

Sociopaths

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The four percent of us who have no conscience

THE SOCIOPATH NEXT DOOR: THE RUTHLESS VERSUS THE REST OF US

By Martha Stout

Broadway, \$24.95, 256 pages

REVIEWED BY LYN NOFZIGER

Not too long ago a couple of PhDs, Thomas Stanley and William Danko, wrote a book about the unassuming rich called "The Millionaire Next Door." Now, it turns out that at least some of our wealthy neighbors are or could well be sociopaths, persons entirely without consciences. Which to some people that may explain why they're rich. But that would be jumping to conclusions because it is not necessarily so.

In no way does it mean that all rich people are sociopaths or contrariwise, that all sociopaths are rich people. Far from it. What it boils down to is simply this: Psychologists estimate that roughly four out of every 100 persons are born without consciences and therefore, that being the case, some of those conscienceless people are bound to be rich and that means one of them could well be your next door neighbor.

But not to worry, at least not too much. Sociopaths are not necessarily serial murderers, child molesters, torturers or cannibals ala Hannibal Lechter. In fact most of them are not, although, if it suited their purposes they could be; they have no conscience to stop them.

Martha Stout, PhD, a consulting psychologist at the Harvard University Medical School, has written a fascinating book called "The Sociopath Next Door." And if he- or she (sociopathy is no respecter of sexes or occupations or neighborhoods) isn't living next door to you he may instead be your boss or your school teacher or just somebody you know. He could -- perish the thought -- even be your parent or your child.

The trouble, Ms. Stout says, is that sociopaths "are nearly always invisible to us." We get to know them for what they are in retrospect, in looking back at our dealings or associations with them. Otherwise, she says, for the most part "we remain effectively oblivious" to them.

This is mainly because on the surface they appear normal, and manage in many ways and most times to fake those emotions normal people ordinarily feel, such as love, regret and sympathy.

And fake it they must do, in order to get along in society. But underneath the front they put on, sociopaths just don't give a hoot for other people or other creatures. Regardless of what they do, sociopaths don't at all care about the effects of their actions on society, family, associates and persons who consider them their friends. They are, Ms. Stout says, hollow people, unable to feel love, compassion, a desire to help or even feel the need to return a smile.

Recently, police in Wichita, Kan., arrested a man they suspect is the serial killer who called himself BTK which stood for "bind, torture, kill." I suspect psychologists will quickly identify him as a sociopath. Here is one reason why. Even though he is active in his church and is a cub scout leader, the man, killings aside, fits the description of what Ms. Stout calls "an abrasive psychopath."

He is an unpleasant neighbor, those who live near him say, always looking for reasons to complain about their activities. He, like a woman Ms. Stout describes in her book as an abrasive sociopath, "excels at the creation of hostility and bitterness." Of course, if he's the serial killer Wichita police think he is, he's carried his unpleasantness to extremes.

Ms. Stout gives us several examples of various kinds of sociopaths. There is "Skip," the brilliant business tycoon who tortured frogs as a boy and who has bullied and manipulated his way to the top of the business world. There is "the stamp man" who got his kicks from burglarizing post offices.

There is Doreen who enjoys hurting people mentally and emotionally. There is Luke, the charming moocher who lives off of other people, mainly women. There is Hannah's father, a high school principal who is also a murderer and appears to enjoy it. And there is Tillie, the abrasive personality who likes nothing better than to make trouble for others.

What do you, as a normal person with a conscience, do when you find, as you inevitably will, that you're dealing with someone who is a sociopath? Ms. Stout has 13 rules for dealing with them in everyday life.

Rule number eight is perhaps the most important: "The best way to protect yourself from a sociopath is to avoid him, to refuse any kind of contact or communication."

Otherwise, she warns, if you can't do that, deal with them with care, don't pity them because pity is a weapon they use, don't try to redeem them and never agree to help one conceal his true nature.

If intuition is a person's sixth sense, Ms. Stout calls "conscience" the seventh sense and adds that as such it is far from universal. At the same time she admits that she and her fellow experts in the field of psychology have yet to figure out why some persons have none.

They think it's possible that some persons may be born without one, or that this lack is due to an altered functioning of that part of the brain called the cerebral cortex.

For others, there is the possibility that environmental factors such as childhood abuse may be partly responsible. But then, maybe not, because "there is some evidence that sociopaths are influenced less by their early experiences than nonsociopaths."

So what it finally comes down to is that as yet psychologists really don't know why it is that some people have no seventh sense, no conscience. Though sociopaths, even those who seem to be successful, are often social misfits, Ms. Stout tells us there is a positive role for them to play in times of war.

That is because they are fearless and experience no horror or guilt while killing or ordering others to kill. As a result they make superior warriors and assassins, whereas, unlike sociopaths, most people make fourth-rate killers at best. The idea of killing another human, even in a war, repels a normal person. Therefore "a person who can look another person in the eye and calmly shoot him dead" is valuable in battle.

Interestingly, Ms. Stout says, sociopaths, because they are easily bored, often turn to liquor or drugs as a way of combatting boredom. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the alcoholic or addict next door is a sociopath or that the sociopath next door is an addict.

In spite of the surface advantages a lack of conscience may give sociopaths Ms. Stout fervently believes a person is better off with a conscience. It is conscience, she explains, that blesses our lives with meaning, that allows us to feel such emotions as love and grief and joy. Without it we would be emotionally hollow and bored and "would spend our days pursuing repetitive games of our own misguided creation."

Put that way it's almost enough to make one feel sorry for the sociopath next door. Almost, but not quite, because, as Ms. Stout warns us, pity is what the guy wants, so if we're smart we won't waste it on him. In fact, once we've figured him out, we'll follow Ms. Stout's advice and won't have anything to do with him. And maybe one day, if you're lucky, he'll sell his house and move.

Lyn Nofziger, a Washington writer, was an adviser to President Ronald Reagan.

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