

DOWD, from page 10

practicing the side of the aggressor. At least in my opinion.

R.D.: There's nothing inherently wrong in being the one with power. It's how you use it. Somebody is going to have more power in any interaction. But if you abuse that power, that's a problem. If you use your power to crush poor people, when you use your power to kick poor people, kick homeless people out of libraries, that's not an ethical use of power.

T.: *Have you studied martial arts? Some of the phrases in your book reminded me of Sun Tzu and the philosophies espoused in "The Art of War." "When you have power, appear weak, and when you are weak, appear to have power." I believe that directly speaks to the ethics of "I'm the authority here. I'm the one with power. How do I show this person humanity without being threatening?"*

R.D.: Just because society's told you that poor people are lesser than you – which just, by the way, is just not true – you don't have to make someone lesser than you. The irony of this all is when you treat someone like a human, they treat you back like a human being more often than not. But when you treat someone like they're inferior to you, they tend to lash out.

We think that the best way to have a calm, safe library; a calm, safe homeless shelter; a calm, safe whatever – fill-in-the-blank – is to use our power to force people into compliance, and to really make sure that they know who's in charge and who's in power and who carries the biggest stick. And that's just not true. The best way to a calm, safe library; a calm, safe nonprofit; a calm, safe homeless shelter – whatever – is to actually treat people with human dignity. And when you treat people with human dignity, they tend to respond in kind. One of the things I try to teach in the training is lead people into the behavior you want from them, don't follow them in what you don't like about what they're doing. This idea that if you're a jerk to people, they tend to be a jerk back. Regardless, homeless, non-

homeless, millionaire, non-millionaire. If you treat them with human dignity and you treat them like they're of equal value to you – which they are – they tend to respond well. I had a librarian say, "I can't believe I flew you out to tell my staff how to be nice to homeless people, but I guess I had to." It's more nuanced than just how to be nice, but the essence of what I teach is, if you treat people with human dignity, more often than not they will follow your rules and not cause trouble. It's a pretty simple message but it takes me three hours to say it, or 250 pages of a book.

T.: *You said homeless people are just like other people.*

R.D.: In almost every way, people experiencing homelessness are identical to everyone else. But there are some differences, but those differences come out of injustice. It's actually dangerous, the idea that everyone is exactly the same. It completely glosses over the massive disadvantages and massive injustices that have been perpetuated against people. If I say everybody is exactly the same, what it means basically is you and I had the exact same opportunities in life and you screwed it up and I didn't. And it completely glosses over the fact that if you were raised in poverty, you are much more likely to be poor as an adult than an individual who was raised – you know, Paris Hilton is not going to be poor, no matter what she does. Someone raised in the middle-class, statistically speaking, is almost certainly going to grow up to be middle class. And statistically someone who grows up poor is probably going to grow up to be poor, because you're at a massive disadvantage. We have to acknowledge the real differences, because those differences don't make homeless or poor people bad. It

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acknowledges the enormous disadvantages that people are at. When we discount the enormous disadvantages that other people might be at, whatever those disadvantages might be – race, gender – when we discount those disadvantages, when we say everybody is the same, we empower blaming the victim.

T.: *You mentioned a couple specific characteristics of vocalization during emotional moments or arguments. And that was one of the things I thought was really curious.*

R.D.: Poverty is inherently loud. I was in our shelter just last night and it's freaking loud, because it's a lot of people jampacked into a tiny room. If you want to be heard you have to be loud. The research suggests, if you're born into poverty, you tend to talk louder. It's not wrong; it's just different. And it scares the hell out of

middle-class people who were born in the suburbs where you don't have to talk loud and they're not used to volume. Now not every homeless person talks loud, not every person born into poverty talks loud, but many do. There's nothing wrong with being loud; there's nothing wrong with being quiet. The problem arises when you have a middle-class person who doesn't understand that many people in poverty talk louder because poverty is loud and then they're terrified when somebody is talking loud to them.

T.: *Your book seems to be predisposed toward empathy-driven tools, which you call "water tools." Can you describe why you think that is important?*

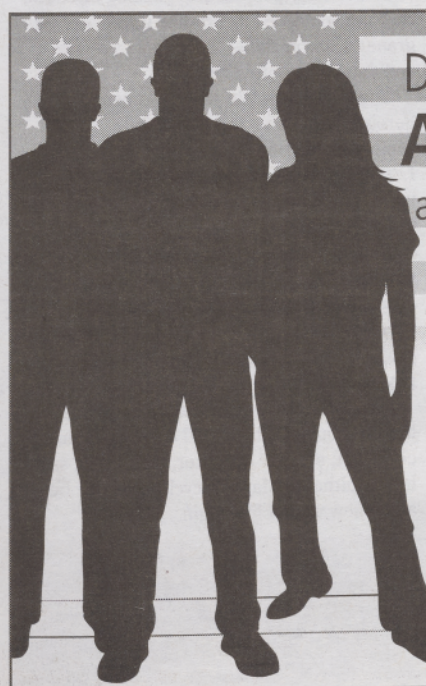
R.D.: Probably the biggest central idea in the book that I really try to push is this idea that there's two parallel systems for trying

to get people to follow the rules: punishment-driven enforcement and empathy-driven enforcement. Punishment-driven enforcement – or the "fire" tools – you get people to follow the rules by threatening punishment. Return the book on time or I'll give you a fine. Don't speed or I'll give you a ticket. I tell my kids don't break curfew or I'm going to ground you. It's the threat of punishment that keeps you in line. Those are your fire tools. Empathy-driven tools are, if I'm nice to you, you'll be nice to me. If I do you a favor, you'll probably do me a favor. If I smile at you, you're much less likely to cuss me out. If I ask you nicely to do something, you're much more likely to do it than if I'm a big, fat jerk about it. And there's a whole psychology behind that. I'm grossly oversimplifying it. And what I try to teach people is that yelling at people, threatening them, punishing, is not the only way to get people to follow the rules. Being nice to them, doing them favors, treating them with human dignity, is a whole parallel system for getting them to follow the rules, and it actually works better.

T.: *I saw your TEDx Talk at North Central College, and you summarized that by saying, "Be who you are." Could you expound upon that a little bit?*

R.D.: It was about – figure out what your deepest, most cherished values are and live those values. To figure out what your truest values are is the times you've failed them. Because, when you fail one of your deepest-held values, you feel like garbage. Think about the times you were really disappointed in yourself, and use those moments to realize what you hold most dear. For me, standing up for the vulnerable is one of my most inherent core values. And every time I've failed to do that, I've lost a little bit of me. It's not just about being who you are, it's about figuring out what are your most cherished values and live that to the fullest.

Courtesy of Street Roots' sister paper Real Change / INSP.ngo



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