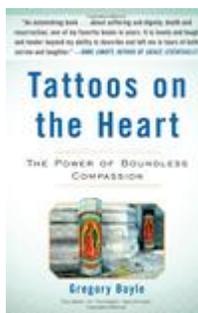


Sermons on the Psychology of Gangbangers

A review of



Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion

by Gregory Boyle

New York, NY: Free Press, 2010. 217 pp. ISBN 978-1-4391-5302-4. \$25.00

Reviewed by

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Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest, a prison chaplain, and the founder of Homeboy Industries, a program that provides transitional jobs, schooling, support, free tattoo removal, and counseling to gang members in the ironically named Boyle Heights section of Los Angeles. Father Boyle, or G-Dog, as he is affectionately known by his flock of former and current gang members, devoted a four-month sabbatical in Italy to write this book.

For those of us who try to understand the impact of concentrated urban poverty, family dysfunction, and a street code in which status is secured through toughness and violence, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* is a must read. Father Boyle provides a moral and psychological counter-account to the extant gang literature and to the media-driven demonization of gangs and gang members.

After reading this book, one cannot help but think of the Boston and Chicago CeaseFire programs models (Kennedy, 2008; Ransford, Kane, Metzger, Quintana, &

Slutkin, 2010). While the former is derived from deterrence theory within the criminal justice literature and the latter is based upon public health contagion theory, both programs focus on the process of changing norms and both are designed, almost exclusively, to reduce homicides. For Father Boyle, norms are changed through a process of getting to know the “truth” and “goodness” within each of us and with opportunities to actualize this self. How this is achieved is the subject matter of his book.

Father Boyle illustrates and extols the importance of helping gang members understand and feel that they are “somebody” and that someone takes them seriously, listens to them, and, yes, loves them unconditionally. Indeed, being fully with and among the individuals he works with is key to what Father Boyle does. While this may sound romantically idealistic, for Father Boyle, who has presided over the funerals of more than 165 members of his inclusive gangbanger congregation, his beliefs are not only based on Scripture but also built on 22 years of operating Homeboy Industries and thousands of intimate encounters with gang members.

So what is this book of reflections by a Jesuit priest who has devoted his adult life to working with individuals whom most would call the worst of the worst? First, it is not a systemic treatise on gangs, gang prevention, or how to get individuals out of gangs, although the ideas in this book are extraordinarily informative in designing programs that do just these things. Second, it is not a memoir, though the book is filled with stories of Father Boyle’s experiences with the members of his flock, stories that illustrate the themes in the book and provide the reader with a primer on gang life.

Perhaps it can best be understood as a series of sermons or thematic stories conveyed with humor in the rich Irish storytelling tradition. The stories are dotted with well-placed biblical and literary quotes and communicated with extraordinary sensitivity to the dignity of the lives of the young people Father Boyle serves. The book is certainly spiritual throughout, and it is, curiously, a poignantly funny book. It is a book, in short, of lessons, a book of possibilities and hope for the most downtrodden in our society. As Father Boyle writes: “If there is a fundamental challenge within these stories, it is simply to change our lurking suspicion that some lives matter less than other lives” (p. xiii).

Lessons Learned

We learn many lessons that Father Boyle has come to understand over his 25 years of work with gang members, many of which are reminders of classic themes discussed in the psychological literature. We learn about the lyrical lingo of the Latino gangs in Los Angeles (reminiscent of, though less systematic than, Labov’s, 1972, explication and appreciation of the language of inner-city African Americans). We learn that peace talks and treaties between gangs serve to strengthen and legitimize the gangs and consequently are

inadvisable. We learn, as Gordon Allport (1954) taught us many years ago, that hate cannot be sustained when working side by side in a silk-screening shop or maintenance crew.

We become aware of the powerfully felt resistance by many to the very notion of offering former gang members a chance to get back on their feet. Jokingly, the staff suggests that their organization change its voice-mail message to “Thank you for calling Homeboy Industries. Your bomb threat is important to us” (p. 11). We learn up close about the pressure and damage of the constant vigilance with which gang members are watched. They are always the first suspects for any wrongdoing that occurs.

We learn that even the most innocent of questions, when asked with a compassionate sense of caring and a sense of wanting to know the other, can release the most profound, transformative, and tearful recollections and recognitions among the most hardened human beings. Moreover, these moments of revelation often come at unexpected times and in response to mundane questions, if one is open to them.

We learn that exclusive and chronic messages of failure and disgrace generate a profound sense of shame that Father Boyle believes is at the root of “gang addiction,” similar to James Gilligan’s (1996) argument that shame is the root cause of violence. As Father Boyle comments: “It is a toxic shame—a global sense of failure of the whole self” (p. 52). We learn, like we did from Claude Brown (1965), that “part of the spirit dies a little each time it’s asked to carry more than its weight in terror, violence, and betrayal” (p. 44).

We learn of the power of hopelessness—“there is a failure to conjure up the necessary image that can catapult you into your future” (p. 89) and of the odd comfort it provides by keeping one away from the “father wound,” a vivid description of the defensive mechanism of denial. We also learn of the power of hope, when and if it is discovered. We learn how hard it is for someone who has been isolated in a world of violence and disrespect to gain a foothold in the “conventional” world and how little setbacks can have cataclysmic consequences. We learn that conflict resolution in the “hood” requires a knowledge of the gang code.

One particularly creative and bright young man, named Fabian, reported to G-Dog that he was riding with his “homies,” and they spotted a kid from a rival gang who was in their turf. One of the guys said, “Let’s bomb his ass.” Fabian said, “Kick back, you guys. That’s my primo [cousin] . . . my tia’s son” (p. 103), and the car swerved back on its former path. The “code” dictates that you don’t attack kin. The kid, however, wasn’t really kin; he was a fellow who worked alongside Fabian at Homeboy Industries.

As illustrated through numerous moments of transformation, it is impossible to know beforehand what will provide the impetus for the quantum leap that is the first step in the change process. These moments rarely come when expected and come only to those patient enough to see them. It can be a simple hug at the right moment, a reframing of something someone has done, the birth of a child, the chance to work in a field that is intuitively desired, an accolade for something done well, or being treated “as somebody” by a waitress in a good restaurant.

Effectiveness

Of course, the logical question that needs to be asked by a social scientist is whether Homeboy Industries and the charismatic power of Father Boyle are effective. In his penultimate chapter, he tries to address just this question. He does so with only partial success. Father Boyle and his programs have clearly and profoundly helped thousands of individuals. Through his spiritual lens, he implicitly presents a cogent and integrated psychological theory of redemption. He suggests, fairly enough, that an ethos of “success” leads inevitably to a simplification and misreading of the complex and daily struggles of individuals trying to cope the best they can within the impinging and oppressive social ecologies in which they are enveloped.

Unsurprisingly, he does not maintain or analyze data on the individuals he serves. Nor does he comment on how well moments of transformation are sustained over time. He would argue, I think, that data collection and data analysis are not in his job description. More important, he does not reflect on how much of his success is due to the sheer power of who he is, a conundrum that plagues many very successful programs. He does not present a clearly articulated program that can be replicated, and he does not address key issues with the depth that they require, such as family interventions or drug rehabilitation.

What we are left with is a powerful set of ideas that, taken together, can be understood as a psychology of healing individuals who grow up surrounded by unrelenting violence without any countervailing nurturance or emotional sustenance. His ideas and insights can and should be used in designing prevention and intervention programs and in staff training, and can and should be used to illuminate our understanding of the lives of children and youth who are drawn into gang life. For this we should be grateful.

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