

Guru Madness

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Anthony Robbins stares out at me from his fifty-dollar CD, pristine helmet hair and fluorescing teeth framing a steely gaze, which looks deep within my soul. He points his finger straight at me and tells me that he knows who I am. Apparently I have a giant within me that (for a price) he can rouse from its so far complete inertia. He can also show me how to take immediate control of my mental, emotional, physical and financial destiny.

Lets see. Complete control of destiny...fifty smackers. Done. During the course of the audio CD Anthony kindly tells me that he lives in a castle and flits about in a helicopter whilst thousands of peoples, giants all – shower him with fifty dollar notes and or thousands for complete, COMPLETE control of their destiny. I nod sagely as I receive the wisdom that “different actions produce different results” and “in your moments of decision your destiny is shaped.” Hard to argue with that. Perhaps my giant has a touch of narcolepsy or is just too damn lazy to fall for these crude Psychology 101 techniques but he remains stubbornly horizontal. Maybe if I buy the next CD in the never ending series or perhaps the video or maybe even the pendant that Anthony promotes. Ker ching...Ker ching...Ker ching.

The self-help industry is a multi billion-dollar industry that grows exponentially every year. Books fly off the shelves grasped by people desperate to get ahead, get out of a hole or just to stay afloat. In the “age of self improvement” we genuflect at the alligator skin boots of any guru, expert or ‘facilitator’ that can shine a light into the dark crevices of modern times. It would be throwing the baby out with the bathwater to suggest that goal setting and motivational techniques are a crock, when in many instances and in many lives these techniques can be useful. It would also be churlish to suggest that we have nothing to learn and nothing to gain from expert opinion but it is worth having a closer

look at the sociology and psychology behind our apparently insatiable demand for products and services that tell us how to live our lives and the end result of all this “empowerment”.

It is also kinda fun to look behind the perma tans and palatial bank accounts of some of the leading lights of the Guru movement. (Alright seeing as you asked: Doctor Phil is a bullying megalomaniac with an alleged history of adultery, Anthony Robbins much hyped marriage didn't survive his “hands on” counseling with another man's wife and Super Nanny Jo Frost doesn't find the thought of having her own children all that “asseptable”. Surprise, surprise – many of the prophets of self-help are all about helping themselves to a slice of the bountiful profits without actually practicing what they preach.

Historically speaking, Benjamin Franklin is accredited with one of the first self-help tomes - *The Way to Wealth* (1730s) in which he advised the masses on ways of pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. The Depression era of the 1930s spawned the classics *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill and *How to Win Friends and Influence people* by Dale Carnegie.

Mix and match these texts, throw in a few contemporary references (particularly relationships and new age spirituality), an ever decreasing time frame and a catchy title and you have pretty much every self-help book published since then. A scan of the considerable floor space that the self-help section occupies in most bookstores reveals that it is now possible to save your marriage in eight hours leaving plenty of time for the one-minute manager and the 30-second guide to world domination. (We may soon be able to take complete control of our destiny yesterday). Bearing in mind that Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus, however, you can still *Heal Your Life* by *Feeling the Fear and Doing it Anyway* by using the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Of the question *Who Moved My Cheese*, I can only reply that we may have come way too far down the *Road less Traveled* when the mysterious ambulation of a dairy product is considered a suitable title for a book on changing your life.

In his 2004 International bestseller – Status Anxiety, cultural commentator Alain De Botton identifies the paradox that as western society has grown more affluent and egalitarian we have grown increasingly more anxious and dissatisfied with our lot. He identifies the notion that anyone can theoretically have it all or be it all as a construct that has gradually taken hold culminating in a generation uniquely susceptible to a rhetoric which promises mastery and control.

We don't have to look far to see the streamlined bodies of the rich and famous disporting themselves on endless summer vacations and we are tirelessly encouraged to aspire to their looks, wealth and status. It is telling to note that between 2000 and 2004, US authority, Market data estimates that the market for the self-improvement genre has grown by 50 per cent. They estimate it as an eight billion plus business with approximately 4 thousand new self-help titles appearing every year. We are following the trend in Australia with the self-help genre regularly appearing on bestseller lists. It is clear that we are increasingly grasping at instruction manuals and authority figures to give us a leg up into the winner's circle but does all this self-help actually help?

Associate Professor Patricia Harris who holds the chair of Sociology at Murdoch University believes that the pervasive trend towards self improvement while laudable in some aspects also has a tendency to establish false hope. "I think clearly there are better ways of bringing up your children or looking after your body and it is useful to know about them but they imply that there is some goal of perfection to be reached," she says. "The point is you can never reach it. You may experience hours, days, weeks when everything is going right. You may be content with the way you feel or the way you look for a while but then the next morning you may not feel the same. The search must then go on for something more permanent. It moves us away from the gentle art of acceptance - that we are fragile imperfect things and that we are all in the soup: the human condition. Perhaps rather than life coaching or self-help books what we need are affirmations like "you are doing it o.k."

She believes that it creates an unrealistic expectation that life could or should be emotionally smooth and functional and that if it isn't there is something wrong that needs to be improved. Says Patricia "It tries to hold us all to some kind of normative standard whereas there are as many different biographies and ways of coping with life as there are people. I think at an individual level it can leave people certainly less contented and more vulnerable to self doubt – have I done enough, was it my fault? There is something worrying about the level of self-absorption that it creates. We have only so much energy and we might be better to channel some of our thinking outwards. Self absorption can be a trap because the more you look in the more you doubt."

Dr Jan Resnick from the Churchill Clinic, a psychotherapist with 30 years experience in research and counselling agrees: "I think it has definitely created a neurotic and narcissistic pursuit of some sort of illusion of perfection that is absolutely doomed to fail. And it does tend to leave people feeling extremely unhappy," he says. "As far as Psychotherapy goes or as far as I can represent it: it is fundamentally about people coming to terms with themselves as they are. That is the starting point. Anything you happen to want to do or achieve or set as a goal for yourself should be enjoyable or something additional that you give yourself. It doesn't matter to me whether it is flower arranging or a PHD in neuro psychiatry."

He believes that if goals are seen as part of a fulfillment as a person they are desirable but if a person feels compelled from something outside himself to strive for an imagined goal level as a requisite for being accepted then it is a path that ensures failure. "I have people who come and are perfect examples of this," he says. "Whatever they do it is not enough. They invariably feel a failure. They are led to feel some inadequacy or deficiency and they feel very unhappy because of it."

Happy or not in the in the age of self-improvement no area of our lives must go unexamined. Goals must be set about our career, family life, finances, bodily and emotional fitness. We must strive for greatness, awaken the giant within and yet not sweat the small stuff. The bar has been raised so high that we require experts and gurus to

enlighten us about what to eat; how to exercise; parent our children; co-ordinate our clothes; clean our houses and rearrange our features. (An estimated two million viewers tuned in to watch *The Super Nanny* making it one of Australia's most successful reality programs). Faced with an unrelenting barrage of often contradictory advice and a schedule designed for the uber being we aspire to be - we outsource. And thanks to the capitalist juggernaut there are an endless number of products, services and opinions available for hire.

Says Dr Resnick: "fostering dependency on professional expertise is a formula for disempowering people. In handing over responsibility to experts you basically keep yourself in the child's position and while it may free you from the burden of responsibility it keeps you dependant. If you look to professional experts to tell you how to parent your children, for example, and then you don't like how they have turned out - what are you going to do?"

He sees one of the problems of expertise, as taking something that is fundamentally personal and turning it into the intellectual and then creating a right or best way to do it. "The problem with that is the supposed right way according to the experts does not necessarily suit every person in terms of how they feel. As these things become divorced from the individual then we become increasingly alienated from things that are absolutely essentially personal like parenting, relationships or sexuality."

And when the cacophony of experts gets too loud - who ya gonna turn to? Increasingly it is your very own personal life coach; an individual who can help you custom fit an action plan and kick start your stalled motivation. It is the latest 'must have' in the human potential movement which has taken a firm hold of the personal aspirations of Americans and Europeans and is now available to take your call. Mother of five, international human rights lawyer and Prime Ministers wife, Cherie Blair made the tabloids with her controversial choice of life coach yet the question remained unasked: what could she possibly have left to aspire to? Dietyhood! Or was is the aspiration du jour of "life

balance” - a concept that may represent a step back into sanity or may simply be the next foothold on the slippery pole to who knows where.

Certainly Michael Prince, WA Chapter President of the International Coach Federation feels we have moved on from the concept of being “achievement machines”. He acknowledges that the basics of business and life coaching have evolved from the high achieving sports rhetoric previously tailored for elite athletes but that a shift has been made to include an emphasis on life meaning and balance. “On the one hand we have become more dependant on experts and it is convenient not to be responsible but I don’t see coaching as being part of the problem – I see the right kind of coaching as being part of the solution,” he says. “I deeply believe that this is not the expert to the empty vessel but that the answers, the potential and the resourcefulness is there somewhere and my job as a coach is to create the space and ask the questions that allow it to be seen.”

Life coach Viveca Nilsson agrees that coaching is not about telling a client what to do: “It is 99 per cent listening. I think all of us know deep inside what is right for us because I don’t know you and I don’t know what is right for you,” she says. “I think sometimes when you speak and you have someone who is not interrupting, you can come to a lot of conclusions.”

I ask if people can work it out for themselves, why they need a life coach? Says Viveca: “It is always very difficult to get started to make changes...people find those first few steps very hard and in the beginning working with a coach can be of enormous support. I will encourage you to take the actions that you have set up for yourself. Many people think a change has to be massive or dramatic and that is not true; you can often change a few things in ordinary life which can result in huge improvements.” Viveca concedes that many clients come with unrealistic expectations about life: “Most of my clients are confused. We seem to have far too many options. There is so much pressure because we want to pursue so much at the same time and it is impossible.”

And therein lies the sweet paradox - Is having a life coach just another tick on the shopping list of stuff we need to stay in the race or do we need one to help us get off the endless merry go round of achievement for achievements sake? Don't ask me – I'm too busy writing the forthcoming bestseller - *If Only You'd Put the Cheese Away When I asked You To.*

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