

HIGH-VOLTAGE HEDGEHOG

(the remarkable power of the human spirit)

by Mike Cooney

A CONVERSATION WITH ROB HARLEY

It seems to be a fact of life: one of the conditions of living on this planet is that, sooner or later, most (if not all) of us will face a crisis. Something bad will happen. Something will go terribly wrong. Whether it's the sudden death of a loved one, a natural disaster (ask the people of Christchurch), a dreadful crime, a horrible accident or a relational catastrophe ... we will all, to some extent, be affected by something that'll test our very essence. But here's the question: how come some people who've been wounded and bruised by life, emerge with powerful lessons learnt – lessons that are hugely helpful to those around them? How come some people, in the midst of their worst nightmare, find a perspective that takes them beyond their despair and leaves them smiling as they choose to enjoy the gift of life? Celebrated journalist, documentary-maker, story-teller and Harley-Davidson-rider, Rob Harley, is soon to release his latest book, 'The High-Voltage Hedgehog'. It's a book, he says, about learning ... learning the value of perspective ... the value of comparing something to other things, so that problems and setbacks can be accurately judged. It's a book, essentially, about the power of the human spirit ...

GRAPEVINE: What encouraged you to put pen to paper on a subject like this? And where does the hedgehog come in?

ROB HARLEY: I was heading home from work about three years ago in what was one of the wettest, most miserable starts to winter I could remember. I was feeling grumpy, had a bout of SAD (*Seasonal Affective Disorder*) and all that. Anyway, when I got in I took a quick glance at the paper, *The Rodney Times*, and was instantly captivated by the lead story. The headline read: **FALLEN LINES SPARK CATTLE COMBUSTION** – and it was this amazing piece about these bulls 'exploding' and catching fire around some fallen power-lines.

But what made a great story even more sublime was the extra little line the reporter inserted towards the end: *A hedgehog was also killed*. And I couldn't help laughing!

Suddenly, my winter's rigours were forgotten and my *Seasonal Affective Disorder* was on hold. For a moment there, a deep sense of gratitude came over me ... and I thought, what an amazing little country we live in! The stories in our newspapers aren't about armoured personnel carriers coming down the street, or how many people got kidnapped in the middle of the night, or whether our neighbourhood got shelled by the government, or whatever! We

TO KNOW THE ROAD AHEAD, ASK THOSE COMING BACK.

have stories about hedgehogs that get electrocuted!

Now, you have to understand: when I decided to leave news and current affairs about 10 years ago, I did so partly out of a sense of soul-weariness.

TIRED OF THE BLAME-GAME:

I was just sick of doing stories about victims. I was sick of turning on the news at night and seeing stuff that was always someone else's fault. It was a fatigue brought on by 25-odd years of reporting within an overwhelming culture of blame.

Anyway, I had the pleasure, in the midst of that culture, to have reported the occasional story in which I found that rare breed of person who operates on what I have come to call the 'solution-side' of life.

People with perspective.

People who understand that if the most remarkable happening in town this week was that a hedgehog went high-voltage ... things aren't really that bad.

So I began to assemble stories. Stuff that gladdens your heart ...

GRAPEVINE: Let's start with an observation. When things go wrong (and it seems that eventually it happens to most of us), a lot of people respond by sulking, or playing the victim, or blaming somebody, or lashing out. Is this a natural reaction? And is there anything wrong with that?

ROB: It depends what it is that's happened to you! If it's a relatively minor thing, then (as some people might say), "C'mon mate, just get over it!"

Look, it's probably about how we're wired to some extent. We're learning a lot

these days about the subject of resilience – what it is that produces this ability to bounce back from difficulty. And it's a fairly mysterious process – although there are now some quite good books on the subject. From what I've read, it seems that scientists are getting a handle on how some people don't just survive a crisis, but even grow *better* as a result of the crisis. More and more writers and researchers are saying that *you actually have to endure some pain in your life*. It's like an inoculation against stuff in the future.

Another book that I'm midway through writing is called *A Safe Place to Cry*. It's about people who deal with trauma on an almost daily basis – people like policemen, funeral directors, intensive care doctors – and how they process their own pain. And one of the really interesting comments that an intensive care specialist made to me was how people/families/communities who *haven't* walked the path of pain at some stage of their life don't do as well in a crisis as people who *have*.

GRAPEVINE: So you're saying that stress and pain and grief and all that causes us to grow – and, in actual fact, is *good* for us? Do you have any examples of people who've gone through the fire and come out even better?

ROB: Someone who taught me a lot about the concept is a guy called Trevor Yaxley. Trev and I were on a plane together a few years ago, and I noticed he was rubbing his leg. As it turned out, his leg has hurt for years, after he was involved in a particularly vicious road accident. (This happened, by the way, just a couple of years after his son, David, was killed in a road crash.) Anyway, Trev told me about the pain in his leg and how, every now



and then, doctors suggest he should have it amputated – because it can get so bad. And I remember asking him “How do you deal with all that?” Particularly following the loss of his son (which was huge, as you can imagine) ... but also with his first child being born with Downs Syndrome ... and having his daughter badly injured in the same crash that killed David.

And Trev said a couple of things. He said “Rob, never waste a good trial!” And he then went on to use this remarkable phrase – he said, “I’ve learnt to live above it and not under it ...”

I’ve never forgotten Trevor’s words. And, interestingly enough, it’s a phrase that cropped up when I was in Whanganui prison watching a woman called Jan Wallis forgive the guy who’d driven his car drunk, and killed her daughter and two other kids.

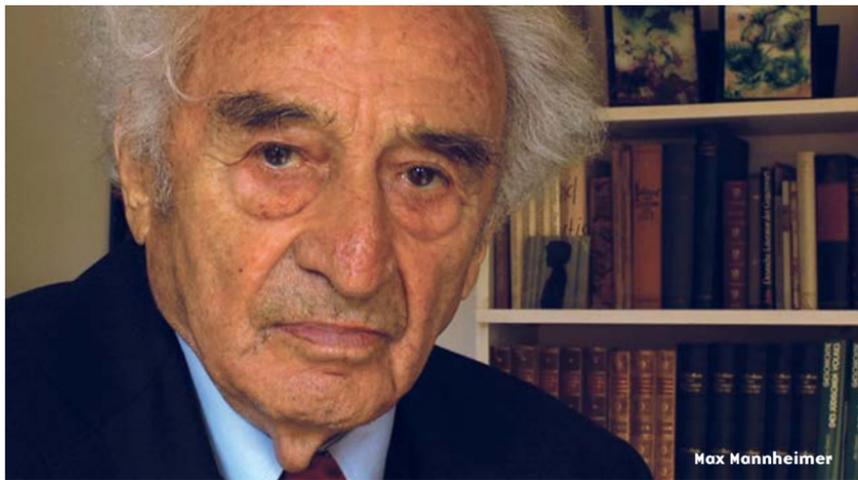
She said to him “I could honestly say

I wasn’t angry at you, because I didn’t want to let what you had done invade my whole life.” Then she went on, “My decision to forgive you has been healing and releasing ... for me.”

I think people who’ve actually been to the very gates of hell, who felt the flames (metaphorically speaking) and have forged on anyway – these people have so much to teach the rest of us.

GRAPEVINE: Can we talk more about resilience? Where do we get it from? Is it something that’s self-taught? Or is it inherited, a genetic thing? Because it seems that some people have it, while some people ... don’t!

ROB: There are lots of different strands to it. For starters, you’ve got the basic quality of human optimism. Studies being done now show that an optimistic attitude is basically developed by the time you’re five years of age.



CAUGHT – NOT TAUGHT:

To some extent, it comes from the home that you're in. If your parents were optimistic people who, in spite of the fact they might've had tough times, looked towards a better day and had a cheery outlook on life – you're more likely to grow up with that kind of attitude.

My mind goes to a guy we once interviewed. He'd survived four concentration camps: one in Czechoslovakia, one in Poland and both Auschwitz and Dachau. He was a remarkable man called Max Mannheimer (his story's in the book). Most of his family were executed in Auschwitz the night they got off the train – his mother, father, brother Erich (another brother, Ernst, was killed later), his 15-year old sister Katharina, and his 22-year old wife, Eva. He came through the war left with only his youngest brother, Edgar.

When I first met Max he said to me, "I have some lessons for you from the camps!" ... and he had a huge impact on me. He told me how, at one point, with his mind full of the dreadful things that had been done to his family, he decided to run at the electric fence and electrocute himself. But 17-year-old Edgar asked, "Max, are you going to leave me here alone?" And Max suddenly realised he had to stay alive for his brother.

In essence, he was saying, *"If today you can't live for yourself, then live for someone else ... even in the midst of the most appalling times."*

At one stage, Max was almost murdered by a guard who saw him limping. If you got injured or sick in those camps, they just killed you. And this particularly vicious guard in Auschwitz used to kill people by beating them to death with a shovel. Max was ordered to go to the tool-shed one day. As soon as he got there and saw the guy coming, he started to flatter him, saying "Capo Helmet, the men really admire you

– I should tell you that.” And Helmet said, “Really?” And Max went on, “Yes, because we recognise that you have qualities of true leadership – just like the Führer himself!” This guy was so distracted by what Max said – it was so completely unexpected – that he let Max go.

Again, I listened to that and I thought: *what is Max telling me here?* And his lesson was: “*Be nice to everyone – one day it may save your life!*”

He had a wicked little sense of humour, too. He was a funny guy. Which was interesting. A study from a few years ago showed that the men and women in the concentration camps who’d found something to laugh about – who retained their sense of humour – tended to survive at a rate exponentially greater than others.

GRAPEVINE: You’ve heard the saying: *‘It’s not what happens that counts – it’s what you do about what happens.’* But how much control do we really have over the way we respond to things? Is it a skill we can practise, something we can prepare for – or do we even have a say in the matter?

ROB: I think it’s partly about the company you keep. It’s like the saying you often hear around our office: “*We’ve got to stay on the solution-side!*”

MIX & MATCH:

If you’re around emotionally-depleting people all the time, they’ll suck the life out of you. So surround yourself with happy people! (Which doesn’t mean go and suck the life out of them!) Try to deliberately place yourself in environments where people are positive and ‘solution-oriented’.

I was in the Harley Davidson dealership in Texas as part of a bike trip we’ve just done. And on the door outside the Managing Director’s office (he’s a big, tattooed bloke), it says *‘Please don’t come into this office with a problem, without at least having thought part-way through how you’re going to solve it.’*

I find another thing that helps is to study people who overcome things. And for me that’s been a massive learning-curve. These days, I deliberately – at least once or twice a year, as part of my work – get out of the country and go hang around people who are solution-oriented and who’ve overcome great odds. I intentionally seek them out.

For example, I found two people who’d lost relatives in the Oklahoma City bombing. I went and met them, because I heard they had great stories to tell. One of them, Kathy Sanders, had lost both her grandsons in the day-care centre below the Murrah Building (which was blown up by Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols). She was in court one day watching the sentencing and saw Terry Nichols’ mother, just bent over and broken with grief, at the back of the courtroom. And so she went over and made friends with her. Then she became friends with Terry



Nichols' son, who would come and visit her all the time.

She said to me, "I was amazed at how far I'd come ..." And, as much as anything else, I want to ask "How did you do that? How did you get past that?"

GRAPEVINE: What sort of impact do these encounters have on you?

ROB: Being in the company of people who've lived through the very worst things imaginable and come out the other side does two things for you. Firstly, it encourages you and it enlivens you. But secondly, it actually makes you really impatient ... and a little bit grumpy!

I mean, the flip side for me of the work that I do is that I watch some of the new breed of reality TV, and I want to reach for the sick-bucket! It's just nonsense!

At lunchtime today I was with two women I'm going to Israel with in a



few weeks' time – to see people who are living right on the edge. Like people who are helping mothers who get held-up at Israeli checkpoints, and are giving birth to their babies in their cars – because they're Palestinian and they can't get through to a hospital.

The thing is, it's quite an intoxicating environment to be in – in the company of these people. And I'm a real believer in the idea that you actually have to go ... and you have to live ... and you have to *smell* and *feel* and *be* in those environments, before you really start caring. And, like I said, it makes you, if you're not careful, a grumpy old man! You find yourself sitting in front of your television, screaming at people!

One of my stories is about a couple from Dunedin (Sue and Kristin Jack). She's a doctor, he's a nurse, and they've lived in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, for many years – effectively in the slums. Their home is a shack, right in the middle of this sweaty, revolting place ... where 75% of the men visit prostitutes on a weekly basis ... where HIV/Aids is rampant ... where it's just astonishingly awful.

You go hang around people like that, and it marks you! You're never the same.

GRAPEVINE: You're pretty big on the power of stories – and you've spent much of your working life tracking down people who have exceptional stories to tell. Is there one which is a stand-out for you? One that has impacted you the most?

ROB: Probably the one that I keep coming back to – because in a sense, it was the start of a whole new direction for me. It was the first time I'd picked up a video camera and started documenting things ...



Sue and Kristin Jack

An old friend of mine rang me and asked if I could help her brother find his daughter who'd gone missing in India. She was backpacking through Asia, and had just disappeared off the face of the earth. He'd made a couple of trips over there already, and on the next trip, I went with him – armed with all these posters of her. The plan was to put them up around this little ancient town called Varanasi (where she went missing), and see what information we could gather.

Anyway, Diana Routley was her name, and we tried rustling up a bit of action without much joy. But he just kept at it, and didn't give up. In the end, he had a fair idea who the guy was that'd been involved in her disappearance, and – long story short – they eventually found him. He was tricked into coming to a hotel to pick up some money that was owing to him. The cops were there, they arrested him, and he led them to his home village

... where they found Diana's body buried under the floorboards of his house.

She'd been suffocated for \$3000 worth of U.S traveller's cheques.

I was back in New Zealand at that stage, and he contacted me and said, "I've found her Rob, I've found her ...". So they burned her bones on a funeral pyre in Delhi, bought the ashes back, and had a ceremony in Kohimarama.

NO STONE UNTURNED:

It was just one of the most powerful things I've ever been involved in. Here was a Kiwi dad who simply refused to give up ... who just went and went and went ... and eventually found a pile of bones, and that was it. That story, at every level, just blew me out of the water.

What impacted me most was just the love of a father. I mean, if I was being

super-spiritual about it (and I think it was probably a bit like this for me) it's like God has got missing-posters ... billions of them, all over heaven ... waiting for his children to come home. And I think it was *that* that got me: the heart of a father.

GRAPEVINE: Lots of your stories have an element of faith in them – does this come out of your personal beliefs, or ...?

ROB: Yeah, some of it does. But what I invariably find is that people who are (gee, this is going to sound dreadful!) the most effective, the most appealing and the most winsome Christians I know, don't do much preaching. They just *are*. They live out their faith. And there's something so magnetic about them that people can't help but ask: "Why are you like this?"

GRAPEVINE: But much of what you've seen is *awful* – right? Which makes a lot of people question: *Where is God when it hurts?*



ROB: I wish there were simple answers to that question, but I don't think there are. And it's hard to even talk about it without sounding trite!

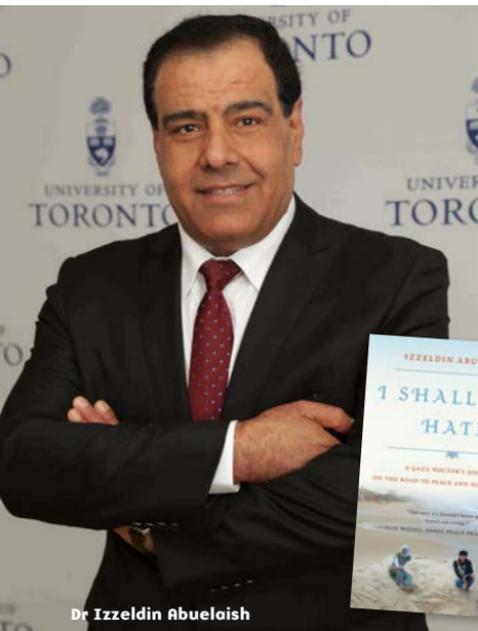
A guy once pointed something out to me. He said, "When you go to a jeweller and you want to buy a really expensive diamond, he'll put the diamond on a black piece of cloth ... and then he'll shine a light on it, to show the gem at its very best." I know this probably sounds cheesy, but sometimes the very best of who *we* are... I mean, the things we celebrate, like courage, tenacity, stickability, faithfulness ... those qualities show up clearest against a background of struggle.

We don't go to the Olympics to see people run the same times that they did back in the 1940s. We go to the Olympics because we're hoping we're going to see a record *broken*. And the whole world of athletics is about striving for a better time – to do it faster, to do it better. And when you go to the gym, you don't just push your hands into the air – you push your hands against *weights*. It's about resistance.

So I think struggle is part of the human condition. And where God is in the midst of all that? Well, you know, sometimes there is stuff that we inflict upon ourselves. But sometimes there is stuff that we in no way deserve. God doesn't bring that stuff upon us, but he grants us the room and the strength to actually live above it, not under it.

GRAPEVINE: How have these remarkable people and their remarkable stories changed you and your world-view?

ROB: I think I'm a softer person. I'm more of a thinker. I'm way less black-&-white



Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish

than I used to be. And I'm far readier to sit and listen to people – and not judge.

I met a man in Toronto earlier this year, Dr Izzeldin Abuelaish. He's a Palestinian who grew up in a refugee camp. He was one of eight children. They lived under the most appalling restrictions and draconian treatment – and his family was dirt-poor. Despite this, he got himself highly educated, managed to become a doctor, and had children of his own.

In January 2009 there was an exchange of fire between Hamas, in Gaza, and the Israeli army. The Israeli army shot tank-rounds into his neighbourhood ... and one of them hit the doctor's apartment building, blowing his three oldest daughters and his niece to pieces. He says, when he walked into that room, he was up to his ankles in blood and body-parts.

THE POWER OF ONE:

His three girls had qualified as a journalist, a lawyer and a doctor ... and, out of that tragedy, he established a foundation called 'Daughters of Peace'. He also wrote a book called 'I Shall Not Hate'. He's now an international speaker on reconciliation. And he's Muslim.

He has taught me much about faith, tolerance, a heart and a hunger for peace, and the triumph of love over hate ...

GRAPEVINE: Are you optimistic about the future?

ROB: I'm very optimistic, actually. At the moment I'm doing some work on a long-term documentary about a lesbian couple ... and I listen now to the way many people speak compared to the way they used to. It used to be that the whole gay and lesbian thing was just like a punch-line – there were jokes and put-downs, etc. But, now, the people that I move amongst don't joke about it anymore. There is a respect, there's an awareness, there's acceptance.

There's this growing sense that, as a society, we ought not to label. And I see a lot less labelling going on now. That's what makes me optimistic. 🍇

ROB HARLEY'S BOOK – 'THE HIGH VOLTAGE HEDGEHOG' – WILL BE AVAILABLE EARLY IN THE NEW YEAR.



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HAVE YOUR SAY!



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