

All You Need Is Love? by James Ballantyne

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“Can we dare to think people are kind, and shape organisations around this view?”

That’s the question Rutger Bregman examines in his latest book *Humankind*, and it’s one that anyone involved in youth and community work like me wrestles with on a daily basis. But is Bregman’s optimistic analysis grounded in reality?

For anyone who’s read this piece on the “Real Lord of the Flies,” the gist of the first half of Bregman’s book will be familiar. His premise is that despite news reports, social media, politics, religions and ideologies that suggest otherwise, “(for the) most part, people, deep down, are pretty decent.” Furthermore, he says:

“If we had the courage to take this more seriously, it’s an idea that might just start a revolution...once you grasp what it really means...you’ll never look at the world the same again.”

Bregman supports this conclusion by reference to examples that stretch from Britain in the Blitz to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, but suggests that - whilst crisis times do bring out compassion and collective kindness (no doubt he would have added the coronavirus pandemic to his list if the book had come out a little later) - these qualities actually emerge more often and more regularly than we might admit.

This chimes with my own experience working with young people in challenging circumstances in the UK, but there’s an obvious rejoinder: if kindness is our natural state, how come we behave unkindly at least as much?

For Bregman, the answer lies in the rhetoric of the media, in how groups behave when not under stress, and in how people in positions of power form and shape policies about economics, politics, health, education and social care in ways that override our natural inclination to be kind, or reinforce the opposite form of behaviour.

Historically, Bregman says, *Homo Sapiens* triumphed as a species because it was more cooperative than others, with hunter-gather communities developing an equality of resources and a preference for flatter leadership structures over thousands of years - so human evolution was less the ‘survival of the fittest’ than of the friendliest.

But the switch to more complex forms of civilisation based around agriculture and industry changed these incentives and increased the incidence of hierarchy, competition and war, all of which require dehumanisation in one form or another. Bregman examines the atrocities of the 20th Century and the psychological experiments that purport to explain them, but concludes that there is little evidence to show that human beings are 'naturally' violent, selfish and animalistic, though circumstances (and their manipulation) can certainly make us so when the opportunity presents itself.

In a chapter entitled "Why good people turn bad," he looks at the inner workings of the military; the corrupting effects of power; the legacy of enlightenment thinking about humanity which focussed on the negative, racist and individualistic traits in people's behaviour; and how sociopathic leaders are elected even in democracies that are populated by people who try to be kind to others.

"Time and again friendly people hope for better leaders," Bregman writes, "but all too often these are dashed; the reason is that power causes people to lose the kindness and modesty that got them elected, or they never possessed these in the first place. In a hierarchically organised society the Machiavellis are one step ahead. They have the ultimate secret weapon to defeat their competition. They are shameless."

So much for the diagnosis; what about the cure?

In the latter part of the book Bregman shares examples of organisations, political systems, schools, prisons and police forces that have shaped themselves around a positive view of humanity. In education, for example, play is a necessity in human development because we are born with playful natures, and children learn best when left to their own devices. In health, "According to the WHO, depression is now the number one global disease. Our biggest shortfall isn't in a bank account or budget sheet, but inside our selves. It's a shortage of what makes life meaningful."

These cases show how appealing to play, dignity, autonomy and goodness is both humane and successful. The Norwegian prison system, for example, works because it 'turns the other cheek,' so prisoners actually get better than they deserve. In a maximum security prison with 250 drug dealers, sexual offenders and murderers, prisoners are allowed to talk, read, swim, ski, shop, form rock bands and churches, and cook together. Their own community maintains all these facilities, growing a quarter of their food with all the equipment they need, including knives.

The evidence shows that a luxurious prison does not engender high reoffending rates - prisoners don't want to go back - but it does change attitudes in a positive direction, so when a prisoner is being released back into the community outside, every attempt is made to ensure they are not a ticking time bomb. Every offender is a future neighbour. In fact reoffending rates are half those in any other prison system.

Whilst it costs more to accommodate prisoners in this way, the long term benefits are enormous. "A humane system is not only brave, but is also less expensive" as Bregman puts it, "Our response is more democracy, more openness, and more humanity." Or as Tron Eberhardt, the warden of a Norwegian prison says, "Treat people like dirt and they'll be dirt. Treat them like human beings and they'll act like human beings." Bregman is not naïve in setting out these stories. They aren't perfect, but in a culture or society that's craving 'effectiveness' it also pays to be nice.

Bregman is reassuringly gentle in his approach, tentative at times with his criticism of

mainstream beliefs about people and posing his questions reflectively. The overriding theme of his book is that kindness and reconciliation should not be written off as exceptions, but rather celebrated as the norm - and used as the centrepiece of politics, economics and society going forward.

To that end he concludes with ten guidelines or principles, including “When in doubt, assume the best” - since avoiding being conned might mean that we’re not trusting enough of most people’s good intentions; and “Think in ‘win-win’ scenarios,” since we live in a world where doing good makes it more likely that everybody benefits, as in the Norwegian prison case shows.

Another principle is “Ask more questions,” and here Bregman displays a harder edge to his writing. The ‘golden rule’ doesn’t go far enough, he says, so we shouldn’t assume that other people want to be treated in a particular way (that’s paternalism). Instead we should ask how they want to be treated.

Empathy drains us, he continues; it wears us down because we can care too much about everything, especially when we spend so much time on social media. But compassion for others is healthy, so long as we maintain a distance, and clear boundaries, from individuals who are suffering. This gives us the energy to be constructive and support others effectively in their own independent choice of actions.

Bregman’s point is that we should use our intellect as well as our emotions to understand others and the decisions they make. Sometimes we have to suppress a desire to be nice, and hear from the voices that might appear unfriendly in their demands for change. “Try to understand the other, even if you don’t get where they’re coming from,” he advises.

His ninth principle is the imperative not to be ashamed of doing good, since acts of kindness are contagious, as we can see in reactions to the coronavirus pandemic across the world, from painting rainbows to flourishing mutual aid schemes and care for our neighbours. Finally, we are urged to “be realistic,” meaning not to be cynical but to make realism a courageous act in a cynical ‘mediocracy’ - to do and be good, because that is our nature. “It’s time for a new view of humankind.”

At a time when Covid-19 has sparked many a conversation about the ‘new normal’ and the wave of protests around Black Lives Matter has created an unprecedented experience of collective unity, Bregman’s story of a new reality built on kindness comes at the right moment. It’s a hopeful history of our past, and the hope of a new history that can be consciously created if we set our minds and shoulders to the task.

Kindness as an abstract emotion is not enough, but when used as the fulcrum of rigorous enquiry and concrete action it is both powerful and creative. Ultimately love can win, and often does.