

Ben Hoffman, The Violence Vaccine

Ottawa, CIIN, 2016

ISBN: 978-0-9864907-4-3

Reviewed by Colm Brannigan

I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary;
the evil it does is permanent. Mahatma Gandhi

This is a wonderful book. When I first sat down to read it I was expecting a more or less traditional treatment of negotiation, peacemaking and mediation from an experienced practitioner but it is far more than that. It is the memoir of a spiritual journey and should resonate with all who see themselves in the peacemaker role. It is an autobiography without pretension. In it, stories are woven into the fabric of the various personal and professional pathways the author has travelled.

Dr. Ben Hoffman has had an amazing career from working as a corrections officer and administrator to mental health practitioner, a consultant who drafted the first ever comprehensive curriculum on Conflict Management and Negotiation at Harvard and starting one of Canada's first mediation firms in Ottawa.

During this lengthy career he worked in a wide variety of matters including land use, First Nations land claims, public policy and complex corporate and commercial disputes. He was also the Director of Conflict Resolution at the Carter Centre in Atlanta and involved in international mediation and facilitation in the Crimea, the former Yugoslavia and the Sudan.

The description of the author's meeting with Joseph Kony of the Lord's Resistance Army reads like an adventure novel. That he willingly put his life in danger to help others speaks volumes about him.

This is not a "how to do conflict resolution" type of book although one of its main strengths is in the description of the various conflicts that the author has facilitated. It should be of interest to all working in the ADR and peacemaking fields.

The book also contains examples of the author's poems and notes, which add immensely to the story and really paint a picture of his uneasy quest for answers to the very difficult issues of violence that he has faced and still faces the world community. This quest focused on answering the question of whether we can be good without God, is central to the book and his life. His account of his own religious and spiritual struggles is central to the messages contained throughout his work.

The book is divided into three parts and table of contents clearly sets out the journey through each chapter in this book:

Part One: EXPERIMENTING ON MYSELF

In times like these
Getting started
A Godless world – really?
Suffer the little children
Pernicious punishment
No special powers
The promise of healing and reconciliation

The endless supply of killers
Wounded healer.

Part Two: FACING EVIL WITHOUT A GOD

Committing to the spiritual path
The man without a soul
God's mirror
Beyond Reason
What religion does for us

Part Three: THE VIOLENCE VACCINE

Letting go of God
The hope of anarchy
The violence vaccine
Epilogue

We live at a time where many ordinary people feel that violence is out of control. The gap between those who 'have' and 'have not' is increasing exponentially and bring with the widening gap, a much greater potential for the use of violence. The unrestrained destructive use of financial and physical power over people and our environment has brought our very survival in question.

In the middle of an increasingly chaotic world, Dr. Hoffman has sent us a powerful message of hope. He believes that personal, family, community and international violence can be prevented and is both articulate and persuasive with his arguments. Most of us while hoping for this outcome, would say that it is highly unlikely. But the author is not viewing the world through some rose tinted utopian vision and his beliefs are well grounded in a lifetime of helping to stop violence in what can only be seen as intractable conflicts. Viewed from this perspective, his goals are realistic. He has walked the talk and we should listen carefully to what he has to say.

This is a spiritual and philosophical work where the author points us towards a path that we can choose to walk. The questions he raises are difficult: if you have no reference point grounded in religious belief how do you tell what is good from what is bad; what is right from what is wrong? There are no easy answers.

ADR professionals know the difficulties inherent in conflict prevention, management and dispute resolution. We need to listen to the optimism that comes from the author's vocation for that is what he is expressing. While the author has many statements worth quoting in the book, I have gone outside of it to find the following which encapsulates far better than I can the message he is bringing to us:

Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict - alternatives to passive or aggressive responses, alternatives to violence. Dorothy Thompson

In essence, the author, a well-known Canadian peacemaker, has given us a guide for both living a good life and how to be effective in dealing with conflict. It is certainly worth reading.

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