UVA neckties, and if the weather is warm, shorts. Women typically wear skirts or dresses, sometimes with pearl necklaces. Some students paint the logo of our sports teams, the Cavaliers (a V crossed by two swords), on their faces or other body parts.

The students attend pregame parties that serve brunch and alcoholic drinks. Then they stream over to the stadium, sometimes stopping to mingle with friends, relatives, or unknown alumni who have driven for hours to reach Charlottesville in time to set up tailgate parties in every parking lot within a half mile of the stadium. More food, more alcohol, more face painting.

By the time the game starts, many of the 50,000 fans are drunk, which makes it easier for them to overcome self-consciousness and participate fully in the synchronous chants, cheers, jeers, and songs that will fill the next three hours. Every time the Cavaliers score, the students sing the same song UVA students have sung together on such occasions for over a century.... The students literally lock arms and sway as a single mass while singing the praises of their community (to the tune of “Auld Lang Syne”):

*That good old song of Wah-hoo-wah – we’ll sing it o’er and o’er
It cheers our hearts and warms our blood to hear them shout and roar
We come from old Vir-gin-i-a, where all is bright and gay
Let’s all join hands and give a yell for dear old U-V-A.*

Next, the students illustrate McNeill’s thesis that “muscular bonding” warms up people for coordinated military action. The students let go of each other’s arms and make aggressive fist-pumping motions in the air, in sync with a nonsensical battle chant:

*Wah-hoo-wah! Wah-hoo-wah! Uni-v,
Virgin-i-a!
Hoo-rah-ray! Hoo-rah-ray! Ray, ray –
U-V-A!*

It’s a whole day of having collective emotions. Collective effervescence is guaranteed, as are feelings of collective outrage at questionable calls by referees, collective triumph if the team wins, and collective grief if the team loses, followed by more collective drinking and postgame parties.