

If I Were Queen: The Sociopath Test

By Michele Burns

One in twenty five people that you know, that you work with, that you are related to or have dated or perhaps even *married*, is missing a conscience and can do anything, to anyone, without guilt, shame, or remorse. That's the assertion of a Harvard psychologist, Martha Stout, in her book, *The Sociopath Next Door*. It explains much about human behavior that has long baffled me. Stout worked for years with the victims of emotional trauma and she eventually grew curious about the people capable of inflicting the horrors she heard about from her clients. What she discovered is that 4% of the population lacks a conscience. These conscience-free people are termed sociopaths and we all deal with them directly or indirectly every day. Other prominent sociopath researchers put the sociopath percentage at 1%, but they find their subjects in prisons, which is where the less intelligent sociopaths, and those lacking impulse control land.

Stout says sociopaths discern early in life that they are different from others and they become expert at mimicking emotional responses. The result is that people don't realize the sociopath is playing by a *very* different set of rules. Stout wrote the book because she thinks we can see through the act if we educate ourselves. Sociopaths are incapable of love or any genuine connection but they learn to *appear* to be kind and good, often *extraordinarily* so. Most of them are not criminals in the legal sense, and they make up only 20% of the incarcerated population.

Stout calls sociopaths "ice people" and says they often have "a kind of glow or charisma that makes them more charming or interesting than the other people around them. They're more spontaneous, more intense, more complex, or even sexier than everyone else." The goals of sociopaths differ, she says, but without human connections they are fundamentally bored so they stimulate and entertain themselves by playing games with other people. They are manipulators, thrilled by winning, dominating, making others jump through hoops. They are generally attracted to power and are commonly and casually deceitful. They seem to take special satisfaction from manipulating or ruining innocent, and pure-hearted people. They enjoy risk but not responsibility, and they use sex as a tool. They suffer above-average rates of alcoholism, hypochondria and suicide. They frequently engage in flattery, and the universal tip-off is their use of the pity play to gain sympathy or cooperation.

I can hear the gears turning as you review your history and recall the perplexing, sadistic boss, the cruel friend, the teacher, or worse, the family member who took perverse pleasure in controlling you, or in your discomfort or humiliation.

The most intriguing point that Stout offers is that there is a test! The brains of sociopaths differ neurologically from the brains of those capable of love. She explains that if you monitor electrical activity in the brain of a person with emotions, there is a reaction to emotional words like love or mother- not so with a sociopath. When sociopaths are given a decision task involving emotional topics, brain imaging finds that they use the part of the brain others use to solve algebra problems.

Here's where being queen would be useful. I know this will never happen, but if I were queen I would have everyone who aspires to a position of power, *especially* power over children, tested for the presence of a conscience. I would test teachers, politicians, parents, babysitters, and most certainly heads of state with armies at their disposal. I might also make the test a prerequisite for

marriage. It would be handy to know if your mate has a conscience but, *more importantly*, there is a genetic component to sociopathy; if you produce children with a sociopath you may bring more sociopaths into the world.

The misery and devastation this 4% of society wreaks is highly disproportionate to their small number. Sociopaths are the people who start wars, scar children, and make our work lives hell. They are the smiling, malicious neighbors, the child molesters, con artists, and toxic polluters. They blind-side us with behavior that is simply unfathomable to those in possession of a conscience. It would be a safe bet that Saddam Hussein was a sociopath, along with Hitler, Stalin, and the whole raft of merciless dictators.

Ironically, a program of testing will probably never be instituted because it would be so ethically challenging. Twin studies suggest that only 50% of the condition is nature. The other half is apparently nurture. Would it be acceptable to use early testing for the tendencies, followed by special nurture and education to stress ethical behavior? If there is any chance that such intervention could reduce the dreadful suffering that conscience-less people inflict on society, I think it bears consideration. In the absence of such programs, I try to educate everyone I love about the existence of this devious 4%.

I was riveted when Stout described the sociopathic attraction to power. I heard her speak during her book tour during the George W. Bush administration and questioners asked about people currently dominating the political arena. She tactfully avoided any finger pointing. I am not nearly so tactful. It is my suspicion that sociopaths have a way of finding each other and that they occasionally congregate in the vicinity of the Oval Office.

I expect Leo Strauss was a sociopath. Strauss is the obscure political theorist whose disciples, the neoconservatives, controlled the strings of our former puppet-in-chief: George W. Bush. Even if Strauss wasn't a sociopath his ideas are tailor-made for the sociopathic political player. Strauss recommends finding an easily manipulated, not-overly-bright dupe to be a figurehead while the "wise elite" stay safely behind a curtain. Strauss has no use for democracy, social justice, individual freedom, or minority rights. The poor are poor because they are stupid or lazy, and the superior rich need not be concerned with their plight. Women should stay home and make babies to feed the war machine necessary to world domination, and leave politics to men. Strauss also maintained that deceit in politics is the norm, and leaders must tell the "vulgar masses" whatever lies are expedient to persuade them to do the bidding of the elites...

Corporations are sociopathic by charter so sociopaths rise naturally to the tops of these institutions. And the government, of course, is a sociopath magnet. Think of the competitive advantage in business or politics of being totally without scruples and able to do whatever it takes to defeat an opponent or competitor who suffers from the constraints of ethics and conscience. One might set up offshore shell corporations to hide losses, or ship jobs to China to pay slave labor wages. A corporation might open stores in small markets and sell below cost just long enough to put local competitors out of business. One might buy politicians with campaign cash and have annoying regulations rewritten to suit. One might sling mud and smear opponents with ugly falsehoods. A wealthy draft dodger who avoided serving, for example, might make a hero-opponent out as a coward.

Looking at my own history I realize I have known many sociopaths. These are my observations to add to Stout's. The sociopaths I know have just one mood, no extremes of happiness or sadness no matter the circumstance. They have infatuations and obsessions but do not love. Money is their measure of everything and they obsess on controlling it. Charity is a useful tool and they engage in it to be seen, to score points for future use or to polish their façade of goodness. They are masters at making others feel guilty while appearing to be altruistic, ill-used or self-sacrificing. Their cruelty and manipulations are clever and subtle and they play mind games, gaslighting to dislodge victims' trust in their own perceptions.

The sociopaths in my life are all married- to people they can control- but their children generally see through them. The children of sociopaths, bizarrely, seem to frequently marry sociopaths.

Sociopaths take aging hard as it reduces sex appeal, a valuable tool, and they may fight it with absurd results. The sociopaths I know put a lot of energy into projecting an image and trying to impress people with their goodness or their power, their accomplishments or their acquisitions. They accrue skills over time, but *never* wisdom, and they appear to lack intuition. I also suspect that sense of *humor* is shorted by this peculiar mental architecture. The sociopaths I know are all respected leaders, basons of community, school, church or business. Finally, I observe that while they have many acquaintances and maybe pawns or sycophants, they have no real friends.

Sociopaths, Stout says, do not see themselves as broken. They think people of conscience have the deficiency. Stout says we may protect ourselves by being aware that not everyone we meet is controlled by a sense of connectedness and responsibility to others. She instructs us to question authority, to watch for small lies, and to suspect flattery and the pity play. If you spot the façade of a probable sociopath, she says, refuse to be drawn into their games. If you must deal with them, call them on their deceit, their cruelty or their manipulations. Protect yourself, and don't worry too much about hurting their feelings, because they have none.