

# REVIEW

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ERRATUM: *A book review by Malcomson published in the July 2015 issue incorrectly referenced Budapest twice on page 52. The correct reference should have been to Bucharest.*

Malcomson, T. (2015). Review of the book *Romania's abandoned children: Deprivation, brain development, and the struggle for recovery* by C. Nelson, N. Fox & C. Zeanah. *The SRV Journal*, 10(1), 52-54.

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**TATTOOS ON THE HEART: THE POWER OF BOUNDLESS COMPASSION.** By GREGORY BOYLE, S.J. New York: Simon & Schuster (Free Press), 2010.

**Reviewed by Joe Osburn**

MY DAUGHTER, AMY, gave me this book as a Christmas gift two years ago. She lives in California near Los Angeles, the “City of Angels” and the locus of the lives it recounts. The book is about societal devaluation, its manifest wounds, and the cumulative toll these take on those so afflicted. Its 200-plus pages stream forth story after story of people trampled by the gang culture which dominates their neighborhoods and looms constantly as a malevolent presence in their everyday existence. Most of the leading actors in these stories are young people, ranging in age from preadolescence to young adulthood, sucked into the quicksand of poverty and struggling to survive in the unforgiving circumstances of their lives. It tells of lives lived in captivity to fear and despair, amid crime, drugs, vengeance and violence, foreshortened by murder and closed off by imprisonment and dead-end futures. It is about people relegated to low status in their community, people who daily experience rejection, exclusion, socio-economic oppression, educational negligence, broken home lives, scorn and dread from others, people whom many others perceive as outright menacing and who, largely in consequence of this perception, often actually become menaces. It is about lack of opportunity, failure, life-wasting, brutalization and deathmaking. It is about the “us versus them” segmentation that bedevils the human

community everywhere, but is carried to perverse extremes in the syllogism of gang logic: “this is our home turf—outsiders are enemies—ergo they must be killed if found on our turf.”

What then, you might ask, makes this book a suitable Christmas gift? Because, amid the darkness, there is light, which is what Christmas is about.

The light in this book is revealed through the mission and ministry of its author, Father Greg Boyle, as the pastor of Dolores Mission, and the founder and leader of Homeboy Industries. The church is located in Boyle Heights, one of the worst parts of Los Angeles, squeezed between Pico Gardens and Aliso Village, which together “comprised the largest grouping of public housing west of the Mississippi ... and the highest concentration of gang activity in the entire city” (pp. 1-2). It has been estimated that there are 1,100 different gangs in Los Angeles, with 86,000 members, which confirms its reputation as “the gang capitol of the world” (p. 2). The name of the mission is most apt in that Dolores is derived from the Latin word *dolor*, meaning sorrow, grief, pain. Fr. Boyle writes “I buried my first kid killed because of gang violence in 1988, and as of this writing, I have been called upon for this sad task an additional 167 times” (p. 2).

The book covers a period of 20-some years starting from when Fr. Boyle was first assigned to Dolores Mission, the poorest parish in Los Angeles, where he was appointed pastor in 1986, until shortly before it was published in 2010. It quickly became a best seller, winning several prestigious literary awards. The force of Fr. Boyle’s faith, compassion and drive shine through on nearly every page.

He is also a compelling speaker, much in demand above and beyond his regular Sunday sermons. His TED talks are available on the internet, and he seems to never miss an opportunity to tell the story of his people, usually bringing some of them with him to speak for themselves. Almost anyone, regardless of their overall perspective on the world, could read or listen to his words and would, I believe, come away with something of value. From our own perspective, the book is a gem of illustration of the two most basic assertions of SRV: (1) that societal devaluation is a destructive force that brings bad things that can ruin lives, and (2) that Social Role Valorization can be an elevating force that brings good things that can enrich lives.

Homeboy Industries grew out of Dolores Mission parishioners' decision to be a place of welcome for gang members, and their learning from this that what gang members requested most was a job. This led to opening a bakery, and after a few stumbles, the enterprise gradually evolved into Homeboy Industries, a diversified corporate concern with multiple components, including Homeboy Bakery, Homegirl Cafe, Homeboy Silkscreen, Homeboy/Homegirl Merchandising, and Homeboy Maintenance, that provide jobs to hundreds of gang members. Getting these businesses up and running wasn't easy. Many people felt that:

*assisting gang members somehow cosigned on their bad behavior. Hate mail, death threats, and bomb threats were common...*

*We used to joke ... we ought to change our voice mail message after hours: 'Thank you for calling Homeboy Industries. Your bomb threat is very important to us.'* (p. 10 - 11)

For many gang members, working at Homeboy Industries was their first legitimate employment, and many started their work careers there and moved on to better paying jobs elsewhere, after having first learned how to work and how to hold a job, as well as discovering that learning, growth, dignity, self-esteem, respect, security, stability and other rewards can come with the valued roles of being a worker, an employee, a tax-payer and a

productive contributor. Beyond the meaning inherent in work itself is that it also helps turn so many other good things of life into genuinely realizable possibilities, including having a home instead of being on the streets and homeless, being able to marry, raise a family and instill in one's children realistic aspirations to something more than gang life, imprisonment or premature death.

One idea conveyed in our SRV teaching that some people find surprising is that full integration is not always advisable nor is segregation and congregation always bad. Another way to put this is that sometimes grouping devalued people together can bring them important benefits that would be hard to realize any other way. A useful illustration of this point is found in the worker deployment pattern of Homeboy Industries. One of its principal goals is to show rival gang members that they do not have to hate or kill each other, but rather can get along and actually come to like or even love one another. It does this by hiring anyone from any gang who truly wants a job even if it means rubbing elbows with adversaries. Coming back to the street after a day's work "forces a fellow active gang member to ask the employed homie, 'How can you work with that guy?'" Answering that question will be awkward, clumsy, and always require courage, but the question itself jostles the status quo" (p. 9). Having a decent job working steadily side-by-side with a supposed enemy on a regular basis in a common and valued endeavor toward mutual benefits answers this question quite effectively for the workers, and seems to be one of the strongest rehabilitative aspects of the whole Homeboy enterprise in depleting enmities and altering mind-sets.

However, having work is only part of having a life. Fr. Boyle's pastoral compassion and solicitude encompass the spiritual and emotional needs of the people in his life, and these are often far more urgent and difficult: visiting the imprisoned, advocating for the needy, counseling the lost, guiding the ignorant, redirecting the vindictive, forgiving the sinner, comforting the sick, consoling the sorrowful, praying with the dying, grieving with the bereaved.

Fr. Boyle has presented an intimate account of his ministry as a Catholic priest living out his faith by “suffering with” the poor, thus being what might be called an “honest-to-God” model of the “boundless compassion” noted in the book title. This helps explain his privileged standing in the lives of the people he serves, the trust and credibility he has earned from them, and why they are able to expose to him their inward fears and deepest hopes. In turn, this also seems to explain his ability to render such vivid accounts of the social encounters he has had with so many of them over so many years. Many who have been touched by him credit his concern for them with transforming their lives; several have testified that he saved their life and no doubt many would say that in reaching their soul, he helped them to save it as well. His presence and caring are tattooed on their hearts. This title is explained in the book's preface:

*Once, after dealing with a particularly exasperating homie named Sharkey, I switch my strategy and attempt to catch him in the act of doing the right thing ... I tell him how heroic he is and how the courage he now exhibits in transforming his life far surpasses the hollow 'bravery' of his barrio past. I tell him that he is a giant among men. I mean it. Sharkey seems thrown off balance by all this and silently stares at me. Then he says, "Damn G(reg) ... I'm gonna tattoo that on my heart." (p. xiv)*

Obviously, all the people to whom Fr. Boyle ministers have made an indelible impression on him as well.

All in all, this is a marvelous book, well-written, intense, engrossing and moving, filled with deep insights into human nature, human needs and human potential. Its author is not trying to implement SRV. He operates outside the SRV domain. And, he may never have heard the term Social Role Valorization. No matter. His beliefs and values are reflected in his decision to closely intertwine his life with the lowly. This makes his book very relevant

to us because it provides a superbly objective empirical confirmation of the central idea of SRV. Fr. Boyle is clearly conscious that having valued social roles such as baker or public speaker, and shedding or avoiding devalued roles such as convict or riff-raff, are major means to a better life for wounded individuals. While this awareness emanates from something that transcends SRV, it has nevertheless led him to act in a way that is concordant with it.

This book provides a colloquial narrative of the life experiences of real but invisible people whom many of us might otherwise never come to know (or want to know), and catalyzes our ability to empathize with both their devaluation and their role valorization. It would be an excellent complement to formal SRV teaching, especially in a college or university course where students usually have more time for ‘outside’ reading. Fr. Boyle's book brings to mind other books of the same genre, like those of Jonathan Kozol, for instance, or of Dorothy Day, or Jean Vanier, the genre of books by people who speak truth with the authority that comes from having lived their lives in the shoes of the people for whom they speak, books that never use the term SRV, but wonderfully convey its spirit. Fr. Boyle quotes a nun who, when asked “how do you work with the poor?,” answered “You don't. You share your life with them” (p. 172). He writes:

*You stand with the least likely to succeed until success is succeeded by something more valuable: kinship. You stand with the belligerent, the surly, and the badly behaved until bad behavior is recognized for the language it is: the vocabulary of the deeply wounded and of those whose burdens are more than they can bear. (p. 179)*

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*JOE OSBURN directs the Safeguards Initiative in Danville, IN, USA & is a member of the North American SRV Council.*

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Announcing  
**Advanced Issues in  
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**About Social Role Valorization (SRV)**

Social Role Valorization (SRV), a human service theory based on the principle of normalization, proposes that positively valued social roles are needed for people to attain what Wolfensberger has described as the good things of life (well-being). This is of particular importance for individuals with impairments or otherwise at risk of being socially devalued by others, and therefore of great importance for human services to them.

**About the book**

The first two chapters explain SRV, and give depth and background to SRV as an empirical theory that is applicable to human services of all kinds, to all sorts of people. The remaining chapters are all revised and expanded versions of presentations that Dr. Wolfensberger had given at previous international SRV conferences. The topics treated in the chapters move from the general (chapters two, three and four) to the more specific (chapters five, six and seven).

The contents of the book are especially useful for people who do, or want to, teach SRV; for SRV researchers; and for those interested in implementing SRV in a systematic way, especially in service fields where SRV is new, not yet known, and not widely—if at all—embraced.

**About Wolf Wolfensberger, Ph.D. (1934-2011)**

World renowned human service reformer, Professor Wolfensberger (Syracuse University) was involved in the development and dissemination of the principle of normalization and the originator of the program evaluation tools PASS and PASSING, and of a number of service approaches that include SRV and Citizen Advocacy.

**Book Chapters**

- Foreword
- Preface
- Chapter 1: A brief overview of Social Role Valorization
- Chapter 2: The role of theory in science, and criteria for a definition of Social Role Valorization as an empirically-based theory
- Chapter 3: The hierarchy of propositions of Social Role Valorization, and their empiricity
- Chapter 4: The relationships of Social Role Valorization theory to worldviews and values
- Chapter 5: Values issues and other non-empirical issues that are brought into sharp focus by, or at, occasions where Social Role Valorization is taught or implemented
- Chapter 6: Issues of change agency in the teaching, dissemination and implementation of Social Role Valorization
- Chapter 7: The application of Social Role Valorization principles to criminal and other detentive settings
- Conclusion to the book