

Article by Johan Stevens – February 2015

My Bible: “Illusions” by Ingeborg Bosch

The Saturday edition of “De Volkskrant” (a Dutch newspaper) of December 27th 2014 featured a series of articles titled “This Is My Bible”. A number of writers and thinkers, including Ionika Smeets and Bert Wagendorp, were asked about the book they fall back on time and again.

For me, this book is “**Illusions**” by Dutch psychologist **Ingeborg Bosch**.

I was 22 when I came into contact with Ingeborg Bosch’s work through a psychologist. I was young, freshly graduated, living in Amersfoort (city in the centre of The Netherlands TN) and having recurrent feelings of loneliness. Weekends were a struggle, especially when I had no social engagements planned. I did have friends whom I would go out with, but still. At some point I had a girlfriend and when she told me that she was going to spend the weekend at her mother’s, I was so scared: what would become of me? All hell broke loose when she left for a ski holiday twice in one winter.

Being alone felt like hell to me and I couldn’t get rid of this feeling.

On my first contact with Bosch’s book, *Illusions*, I was shocked by the way I could identify with it. This was about me! The way Bosch describes different situations in which, in hindsight, we react overly sensitive or overly indifferent. The way we often react to situations as the child we were instead of the independent adult we are. I mean, you can say a lot about an evening or a weekend alone, but strictly speaking it’s a far cry from being ‘hell’, you can do all sorts of fun things, or worst case it’s a little boring.

Another thing I identified with was the feeling of urgency to do certain things. This hyperactive feeling, “yess, this time I’m totally going to pull it off”. I called a girl I was dating and she didn’t call back, the way I was obsessively hoping she would call back.

And how irritated I would become. “Really what’s wrong with this girl to not even give me a call back?! Society is becoming increasingly individualistic. Bitch.”

Ingeborg Bosch’s explanation for this and many other complicated emotions was spot on for me: She explains that these reactions are a way to protect yourself from old pain. Situations that occur in the here and now easily touch upon feelings we have been carrying for a long time. Feelings of not being seen, not being understood, from early childhood.

So how can that be?

As a child we are at the mercy of our parents and when loving touch and attention often lacks, it’s life threatening for a child. Because for a child this attention truly is a basic need. In addition, according to Ingeborg Bosch, a child’s perception of time is distorted.

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To a child mom's absence will last forever. If mom doesn't respond to crying in the night, or starts yelling then for a child this is 'hell'. So what if a child is threatened, treated cynically, or always gets scolded, or ridiculed? Life-threatening, overwhelming.

In order to survive these experiences as a child we put up defences. A defence is a way to deny and suppress this truth. Unconsciously the child will do his/her utmost to be cute, nice, sociable or athletic. Or he or she will believe that everything is his/her fault. A child will blame himself or herself for everything, guilt and shame and insecurity will start to occupy a permanent space in his/her life.

These defences are lifesaving for a child and as adults, we no longer need them, so what's the big deal? Although we, as adults, have a totally different reality, it often seems though as if we are still a child. That's the reason criticism from your boss can feel so devastating sometimes. That's why many of us don't really dare to become intimate with someone, why being alone can be so terrible. There's a technical reason in our brains behind this, something with the amygdala, but that's beyond the scope of this post.

For me it has helped me tremendously to see, to rationally understand, that for us as adults, most things are not so urgent. A "like" on Facebook, you can do without it for an hour. Or a year. Four months without sex (I don't usually believe this but it's true) we can do without it. Whether I enjoy a period without sex? No, of course not. But it's not 'hell' or 'devastating'. Well ... maybe it's a shame (especially for all these women;-))

In addition, in most cases adult reality means you always have a choice, certainly if you have a healthy body. I can go into a pub and have a chat with somebody.

We can take care of ourselves regarding our basic needs, we know that everything has a beginning and an end, we know that it's a vast world with many possibilities.

Slowly I start to get a grip on these mechanisms. And that's a blessing. If the old reality is no longer stuck to the now, then a day without Twitter can become the best thing that can happen. Then being single can mean something that's not always fun, but also leaves space for new encounters and many other things. Then you don't need to feel undervalued when someone doesn't choose you and start afresh every day when dating or searching for a job.

One last example: over the past year I have spent perhaps 100 short but annoying hours stressing about anything and everything. In particular wondering if somebody would do something for me or not. In 95 of these cases, my worries were wrong. Everything would turn out to be just fine. I believe this illustrates what Ingeborg Bosch means by: "If we can experience the here and now for what it really is, then it is usually surprisingly unburdened."