

The Gift of Fear - and Other Survival Signals that Protect Us from Violence by Gavin de Becker



Reviewed by: Lauren Evans

I picked up this book after attending a workshop at work about learning how to avoid terrible things like kidnapping when traveling abroad. Our instructors were some industry heavy hitters. Mitchel Keiver is a senior manager with 15 years in corporate security, and he provides training on kidnap incident management and crisis response. Our other instructor Steve Romano has worked in law enforcement and security for more than 39 years. Previously, he was the Chief of the Crisis Negotiation Unit of the Critical Incident Response Group at the FBI. When they recommended this book and only this book as our reading, I definitely wanted to check it out.

Throughout our lives, we will all have to make choices on our own without instructors or experts there to guide us. *The Gift of Fear* is meant to arm the reader with a better understanding of how to recognize fear, tap into it and then use it effectively for safety. The author states: “As we stand on the tracks, we can only avoid the oncoming train if we are willing to see it and willing to predict that it won’t stop.”

The book opens with a few stats to paint a picture of how violent our country has become. The author states that in the last two years alone, more Americans have died from gunshot wounds than were killed in the Vietnam War – and, 20,000 guns enter the stream of commerce every day. Four million children were physically abused last year, and it was not an unusual year. De Becker begins in this way to convince the reader that he or she, or someone that they care for, will possibly become a victim at some time.

Murderers are not as different from us as they seem. The author tells us about one of his close friends who was so angry at an ex-boyfriend when she was in her twenties that she had fantasies about killing him. Then, one day, she was driving her car, and he was coincidentally in the crosswalk, right in the path of her car. She sped up, but he was able to jump out of safety with only his leg injured. If things would have happened a bit differently, this woman would be a murderer. Instead, she is “among the world’s most famous and admired people, someone you know of whom you certainly wouldn’t have been pegged as a murderer.”

We read a story about Kelly, a woman who entered her apartment building to find a man lurking in the shadows. When he claimed he was going to the same floor she was and offered to help her carry her things, her intuition sent her a signal to be wary. But, the stranger’s behavior didn’t fit the bill of a murderer or a rapist, and Kelly did not recognize what her intuition knew. He persuaded her to let him into her apartment, and she narrowly avoided being raped. De Becker shows us all of the warning signs and teaches us how this could have been easily avoided, and that refusal to hear “no” can be an important survival signal.

The author tells us that in order to predict whether the Palestinians will continue in the path of violence, we must try to see things the way they see them. He cites a recent *60 Minutes* episode where the mastermind terrorist in Palestine known as “The Engineer” was profiled. The interviewer asked one of his terrorist followers how he could do what he does. The man’s answer: “He’s a very normal person, just like all of us.” The interviewer claimed that there was no way “he is just like all the rest of us.” To that, the terrorist follower said, “There are thousands and thousands in our country that believe what we believe – and not only our country, in the rest of the Arab world and even in your country.” De Becker goes on to shed light on a process his firm uses to use to evaluate the likelihood of success of any prediction. Effective predictions can only be made without value judgments, and we must be able to see situations from the perspective of others.

The following chapters show us how intuition and perception come into practice. I found Chapter 8 very relevant to my past where I struggled in dealing with people who couldn’t let go. De Becker says that the strategy of “watch and wait is usually the wisest first step, but people frequently apply another management plan: engage and enrage.” We all have a natural urge to do something dramatic when we are threatened or harassed, but the fastest way to end that harassment is by not reacting and appearing to do nothing. It seems so obvious, but it’s so easy to react in the moment without thinking first. Later in the book and continue our practice, the author provided a list of behaviors to help guide intuition to predict violent situations in the workplace, as well as tips of how to let go of a violent employee. He also shared pre-incident indicators associated with spousal violence and murder and reminds us that by the time we wake up tomorrow morning, another 12 women will be murdered. The book ends with a case that brings all of the elements we learned about together, as well as a final chapter where he encourages the reader to “honor accurate intuitive signals and evaluate them without denial.”

Here are some important learnings I took from the book:

1. Listen to your intuition.
2. Technology will never be able to save us – we must rely on intuition.
3. Trust that what causes alarm probably should, because when it comes to danger, intuition is always right in at least one of two ways: it is always in response to something, or it always has your best interests at heart.
4. You are what you know. Our intuition fails when it is loaded with inaccurate information.
5. With denial, the details we need for the best predictions float silently by us like life preservers.
6. The resource of violence is in everyone – all that changes is our view of the justification.
7. Safety is the preeminent concern of all creatures and it clearly justifies a seemingly abrupt and rejecting response from time to time. “I did not ask for your help and I don’t want it” could help avoid you from being attacked. Being rude is a small cost compared to your life.
8. Charm is almost always a directed instrument.
9. Never jog alone while listening to music. Save rocking out for the gym.
10. Women are more comfortable relying on intuition because we do it all the time.
11. Never show fear when threats are made. Threats are rarely spoken from a position of power, and it is the listener not the speaker who decides how powerful a threat will be.
12. Restraining orders only make matters worse. Public rejection is a threat to the identity.

When this book arrived to our library, I was about to leave for a trip to Morocco where I was responsible for a group of 19 Whole Foods Market team members and customers. I took it on the plane to read and finished it in Thailand. *The Gift of Fear* was very revealing and informative for me. It’s a great read for all of us, as we all take things for granted when it comes to our personal safety –

even our daily routines going from home to work could very well be putting our lives in jeopardy. The author attempts to convince us because the most violent acts are predictable, there are tools and valuable insight that can be used to prevent unnecessary violence and save lives.

“People should learn to see and so avoid all danger. Just as a wise man keeps away from mad dogs, so one should not make friends with evil men.” –Buddha