

## Journal of Integrated Studies, Vol 9, No 1 (2017)

# The Gift of Fear – A Book Review

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Keywords: Stalking, Security, Creative Non-Fiction, Prevention, Violence, *The Gift of Fear*

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I just wanted some peace, but Ted's soft-spoken message on my voicemail ensured I wouldn't have it. "Hi. I guess you're still on your way home from work so I'm heading over now. I'm surprised you're not there yet."

To anyone else, this message would sound affectionate and caring. A man hopes to spend time with his partner. The problem is, I'm not Ted's partner. I never really was. We went out a few times but broke up a number of months ago. For some reason, he doesn't understand or accept that.

My heart pumps harder in my chest and my insides constrict at the sound of his voice. I have to get out before he arrives. I have to avoid him. I gather up what I need for the night as the two questions that have haunted me these past few months blast through my brain again: How can I make him stop? When exactly will I get my Ted-free life back?

In the non-fiction book the *Gift of Fear*, professional security consultant Gavin De Becker addresses not only my personal 'Ted' experience, but many other situations related to personal safety. He expertly teaches and empowers the reader to prevent and overcome violence. I initially read De Becker's book when researching the topic of stalking for a fictional work. I had no idea that years later, I would become intimately familiar with the material.

De Becker is considered an authority on predicting violence. Since founding the firm Gavin De Becker & Associates, he has worked with all levels of government, enforcement agencies and celebrities to evaluate threats of violence and find ways to prevent those threats from becoming reality. He has also worked with victims of domestic abuse and stalking. Even more importantly, he is an abuse victim himself.

His credibility immediately springs from the page, which is a key aspect to the success of any creative nonfiction (CNF) piece. Because CNF is fact-based and must be truthful, author believability (either through experience, or in-depth interviewing) is often evident to the reader. Early in the book, De Becker adeptly describes a domestic violence situation where a woman aims a gun at her husband in front of her two children. "I was standing off to the side ... watching the scene unfold. As before ... and ... many times again, I would be responsible for predicting whether or not a murder would occur;" (De Becker, p.18). The scene goes on to detail his observations of "pre-incident indicators," (p.

20) which led him to believe that the woman's actions were no longer futile threats. This time violence would occur. This time, the wife would kill the husband. He was right. This time, she did. What made this scene even more poignant was the fact that De Becker was one of the children who had witnessed the event. The killer was his mother.

De Becker himself attests to the fact that growing up in an environment where violence could erupt at any time provided him with the fundamental understanding that fear was a gift. It also provided him with the drive to help others embrace their fear so they would not be victimized by it. To that end, De Becker employs effective CNF techniques throughout the book, using real-life cases from his work. He then dissects and analyzes each incident to reveal violence indicators. In this way, he teaches the reader to recognize these same indicators and avoid violence. De Becker employs Gutkind's "Creative Nonfiction Dance," where information is expertly embedded in or between scenes (Gutkind, p.138). Employing scenes (a technique usually relegated to fictional works) engages readers in a way that listing information cannot. Gutkind's "highlighting test" (p. 114) posits that one effective way to analyze a CNF work is to highlight the scenes. More scenes make a better CNF work. If we applied the "highlighting test" to *The Gift of Fear*, ninety per cent of this book would be yellow. This is what makes it a powerful read.

An especially poignant scene occurs when the book opens, immediately grabbing the reader's attention. De Becker recounts the events that led up to a young woman's rape. The perpetrator usually killed his victims, but this time he didn't get the chance. As De Becker counsels the victim, he reveals to the reader specific techniques the rapist used to encourage premature trust. One such technique, "forced teaming" (p. 64), occurred when the rapist insinuated that he and the victim were in the same boat by both needing to go to the fourth floor of her building. It was this lie that gave him access to her apartment.

After the rape, the attacker closed the bedroom window and started to make his way to the kitchen. He told the victim to stay put. She didn't. She instinctively knew he was going to kill her. She grabbed the sheet off her bed, followed silently behind him and escaped to a neighbour's home. De Becker helps her realize that by closing the window, she understood the rapist was trying to reduce noise. He was going to the kitchen to get a knife because his gun would have been too loud when he killed her (p. 3). This understanding helped her heal because she realized she could trust her instincts again.

Through this example and many others in the book, De Becker clearly and logically explains the signals and signs we often ignore in our everyday lives that can lead to our own victimization. One of the most powerful concepts he discusses is the necessity of trusting our own intuition. Repeatedly, in De Becker's book, when individuals ignored their instincts and instead trusted their logic, violence occurred. De Becker explains this:

What ... others want to dismiss as a coincidence or a gut feeling is in fact a cognitive process, faster than we recognize and far different from the familiar step-by-step thinking we rely on so willingly. We think conscious thought is somehow better, when in fact, intuition is soaring flight compared to the plodding of logic. (De Becker, p. 28)

Our society rewards logic and as such, we sometimes ignore the power of our intuition. The rape victim De Becker worked with didn't like the sound of the man's voice right from the start, but she ignored her instincts.

The *Gift of Fear* taught me to trust my instincts whether or not they were in-step with my logic. I've heeded that principle on a number of occasions. Once, I quickly exited an elevator when the man next to me made me extremely

uncomfortable. In another instance, I avoided a supposedly safe parking lot at night because I had a very bad feeling about it. Intuitively, I knew that I'd avoided violence on both of those occasions, no matter how illogical my actions would have appeared to others.

It wasn't until years after I'd read *The Gift of Fear* that 'Ted' (not his real name) came into my life. When the stalking started, I re-read the book. I quickly realized that I'd ignored my intuition. I'd shooed away the warning signs with my logic. At first, I wanted to kick myself, but quickly recognized that I had all the necessary tools to handle the situation. I followed De Becker's advice and stopped all contact. I got a new phone number. I was eventually lucky enough to get a new job with my organization in a different town. I moved. Ted never found me, so I got my life back.

I often think back to that cold winter evening when I scrambled to get out of my house and away from Ted. I drove by him as he stalked purposefully towards my home, but luckily, he didn't see me. I avoided contact with him that night. Thanks to De Becker and *The Gift of Fear*, I've avoided contact with him every night since.

## Works Cited

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