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## **Cure Without Communication: Self-Help Books and Popular Notions of Self and Communication, 1860-2000**

M. Louise Woodstock

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# Cure Without Communication: Self-Help Books and Popular Notions of Self and Communication, 1860-2000

## Abstract

This study traces the development of a basic premise, that what we think manifests in reality, underlying much of psycho-religious self-help literature in the United States. This premise posits alternative ways of thinking about the self, the community, and the communicative relationship between them. The belief in the power of thought to impact action - in the capacity of thought to instill good health, confident mindsets, and optimum circumstances – makes the claim that one can repair reality without social interaction. This study excavates the various evolutions of that claim and considers its impact on both notions of the self and the collective as well as on our understanding of how communication works. The study emphasizes three periods during which self-help and the genre's attending interest in "thought as communication" have been particularly resonant. In the early period, popular from roughly 1880 to 1910, psycho-religious self-help books were published by writers of "mind cure" or "New Thought" movements, alternative spiritual movements that promised relatively easy remedies for health and happiness. By rallying their powers of mind, readers were told they could control and direct their thoughts so that they exactly mirrored the intentions of God with the resulting consequence of perfect health and happiness. The underlying mechanism at work, according to these books, posited a direct relationship between thought and material consequence. This belief in the power of thought to construct reality continued to weave its way through our culture, becoming especially popular again in a middle period of 1940 -1960 under the name "positive thinking." During that period, the full effects of popular psychology were manifested in the self-help genre, positioning scientific knowledge alongside God and offering an alternative conception of the ways in which "communication" could improve our lives. At the same time, "negative thinking" books encouraged readers to identify and accept painful elements of their pasts. By the late period of the 1980s and 90s, the concept previously called "mind cure" and "positive thinking" had incorporated popular psychology into a hybrid "spirituality," a concept that encouraged readers to place painful problems in the past while holding strong to a "positive" future. The self-help genre provides a valuable written record of how the self and thought have been constructed into a particular cultural discourse. The self-help rhetoric about "thought as communication" claims that individuals in isolation can in fact accomplish the restorative and healing functions regularly attributed to social interaction. Surrounding this core self-help concept, however, circle many changing characterizations of religion, science, health, personhood, and community.

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Barbie Zelizer

**CURE WITHOUT COMMUNICATION:  
SELF-HELP BOOKS AND  
POPULAR NOTIONS OF SELF AND COMMUNICATION,  
1860-2000**

**Louise Woodstock**

**A DISSERTATION**

**in**

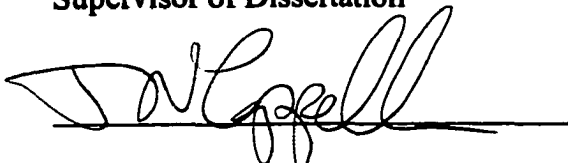
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**Supervisor of Dissertation**



**Graduate Group Chairperson**

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When the best thing comes into our thoughts, it is like what my mother has been to me. She has been just as really with me as all the other people about me – often more really with me. *Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot

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## ABSTRACT

### CURE WITHOUT COMMUNICATION: SELF-HELP BOOKS AND POPULAR NOTIONS OF SELF AND COMMUNICATION, 1860-2000

Louise Woodstock

Dr. Barbie Zelizer

This study traces the development of a basic premise, that what we think manifests in reality, underlying much of psycho-religious self-help literature in the United States. This premise posits alternative ways of thinking about the self, the community, and the communicative relationship between them. The belief in the power of thought to impact action – in the capacity of thought to instill good health, confident mindsets, and optimum circumstances – makes the claim that one can repair reality without social interaction. This study excavates the various evolutions of that claim and considers its impact on both notions of the self and the collective as well as on our understanding of how communication works.

The study emphasizes three periods during which self-help and the genre's attending interest in "thought as communication" have been particularly resonant. In the early period, popular from roughly 1880 to 1910, psycho-religious self-help books were

published by writers of “mind cure” or “New Thought ” movements, alternative spiritual movements that promised relatively easy remedies for health and happiness. By rallying their powers of mind, readers were told they could control and direct their thoughts so that they exactly mirrored the intentions of God with the resulting consequence of perfect health and happiness. The underlying mechanism at work, according to these books, posited a direct relationship between thought and material consequence. This belief in the power of thought to construct reality continued to weave its way through our culture, becoming especially popular again in a middle period of 1940 -1960 under the name “positive thinking.” During that period, the full effects of popular psychology were manifested in the self-help genre, positioning scientific knowledge alongside God and offering an alternative conception of the ways in which “communication” could improve our lives. At the same time, “negative thinking” books encouraged readers to identify and accept painful elements of their pasts. By the late period of the 1980s and 90s, the concept previously called “mind cure” and “positive thinking” had incorporated popular psychology into a hybrid “spirituality,” a concept that encouraged readers to place painful problems in the past while holding strong to a “positive” future.

The self-help genre provides a valuable written record of how the self and thought have been constructed into a particular cultural discourse. The self-help rhetoric about “thought as communication” claims that individuals in isolation can in fact accomplish the restorative and healing functions regularly attributed to social interaction. Surrounding this core self-help concept, however, circle many changing characterizations of religion, science, health, personhood, and community.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction: A CONCERN WITH THE THINKING SELF**

“What we think manifests in reality.” This is the basic premise of a longstanding strand of “self help” literature that suggests alternative ways of thinking about the self, the community, and the communicative relationship between them. The belief in the power of thought to impact action – in the capacity of thought to instill good health, confident mindsets, and optimum circumstances – makes the claim that one can repair reality without social interaction. This dissertation tracks the evolution of that claim and of the ways in which it promises to produce reality without the social interactivity frequently theorized as a necessary component of the construction of reality. Is it possible to realize the therapeutic, reparative benefits of interactive communication when even the influence of the social world is denied?

Self help’s insistence on the power of thought challenges many of our broader notions about how communication works as a mode of therapeutic intervention. Throughout society, communicating – talking, writing, thinking, reading with others and to ourselves – has been broadly posited as a primary way to bring about positive therapeutic change. Much less clear, however, is what form this therapeutic talk should take, or what it means. Social discourse about what it means to be human, happy, and good swirls about us in a dizzying mix, and nowhere is the idea that we communicate ourselves into health and happiness more prevalent than in “self-help” literature. In addition to providing cultural commentary, self-help’s descriptive and prescriptive messages belie considerable confusion about the achievement, or lack thereof, of health

and happiness. The only way to gain clarity and calm, this discourse maintains, is to communicate – a concept that has typically been thought to involve “getting outside the self” by sharing one’s thoughts and concerns with others. And yet, the popular and enduring literature of self-help makes the opposite claim – that “others” are hardly necessary or even desirable in fashioning the therapeutic interventions typical of situations requiring self-help.

This dissertation, historical and critical in scope, studies the models of and messages about a particular iteration of “communication” in self-help literature – a belief in the power of thought to construct reality. This notion endows the curative capital most frequently theorized as stemming from social interaction in the mental processes of the isolated individual. Simply put: this belief in the power of thought holds that individuals can change their lives, their relationships, their jobs, their personalities, by thinking differently. Through the power of thought alone, the desired change will occur. My research explores self-help’s narrative structures, through which ideas of selfhood, thought as communication, and community are textually conveyed, within the context of the genre’s development from roughly 1880 to the present. Rather than offer a comprehensive analysis of the self-help genre as a whole, I track how the power of thought, seen here as a potent force moving within and beyond each individual, is constructed as the central vehicle by which health and happiness can be gained and by which the self can change.

This project hinges upon the long prevalent idea in social scientific scholarship that notions about the self (and, I will argue, about communication and about thought as a form of communication) emerge out of culture and the collective. Groundbreaking

sociologists Charles Cooley and George Herbert Mead argued that ideas of selfhood are not innate but born through social interaction. Instead of thinking of ourselves independent of the actions and reactions of others, our ideas about ourselves, and subsequently our behaviors, are shaped by our environment and those who inhabit it. The meanings that humans attribute to themselves therefore are not only culturally variable, but are formed as well by shared symbolic products and interactions (Cooley 1956; Goffman 1959; Mead 1967). Theoretically, the arguments offered here are based upon the assumption that the self-help genre is such a symbolic product, one capable of shaping “our identity, our thought and our emotions” (Berger 1963, 121).

Extrapolating from the Chicago School scholars, “from Mead and Cooley through Robert Park and on to Erving Goffman,” James Carey draws “a definition of communication of disarming simplicity yet [...] of some intellectual power and scope: communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (1989, 23). For Carey, and for the scholars of which he speaks, producing, maintaining, repairing, and transforming reality – the very behaviors of humanness – inherently involves interaction among people. Alternatively, by framing “thought” as the central mechanism of health and wellness, the self-help genre offers an implicit challenge to the Chicago School’s theory that transformative communication must involve the self with social others. In effect, the self-help genre has constructed an alternative model of thought as communication, cast in a persuasive textual form, that has been perennially popular for at least a hundred years.

Counter to the messages in the books themselves, my underlying assumptions when studying the models and messages of thought in self-help are based upon theories of

language as social interaction. Turning again to Carey: “Models of communication are, then, not merely representations of communication but representations for communication: templates that guide, unavailing or not, concrete processes of human interaction, mass and interpersonal” (1989, 32). This belief, that language is not merely a representation of the social world, but an active agent within it, stems in turn from one that sees thought, communication, and action as intertwined social forces. The relationship between language and society has often been conceptualized as one in which language represents the world. This conception places language outside the realm of society, as a characterization of, but not a character within, society itself. Alternatively, we can think of language, and by extension media representations like self-help books, as not merely representations but as social events and actions with consequence, with the power to construct as well as reflect social life.

Most often, ideas about self, community, and communication take the form of the story. Scholarship on narrative and the self offers the insight that just as people make up stories, stories make up people (Irvine 1999, 2). The stories in self-help texts, the bulk of the books’ pages, are templates “for thought as communication.” In addition to seeing the self as an “internal dialogue” (Gagnon 1992), the self also engages in an external exchange with the surrounding social discourse. Clearly related to Mead’s notion of the socially created self, in more recent decades, scholars have posited a notion of a self that emerges through discourse and storytelling (Bruner 1998). For instance, Sarbin claims that people think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices by using narrative structures (1986, 8). Vincent Crapanzano describes the social work that stories do: “Narratives of the self are more than a story, a chronology, a history of the self (however



defined); they are taken to be a means of knowing the self. As such, at least in our medicalized era, they have, among others, a therapeutic intention [...] For us they describe self-discovery and facilitate “personal growth” (1996,108-9).<sup>1</sup> This implicitly places a great emphasis and heavy burden on the power of the individual’s thoughts and in turn begs the question of how “healing” as a direct consequence of those thoughts is conceived within these stories of therapeutic intention. Perennially, within the realm of self-help books, the greatest responsibility for healing, for success or failure, falls upon the individual, the reader. Therefore, an exploration of the construction of thought as communication in self-help books is heavily dependent on and intertwined with the textual characterization of the self, at times to the extent that “self” and “thought” appear inseparable, as Arthur Frank says when he writes that “stories [...] are the self’s medium of being” (1995, 53). Additionally, entangled ideas of self and thought frequently imply an other, the “spoken-to,” and thus involve the self’s community. Here again “communication” is invested with a primal, connecting potentiality of oneness, wholeness, fullness, or universal union, whether with oneself, God, or others. But importantly, this sense of unity is accomplished without literal interaction with others. Self-help books argue that the reparative benefits typically attributed to communication as social interaction can in fact be accomplished alone.

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<sup>1</sup> Crapanzano contrasts “a therapeutic function” with “the confessional, the pedagogical, the exorcistic.” This is a contrast which is not transparent to me. In fact I think that confession, pedagogy and exorcism may in fact be express outcomes of therapeutic discourse.

Historically, the stories in self-help books have maintained one constant: thought shapes reality. Over time, this idea takes multiple forms as the role of the explanatory mechanisms of science, religion, and narrative structure change, and it is these variations that the following chapters explore. In a broad sense, following this idea over time allows us to chart the evolving, transformational power self-help authors have bestowed upon thought and to consider the disparity between the stated power of thought and the explication of that power. For while thought becomes a transformative power in self-help texts, the term and the associated concepts of self and community remain largely undefined. Just as there is an inherent validity to the idea that connecting with others helps us understand ourselves and our world, the idea that self-change and self-understanding spring from thought seems similarly sensible; yet despite its frequent reiteration, “thought” remains vague and opaque. This dissertation tracks the evolution and maintenance of that sensibility as constructed in self-help books about general health and wellness. What matters in these texts is that this sensibility, that thought is powerful, appears true. Self-help books answer the need for this truth by making the power of thought into a transparent belief.

Of course, the self-help genre is far from the only discourse that posits a healing power in thought. The popular belief in American culture in the power of thought, language, and communication to heal, to construct the self, and to build relationships is enduring. The numerous forms that this takes are testament to its fundamental nature to human experience: religious incantations, town hall meetings, psychotherapy, or simply “clearing the air” with a spouse or friend. Communication, it is assumed, is a necessary condition for addressing both intra and interpersonal problems, with even a scientific

term for the inability to name and articulate one's feelings – Alexathymia (Gates 1993). We can thus place the self-help genre within a broader realm of cultural belief and practice in communicative healing. Still, while the concept is often expressed in simple, expansive terms – “I felt so much better after we'd talked about our problem” – a belief in therapeutic communication takes on specific, contextual attributes that change across society, time, and institution. And as is argued here, unlike town hall meetings, self-help books in the positive thinking tradition fail to acknowledge that reality involves people and that self-help is a negotiated, constructivist project involving collectives.<sup>2</sup>

And yet despite the inherent neglect of social interaction advocated in positive thinking rhetoric, self-help books, in offering advice on the good life, posit mass mediated, popular answers to the enduring questions that have propelled much philosophical and sociological inquiry in western societies since the Enlightenment (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 14). What is the nature of the individual; how do we and how should we think and act? Are we rational, contemplative beings, or emotional, impulsive ones? What are the consequences of isolation and of attachment to others? Do we have control of our own destinies or is there a greater power (God? Biology? Society?) to which we must submit? How are we each to be happy, to lead a good life, to be moral? Self-help books dare to attempt answers to these fundamental human questions. In doing so, they adopt the authority more frequently voiced by religious, scientific, medical and psychological institutions, and given their popularity, these books

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to differentiate here between the narrative that change in thought and perception then induce the individual to interact differently with others and the narrative that I am critiquing, in which thought changes reality regardless of any subsequent interaction between self and others.

consequently play a significant role in shaping ideas about the self, thought as communication, and community.

The present social context in which self-help resides invests the genre both with significant power to do harm while simultaneously disparaging it as inconsequential, even ludicrous, fluff. During the 2001 television season, ABC launched a sit-com, starring Jason Alexander as Bob Patterson, a self-proclaimed “self-help guru.” The show represented self-help’s proselytizers as ineffectual buffoons who fell prey to the very social and personal pitfalls they claimed to help others sidestep. *Psychology Today* instructs readers to identify the ‘distortions’ of self-help books as a means of protecting themselves from the texts’ over-inflated claims (*Psychology Today* 2001). Yet despite the negative aura that surrounds self-help, the genre continues to expand, commanding more shelf space in our bookstores, more time on our airwaves, and more “eyeballs” on the Internet. While data is not available for the specific subset of self-help studied in this dissertation, the total “self-improvement market is estimated to be worth \$5.7 billion as of 2000,” and at 32%, the largest category within that market, defined as “general motivational, spiritual, and self-help products and programs,” closely mirrors the types of books analyzed here (Marketdata Enterprises 2001).

Beyond these commercial indices of the genre’s influence, the rhetoric of self-help has pervaded contemporary thought. Literature professor Trysh Travis, writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, argues that the primary way in which her students of English literature ‘connect’ with 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century fictional characters is through the rhetoric of self-help (2001, B13). Self-help rhetoric may wash over critical, cultural differences if everyone can be ‘understood’ according to their ‘hang-ups.’ Yet, the

literature does offer a language people use, at the very least, to socially engage each other and more often to generate and sustain a sense of meaningful connection, as any episode of *Oprah* will attest. Setting aside the characterization of self-help as low culture and potentially destructive, the popularity of the books, coupled with the broad adoption of their rhetoric, conveys a widespread concern with the role of communication in the healthy maintenance of personal and public life. Also, the ways in which self-help rhetoric works to connect people throws into question the critique of self-help as individualistic and destructive of social cohesion.

The study of narrative within the social sciences has often focused on the correspondence between the story and “reality,” with researchers frequently noting the discrepancy between the two and the constructed nature of narrative (Mishler 1995). What is of importance here is not the accuracy or truth of self-help’s narratives of thought, self, and society, but that the narrative structures are culturally available for adoption<sup>3</sup>. While this dissertation focuses on texts, ample evidence demonstrates that the concepts of thought, self, and society articulated in the self-help genre are echoed in other realms of culture. When the World Trade Towers fell on September 11<sup>th</sup>, they became the vehicle through which we attempted to understand the world. Wide-ranging, disparate aspects of culture, from sports teams and fashion to presidential politics and the Dow Jones Industrial Average, were seen through these events. So too can our beliefs about the powers of thought to heal be read through this lens.

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<sup>3</sup> These ideas, all of them fundamentally about morality, include the degree to which we are self-determining individuals in control of our own destinies, the impact of thought and emotion on human behaviors, and whether or not individuals are capable of change and under what circumstances.

In late October 2001, *People* magazine devoted an entire issue to “Calming Your Fears” after the terrorist attacks. On dealing with fears of flying, “expert L. Jay Koch,” advised the magazine’s readers to “talk to somebody” if they felt panicked (2001,102). The content or subject matter of that talk was left unmentioned, implying that the act of communicating, rather than the substance of it, is what provides relief. Dr. Flemming Graae, a child psychiatrist, recommended that parents communicate with their children in a “reassuring and honest” way. Graae implied that talking with children would alleviate their concerns. “Be more available and in contact,” he said (2001, 104). Again, the commonsensical basis of this advice is incontestable, but so is its opacity. By focusing on the communicative act, on “being in contact,” the content of communication often goes unmentioned. The implication of this absence is that content, what is communicated and how, needs no elaboration, takes little effort, and invariably produces the desired effect. Graae does acknowledge that children need to take concrete action in response to worry and fear, and advises parents to “channel” their children’s anxiety by “taking up a Sept.11 collection. [...] and explain[ing] that all of us can help our country by simply being good to each other” (*People* 2001, 104).

But surely there are differences between types of communication, most notably between interpersonal and mass mediated communication. *People* magazine posed the question, “Is the nation as a whole suffering from acute anxiety as the result of the terrorist attack?” to Dr. Paul Ragan, a psychiatrist at Vanderbilt University. Pointing to the power of mass media to do harm, Ragan answered, “A large segment of the nation is. Because of electronic communications, all of this gets into our living rooms and we can’t help feeling anxious” (2001, 105). In response to the question, “How can people ease

their anxieties?” Ragan answered, “Talk to them, at churches, in social groups and especially with the family. [...] Writing – poems, letters, in a journal – is also helpful.” Again communicative activity was offered as a cure while communicative content remained unmentioned. Surely not all communication is equal, as the same article advised readers to beware of “rumors.” Princeton professor Elaine Showalter advised readers to protect themselves from rumors and the panic they inflict by reading critically. “What you look for in any rumor is attribution and evidence. Look for anonymous sources, for unattributed quotes, for sweeping generalities. Those are the top three signs that a rumor has no merit” (2001, 107). But be warned, “The Internet is both the poison and the remedy” (2001, 107).

As the collective reactions to the collapse of the World Trade Towers have demonstrated, we are a society that defines communication as our way of understanding ourselves as individuals and as a collective. But communication is an unwieldy notion – incorporating everything from television to unarticulated thought. Depending on what more specifically is meant by communication – mass, interpersonal, or intrapersonal – communication takes on tremendously different valences and powers to effect good and ill. This dissertation explores the cultivation of these popular ideas about communication within self-help, a mediated genre that has done a great deal to proselytize a notion of thought, invested with mysterious, transformative power, as the answer to past sins and the key to future glories.

## **What is Meant By “Self-Help” in this Research**

The dissertation charts evolving notions of the power of thought in North American self-help literature that are targeted to the general reader and promote general ideas of wellness. The notion that thought is the vehicle or means of manufacturing a good life, a sense of happiness and wellness, is a central theme in this literature, for as Fulton J. Sheen wrote of his reader, “what he basically wants in common with all other humans is happiness” (1953, 18). The use of the term “self-help” requires clarity since it means something somewhat different to each of us; as a scholar of religious self-help puts it, the term lacks “historical precision and connotative neutrality” (Anker 1999a, 2). The connotations for some have nothing to do with mass mediated books or with notions of the power of thought to change reality. Historically and today, groups that identify as “self-help groups” often refer to people who gather around a particular, local concern – anything from environmental hazards to improving women’s health. In this permutation, what it means to help oneself may be quite literal, such as helping oneself out of poverty or being self-reliant and pragmatic. It was in this sense that Samuel Smiles entitled his 1859 text, *Self-Help*. As the author also of *Duty, Thrift, and Character*, Smiles was an author firmly rooted in the “success literature” camp that provided readers with pithy advice on getting by in the world. The concept that would come to inflect so much of the genre – a belief in the power of thought to manifest reality – was largely absent. The reader found little here about the transformative power of thought, and much more about managing life’s hard knocks by taking action. Interestingly, self-help, when used in the way Smiles suggested, took on a communitarian tone, as opposed to an individualistic



one, as it did in the “mutual aid” groups of 1930s Britain (Katz 1993). Books that encourage social engagement as the means of solving problems are interestingly still called self-help books, but these are not the sorts of books under analysis here. Books that are about communicative difference and discord between the sexes, between parents and children, between managers and employees all fall outside the frame used here to identify books for inclusion. Texts that provide advice on communicating with others inherently suggest something quite contrary to what is implied by the “thought as communication” books. They suggest that interacting with others is the principle means of solving problems, acknowledging that the problems themselves are of a social nature; “thought as communication” books, on the other hand, propose that readers dismiss the social world and focus instead of the machinations of their own minds. Through the power of thought, these books put forth, readers can change the social world without actually engaging with it. Also, it is important to note that this project is a study of books, not of interactive “self-help” groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous nor of the popular lecture and workshop circuit. For many, these interactive groups and weekend sessions are what comes to mind when the term “self-help” is used but are not a part of what I mean when I use the general term “self-help” in this dissertation.

Similarly excluded and following in Smiles’ tradition, self-help may mean handy manuals that condense complex information into bullet point form, like the popular *Idiot* and *Dummy* guides. In this permutation, self-help signifies “how-to” (fix your car, fix your finances, fix your diet). Some think of self-help as nonprofessional advice for people with problems, and others think the texts contain information universally applicable to all. Some people think of self-help as inspirational, while others find it

pedantic and formulaic. Some think self-help is about alcoholism, spousal abuse, or surviving cancer; others conjure up get-rich-quick schemes or body image issues. Self-help may engage an individual in relation to a number of social planes – one’s self, one’s family, one’s workplace, or one’s society. Embedded in these various meanings of self-help are connotations about the texts and their readers that encompass ideas about social class, illness, happiness, life phases, identity politics, and more.

Given the multiplicity of meanings, I will delineate what I mean when I use the term “self-help.” This critical historical research project explores a subset of self-help books that falls into the wider rubric of the genre but comprises only a part of it. This project is based upon broadly popular psycho-religious self-help. These books focus on general themes of health, wealth and happiness, whose more recent titles are probably familiar: *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind, The Road Less Traveled, I'm OK – You're OK*. Some of the books from the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s middle decades may ring a bell: *The Power of Positive Thinking, How to Win Friends and Influence People*. But bestselling books of this sort have a longer history, as the long forgotten titles from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *In Tune with the Infinite* and *Power Through Repose*, suggest.

This study does not focus on the sub-genre of ‘success’ literature, except in the case of books of exceptional popularity and influence on psycho-religious self-help. While this may not be a clear distinction from ‘psycho-religious’ literature, I argue that there is a significant difference between success self-help and psycho-religious self-help. The first frequently advocates acknowledging the social world “as it really is,” while the second focuses on the individual’s perception of reality, often while dismissing the effects of social structures. Both economic and psycho-religious self-help often have

similar goals and cross similar ideological paths, but psycho-religious self-help's dependence on popular religion and psychology again distinguish it from economic and social success literature (which tends to be more "how-to" and pragmatic.)

Similarly, this study does not focus on the sub-genre of "relationship" literature, those many books that offer advice on improving relations with one's partner, boss, parents, or children. These books are by definition quite different from what could be variously called mind cure or positive thinking books. Rather than suggest that reality, health and wellness could be fabricated through visualization, relationship books posit a notion of communication based upon social interaction. Relationship literature, of course, like success literature, does frequently borrow positive thinking rhetoric, and for this reason, the occasional, tremendously popular relationship book was consulted to chart its integration of positive thinking rhetoric.

The texts upon which this research is based, like self-help books in general, emphasize individual agency over social factors in determining the course of one's life. Rather than tracking the evolution of the self-help genre *per se*, this project tracks an idea that pervades popular culture but has found a home within this subsection of self-help literature: the idea that well being and happiness emerge from thought. In fact, I hold this to be the central message of self-help, and while it has come to mean different things over time, it has retained a consistent core message that posits a direct, simple correspondence between what is thought or said and what actually occurs in the world. Self-help books position thought as the magic bullet to success and fulfillment. The way we think is held responsible for our sense of ourselves, the state of our relationships with others, our ability to function fluidly in the world, and the source of our inner strength. Defined

thus, the conceptual distinction blurs between thought and the complex web of physiological and psychological qualities that comprise a person, thereby intertwining ideas of selfhood and thought as communication. With these conceptual moves, self-help books position thought as the central work of the individual, a suggestion that has been repeatedly emphasized throughout the self-help genre's history.

Certainly, my strategic narrowing of the genre of self-help has influenced my analysis of the genre, and I have done so by following the notion of a strategically chosen example (Glaser and Straus 1967). Before starting work on this project, I had never read a self-help book, but I cannot say I was entirely unfamiliar with the books since they were often to be found on bedside tables in my parents' house. I have a particularly vivid memory of a dust-covered copy of *The Choice is Always Ours* that managed to remain misplaced under my mother's bed for years. Like sitar music and spider plants, self-help books, particularly of the positive thinking variety, seemed destined to always populate my lived space, but never to cause any real change in family dynamics or individual personalities. While I have attempted to analyze the notion of "thought as communication" in a methodical and rigorous way, this is an interpretative project and my somewhat cynical sense of the books as ineffectual has no doubt colored my analysis of them.

### **Thought as Communication in Self-Help**

To say that self-help books are "about thought as communication" has multiple potential meanings. In this project, I explore self-help's construction of thought as communication through the surrounding institutional context and the narrative structures

within the texts. By surrounding institutional context, I mean that the history of the genre and the shifting social influences of religion, psychology, and media institutions all shape the messages that self-help literature conveys. Publishing houses, as they are still romantically called, have long been informed by structuring forces, such as conglomeration, convergence, production routines, and generic formulas.

At the same time, the formal attributes and narrative structures of the books provide inherently communicative messages. Structured primarily as a way of telling stories, self-help authors claim the right to advise readers on issues central to their lives. And by reading stories, readers are informed about potential ways to think about their lives. Tracking the rhetoric on thought as communication also requires analysis of the narrative construction of author- and readership. As will be explored in more detail in the pages that follow, the relationship crafted between authors and readers can be fruitfully explored in terms of narrative theory. An underlying assumption of narrative theory, as in textual and rhetorical studies more generally, is that stories and language often have an inexplicit strategic dimension. The very language used by authors cultivates and sustains both their role as storyteller and the moral authority of the tale they tell (White 1980).

"The power of words," Bourdieu explained, "is nothing other than the delegated power of the spokesperson, and his speech -- that is, the substance of his discourse and, inseparably, his way of speaking -- is no more than the testimony, and one among others, of the guarantee of delegation which is invested in him" (1991, 107). It is through the author's voice, then, that messages take persuasive form and gain cultural relevance. On the face of it, reading may seem a strikingly solitary act, yet reading can also be considered a social behavior (Anderson 1983, 39). Not only do we, as individuals, tap

into collective stories of the nation, but collective forces also underlie personal narratives (Crapanzano 1996). In the case of self-help books, personal narratives convey collective messages about positive and negative, connecting and disconnecting, therapeutic and harmful forms of thought and communication. As textual analysis demonstrates, these explicitly personal narratives are implicitly formulaic, suggesting a readily available, cultural, conversational form in active use.

Self-help's stories are inflected with moral underpinnings about the *role of thought* in individual and social life. In fact, our thoughts are said to define us more meaningfully than any other characteristic – seemingly more than gender, race, class, religion, or relationships. Over time, the ways in which thought has been framed have shifted, but the notion that what we think and say shapes material reality has remained a constant underpinning in the self-help genre. Health and happiness hang in the balance, dependent upon successful thought. Yet, while self-help books define these seemingly commonplace claims about thought as the central work of the individual in society, they leave the broad and diffuse concept tangled in a multiplicity of meanings. Untangling those meanings of thought as communication in self-help books is the core task of this dissertation.

The notion suggested here – that one can change reality without engaging with others – suggests an alternative way of thinking about how we repair the world around us. Thinking, rather than social connection with others, becomes the vehicle by which we engage and improve the environment. Self-help certainly has more sophisticated cousins, such as the study of intrapersonal and interpersonal communication, that put forth a more persuasive rendition of notion of thought as a form of communication. For example, the

authors of a college textbook entitled *Interpersonal Communication* claim “We never stop communicating. When we’re alone, communication simply turns inward” (Trenholm and Jensen 2000, 37). The nature of that intrapersonal communication is markedly different, however, “more disconnected and repetitive and less logical than other forms of communication” (Trenholm and Jensen 2000, 24). Yet still, theorists of interpersonal communication would not want to claim that intrapersonal communication is capable of the same effects as other forms and instead go so far as to base their definition of communication upon social interaction. Dean Barnlund claims that interpersonal communication is “transactional,” meaning that we construct ourselves and others through interaction (Barnlund, 1970). Can we also then construct ourselves and others without interaction? Judy Pearson and Brian Spitzberg require that “all communicators share immediacy and salience of feedback” (1990, 15). It is precisely the possibility of feedback that, unless we take the self to be a complete communicative circuit, self-help’s “thought as communication” disallows. Despite acknowledging intrapersonal thoughts as a form of communication, when defining communication broadly, Trenholm and Jensen maintain communication is a “collective activity” (2000, 6). These distinctions between theories of interpersonal communication, which acknowledge intrapersonal communication as a distinct and viable form of communication yet still do not credit it with the formation of social reality, and self-help’s notion of “thought as communication” are significant and place self-help’s constructions in considerable doubt.

## **Organization of the Dissertation**

**This study tracks the development of self-help literature in the United States, emphasizing three periods during which self-help and the genre's attending interest in the power of thought to construct reality have been particularly resonant. In the early period, the texts of a loose amalgam of spiritual movements, popular from roughly 1880 to 1910, and taking on the alternate headings of "mind cure" and "New Thought," (sometimes capitalized and sometimes not), promised relatively easy remedies for health and happiness that equate thought with material consequence. These ideas continued to weave their way through our culture, becoming especially popular again in a middle period of the 1950s under the name "positive thinking." During that period, the full effects of popular psychology positioned scientific knowledge alongside God, offering an alternative conception of the ways in which thought could improve our lives. At the same time, "negative thinking" books encouraged readers to identify and accept painful elements of their pasts. Psychologically-oriented self-help books continued to dominate the genre through the 1960s and 70s, but by a late period of the 1980s and 90s, the concept previously called "mind cure" or "positive thinking" again became the central self-help message, this time under a rubric of "spirituality," a concept that encouraged readers to place painful problems in the past while holding strong to a "positive" future.**

**The historical scope of this project mirrors the generation of the self-help genre, which in turn coincides with significant social change, the development of psychotherapy, the increasingly secular notions of 'spirituality' and contemporary notions of communication, all of which turn on the story of modernism (Slater 1997). As**



contributors to the self-help genre, popular religion and popular psychology did not exist in historical opposition but on a continuum in which the more religious forms dominated through the nineteenth century and the psychological forms became more pervasive during the 20<sup>th</sup>. Books addressing health, wealth, and happiness began to develop into the cohesive genre we identify today as self-help toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Popular religious and psychological movements took advantage of rising literacy rates as well as production and distribution advances in publishing to reach geographically dispersed audiences. George Beard, with the publication of *American Nervousness* in 1881, popularized budding scientific and medical explanations of nervousness (Lutz 1991; Moskowitz 2001). Beard's book represented a significant cultural shift in which emotional states came to be seen as having physiological or psychological origins. Scientific explanations, over religious ones, became increasingly persuasive during this time. Not coincidentally, it was also during this period that the modern meanings of 'communication' as contact between distinct individuals developed (Peters 1999). Communication served as a pathway out of the self, the means by which individuals demonstrated self-understanding in the social milieu – a notion clearly oppositional to the notion of thought as communication in which moving beyond the self to create change was unnecessary.

The history of self-help literature is in part a story of diffusion and dispersal. Over more than one hundred years, the genre has come to cover an ever-broadening range of social issues and has been read by increasing numbers of people from ever more diverse walks of life. Moving beyond the genre itself, the language of the texts has been adopted into popular discourse in general. While it is not the focus of this study to track

**this diffusion, recognizing it points us back to self-help books themselves, the nexus in which popular psycho-religious ideas about the self, thought as communication and community were initially distilled.**

**The second chapter sets the stage for the chapters to come by providing several theoretical frameworks. The sociological theory of the ‘therapeutic ethos,’ a pervasive sensibility derived from consumerism and psychological rhetoric, holds that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century individuals have been directed to find satisfaction through consumption and through looking inward rather than to the collective for answers to life’s enduring questions. Consequently, the vibrancy and vitality of the public sphere have been said to fade due to neglect and self-centeredness. Chapter two argues that self-help literature can be partially understood in terms of this detrimental therapeutic ethos, but that the genre’s fundamentally social messages cannot be explained through this theory. Alternatively, chapter two also explores the relation between popular notions of thought as communication and scholarly theories of communication. Interpersonal and intrapersonal communication have been generally valued as healing the communicators, while mass communication has been distrusted and posited as potentially corrupting. Beyond just marking similar propensities towards investing communication with meaning, these theories, both popular and scholarly, outline our goals for communication, as well as noticeable gaps or absences in our definitions of communication that surely impact our practices of communication. Lastly, chapter two identifies the key narrative traits by which self-help authors structure tales about thought as communication. It is argued that authors cultivate a sense of intimacy characteristic of interpersonal communication to compensate for or obscure the lack of real communicative exchange. The books thus**

imply that social interaction is a necessary ingredient of therapeutic encounters, all the while arguing that the individual -- acting without others and through changes only in thought -- can heal the self.

Chapter three marks the beginning of the dissertation's historical analysis of self-help books. Focusing on the early period of self-help literature, I argue that during the latter decades of the nineteenth century the publications of a loose grouping of alternative spiritual movements began to congeal into the psycho-religious self-help genre. These books, positioned as an alternative to both traditional religious and medical knowledge, purported to tell readers how to live long, healthy, happy lives. By rallying their will power, readers could control and direct their thoughts so that they exactly mirrored the intentions of God. The underlying communicative mechanism at work, according to these books, posited a direct relationship between thought and action. Particularly concerned with both mental and physical health, these early texts argued that God, having created a perfect universe, did not intend individuals to be unwell. All sadness and sickness, according to this logic, resulted from failing to live and think according to God's reason, from being distracted by the incorrect, infecting notions of society and other individuals. The necessary corrective was to bend one's thinking away from the social and toward the divine.

Chapter four addresses the middle period of self-help literature. Self-help's generic ideas about communication, and the associated concepts of self and society that they produced, continued to evolve throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Interest in the divine was now accompanied by a growing attention to scientific knowledge. During the 1950s, more people than ever purchased books with a "positive thinking" message, but so too

did readers captivated by psychological therapies that encouraged them to reflect upon “negative” thoughts that might be metaphorically and literally infecting their lives. “God” was still an important concept during this period, but scientific knowledge was even more persuasive. Still more important was the social domain; this was an era obsessed with social status, and positive thinking’s power to manufacture material reality was no longer confined to thoughts of divine law but broadly applied to “whatever the heart desired.” Whether wealth or health was the defined goal, readers could communicate that goal into being if only they believed and had faith. This had direct bearing on the self-help texts that evolved during this period.

Chapter five tracks the more recent period of self-help. From the 1960s on, self-help books remained popular, but the 1980s and 1990s saw an even greater burst in their sales (Korda 2001). And while books in the 1960s and 70s reflected psychology’s domination as the ideology by which the self, its thoughts and behaviors could be best understood, in the 1980s and 90s psychological principles were represented in equal measure with religious or spiritual ideas about thought, self, and society that closely resembled the mind cure and positive thinking ideas of previously best selling self-help. Spirituality in late 20<sup>th</sup> century self-help became a highly personal communicative practice. Not only did the self, as constructed in the text, tend to perform spirituality alone, but answers to enduring questions about health and happiness, answers which had previously been invested in divinity or society, were now said to dwell within the self and to be of a uniquely personal nature. Throughout the genre’s history, self-help books had had to overcome the disjuncture created by their mission to convey information about intra- and interpersonal communication through mass communication. This goal became

particularly demanding as the self was thought to hold the mysterious answers to health and happiness.

The dissertation concludes by synthesizing the historical analysis into a comprehensive look at the self-help genre's notions of thought as communication without social interaction. While these books have articulated an express interest in the day-to-day intimacies of individuals, they draw from macro-level discourses that have many other outlets in the mainstream press and in everyday use. A facile notion of thought as having literal impact saturates popular culture, and in this regard my analysis of self-help points to a phenomenon far broader than what I examine here.

## **Chapter Two: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

The evolution of self-help literature and its construction of a facile relationship between thought and reality can be understood through broader understandings of the self, community, and communication. These notions, explored in this chapter, reverberate throughout the three historical chapters that follow.

To begin with, the communitarian critique of the therapeutic ethos, which holds that in the United States a collective belief in individualism creates obstacles to community involvement, is relevant to understanding the self-help phenomenon. Seen as a literature that encourages individualism, self-help books are read throughout this dissertation for the messages they convey about individualism and community. I argue that while the self-help genre throughout its history has placed a premium on individuality, the books also relay a secondary but influential message of social engagement, especially of that between author and reader. The exact tenor of this social engagement, however, is unclear.

At the same time, the contextualization of self-help's notions of thought against broader understandings of communication involves the many ways in which "communication" has been popularly conceptualized – as stimulus and response, as influence, as exchange, etc. – and the positioning of "thought" in each conceptualization. It is argued that in self-help thought takes on the interactive, social attributes that scholars have long invested in communication, with thought infused with an expansive power in

the social world. Readers are encouraged to believe that through the machinations of their minds alone, they can improve their social lot, with explanations of the workings of that power seldom, if ever, made explicit. The result is that thought becomes a concept of religious power in which belief in its efficacy is required.

This belief in the power of thought is complicated by broader notions of mass and interpersonal communication, both of which insist on interactivity with others as the locus for communicative efficacy. Self-help rhetoric, as studied here, exhibits characteristics of both: on the one hand, it is conveyed as a mass medium; on the other, its authors go to considerable lengths to develop the sense of intimacy between author and reader that is characteristic of interpersonal communicative encounters. The books thus constitute a paradox: implying that social interaction is a necessary ingredient of self-help, yet offering a mode of interactivity that is imaginary and devoid of real connection with other people. Authors fashion this message by enlisting narrative devices that construct their authorial personae as well as a generalized persona of the reader in strategic ways. Through these devices authors tell their stories about the power of thought, self, and community.

### **Sociology of the Therapeutic Ethos**

Historically, as our individual self-consciousness came to command increasing attention, a concern about a growing solipsism has been leveled against the general focus on the self, and particularly against those commercial media that convey such messages. This concern has taken multiple tenors since the advent of modernism, but the most constant note struck by social critics is that the 'therapeutic ethos' engenders a

narcissistic self-centeredness that in turn erodes social and political life. In a broad sense, scholars like Robert Bellah, Jurgen Habermas, J.T. Lears, and Richard Sennett express concern with the role of communication in social and political life. Since the socially and economically tumultuous days of the industrial revolution, critics have argued that the commercialization of therapy alleviated social fears and anxieties resulting from modernization by training one's attention internally and thus away from social upheaval. Put quite simply, when pushed past the tipping point, emphasis on the self is 'bad' for society in that it allows social ills and inequities to continue unchecked. With all of us staring at our navels, we fail to really communicate with and care about the collective, which is consequently left suffering from neglect and abuse. As already suggested, popular self-help literature has long had its detractors. But the genre can also be seen as the recipient of this more generalized cultural criticism of the "therapeutic ethos" which scholars hold responsible for a perceived impoverishment of public life (Bellah et al 1985; Putnam 2000; Yankelovich 1981). As a genre that contributes to the therapeutic ethos, one would expect self-help books to erode social bonds and political engagement. One of the research interests of this dissertation was to investigate how self-help books speak of and to community. Here the theories of the therapeutic ethos are considered in light of self-help and its construction of "thought" as having social effects.

Defined by Bellah and his colleagues as the new civil religion (1985), a number of scholars of social life – communitarians, theorists of the public sphere, critics of consumerism – hold that popular psychological principles which train attention on the self have detrimentally influenced the workings of just about all aspects of contemporary society, contributing to a decline in the quality of political participation and social life.



As a theory that attempts to explain a broad swatch of human experience, scholarship on the “therapeutic ethos” touches generally on many aspects of political and social life over the last century and at times looks longingly back to a time when society was held to have been more cohesively collective and engaged with political issues. The public sphere has been defined as comprised of the spaces – literal, mediated, and perhaps even imagined – in which citizens come together to talk about political and social concerns and to address the question of how the promise of democracy can be realized (Calhoun 1992). A lively public sphere has been thought to balance, or create a countervailing force to, the weighty institutions of state and market, and therefore must be amenable to free expression. Using medical metaphors much like those popular among self-help authors, these scholars diagnose the lack of political engagement as a social ill, identify the toxin as the “culture of narcissism” (Lasch 1978), and prescribe “bowling in teams” as remedy (Putnam 2000).

The “therapeutic ethos” is based in part upon theories of modernity associated with Weber and later with Giddens, in which powerful institutions – Protestantism, industrialism, capitalism, surveillance and military forces – enabled the business and governmental communities to consolidate their social control (Weber 1958; Giddens 1990). Diverse scholars (Foucault 1973; Lears 1981; Cushman 1995) have linked the rise of psychotherapy with modern capitalism, defining both as efforts to stifle a collective sensibility among people. Communication scholar Dana Cloud, defining capitalism’s objectives “to privatize social responsibility, to stifle dissent, and to promote the elaboration of identity through consumption” (1998, xiii), identifies therapeutic rhetoric as a principle means by which capitalism’s objectives are accomplished. The power

associated with psychotherapy, according to Phillip Rieff, is immense, amounting to the ascendance of a new cultural frame of reference on America. Writing in the 1960s, Rieff stated, "Today it is this psychological therapeutic, embodied in diverse social practices such as advertising and psychotherapy, that stands as the healer of the American self" (1966, 119).

Christopher Lasch, Robert Bellah, and Jackson Lears, among others, believe that healing and consumption have elided as therapeutic ideals have become increasingly embedded in the mores of consumer culture. According to scholars, advertising, as a primary mechanism for the advance of capitalism, has most avidly adopted therapeutic notions as sales tools (Lears 1981; Lutz 1991). Ewen's historical account of advertising, *Captains of Consciousness*, views the relationship of advertisers to audiences as a manipulative one. Following the industrial revolution, capitalists borrowed liberally from budding psychological theory to cultivate consumption (Ewen 1972, 31). Ewen outlines the means by which advertising became a way to drive consumerism; "advertising attempted to create an alternative organization of life which would serve to channel man's desires for self, for social success, for leisure away from himself and his works, and toward a commoditized acceptance of 'Civilization'" (Ewen 1972, 48). Similarly, Lutz (1991), in his study of "neurasthenia," or nervous disease, posits the commercial rhetoric of nervousness, an ailment said to be much more likely to attack "brain workers" than laborers, as a vehicle for the public rearticulation and resubstantiation of class differences during a time of social change.

These critics claim that despite the incessant care of the self, many people still feel deeply unsatisfied and disconcertingly alone. Holding psychotherapy responsible,

Cushman characterizes this self-dissatisfaction as “the empty self,” a self lacking community, tradition, and shared meanings (1995, 79). Therapy is both the problem and solution in this social equation. Therapeutic ideals, co-opted by capitalist consumer culture, have contributed to the “break down” of communal life, leaving people isolated and fractured. Therapeutic techniques, including self-help books (consumer products to be sure), are then held out as an ameliorative tool, one which critics say in no way remedies the problem and at worst deepens the divide people feel from meaningful connection and engagement. While not explicitly exemplified in the communitarian literature, self-help books seem to fit exactly into their category of cultural artifacts held responsible for our deteriorated public sphere. Instead of seeking connection with others, self-help reading, a solitary activity, encourages readers to locate the cause and cure of problems within themselves.

It is questionable, however, just how and to what extent self-help literature squarely fits into the theory of the commercialized therapeutic ethos. Self-help literature, while undoubtedly individualistic in focus, to various degrees has advocated awareness of and attentiveness to our connections with others. The core individualistic notion in the text is not that relations with others are unimportant, but that these relationships can be cultivated, maintained, and improved primarily through individual means, through mental thought processes rather than through social interaction. In a literal sense, this belief in the power of thought does away with the need for social interaction, even though the textual narratives, as will be discussed later in this chapter, rhetorically imply that readers need authors to help them change their lives. In a sense, then, self-help substitutes an imagined relationship between reader and author for the real relationship present in

communicative interactions. This relationship is one-way, non-dialogical, not continuous, and, most importantly, constructed. Its salience in self-help thus raises questions about the shape of interactivity in communication and its particular formation as part of self-help.

This dissertation does not pose the question of whether or not self-help literature contributes to social decline, as theories of the ‘therapeutic ethos’ do. Instead I consider self-help an index of popular ideas about the power of thought. Approaching the literature with this research question in mind suggests that self-help books, and especially their messages about the power of thought, cannot be simply plugged into the therapeutic ethos’ model of consumer culture and social isolation. While the books invest thought with tremendous power for social good and bad, arguing that an individual’s mental thoughts are given material form depending upon the tenor of those thoughts, the social world does not recede from view, and in fact remains very much a central concern. At the same time that the texts direct the reader away from consideration and criticism of the social dimensions of their problems (which by extension may make the problems that much more invasive and intractable), self-help books are explicitly social in both their construction of the relationship between author and reader and in the importance they place on relationships (although admittedly, these relationships can supposedly be controlled by thought processes alone). Undeniably, readers are directed to focus on themselves in the search of explanations, but they are also told that relationships are of the utmost centrality to their lives, and that they demand care and effort, as author Stephanie Dowrick claims, “Responsibility for others is crucial to living an emotionally

mature life [...]” (1991, 18). While responsibility for healing resides with the individual, social connections are constructed as ultimately sustaining.

### **Various Meanings of Thought and Communication**

The central argument of this dissertation is that self-help books offer an alternative way of thinking about communication. Proceeding from the premise that what we think manifests in reality, they suggest that the functions often invested in notions of communication -- specifically, the ability to produce, maintain, repair, and transform reality (Carey 1989, 23) – are here served without the social interactivity that we tend to assume is part of the communicative act. In the field of communication research, “communication” may mean many things – such as transferring, exchanging, influencing, and symbolically interacting. These wide-ranging ideas about communication carry various positive and negative connotations about the impulses and outcomes, ease and difficulty, time and space required by the communicative effort, and each has impacted in different ways on the evolution of self-help.

One of the most lasting distinctions has been between mass and interpersonal communication. Perhaps one of the first theories of mass communication to exert considerable influence on self-help’s shaping has been alternately called “stimulus–response theory,” “hypodermic needle theory,” or “great effects theory.” This approach bestowed communication with considerable power to send forth messages to the masses that would be simply, straightforwardly, and willingly digested just as the senders intended (De Fleur 1966, 115; Schramm 1971, 8 ). The way in which the power of

thought is constructed in self-help literature shares central tenets with this theory of mass communication; thoughts invariably have immediate and considerable effect upon the individual and others. For the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School and their followers, mass communication was similarly powerful, but considerably more dangerous. They saw mass communication as simple propaganda initiated by powerful producers and intended to maintain social inequity (Adorno & Horkheimer 1944). In this theoretical perspective, the mass media become tools in the management of mass opinion, able to ideologically unite a geographically dispersed and culturally diverse population.

In keeping with the notion that communication is a way to connect people, other theorists have put a more hopeful, but perhaps equally deterministic, spin on communication. For example in *The Meaning of Meaning*, C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards defined communication as a path to more rational social relations (Ogden & Richards 1923, in Peters 1999, 12). Similarly, for John Dewey, communication is the pragmatist's means of gathering people together for a common purpose (Dewey 1927, 110). In Victor Turner's view, communication can be seen as a dramatic performance, a ritualistic event in which social relations are made anew again and again (Turner 1969; Turner and Bruner, 1986). This view positions communication as an interactive process with multiple meanings and indeterminate outcomes, connotations still in vogue in communication research, especially among those in cultural studies. In this view, the creation of communicated culture is defined as an on-going process or project, a position that dovetails nicely with scholarship on the narrated self. Giddens argues that the self is not a collection of traits that we possess, but rather an on-going dialogic process that evolves over time and space (Giddens 1990, 75). Yet still, in Giddens' process-oriented

definition communication holds, as it does in all these disparate examples, tremendous definitional power, for good or ill. But what unites these disparate definitions of communication is a reliance on social interaction, precisely the dimension of interaction with others, that self-help literature's notion of "thought" and thought's power to shape reality eclipses. When author Tony Robbins writes, "you can feel any way you choose at any moment in time" (1991, 249) or "it's in your moments of decision that your destiny is shaped" (32-33), he expresses the sentiment that one's present emotional state and one's future life course are "thought" into being, are "communicated" into reality. There is an undeniable truth to this sentiment, just as there is undeniably an enormous hole created by it. Other people appear inconsequential, an individual's biologically and socially constructed characteristics (such as ethnicity, bodily shape, gender, socioeconomic class, etc.) are denied influence. This construction is exactly contrary to the one held by many communication scholars which posit a sense of self as stemming from the cultural domain, as constructed through social engagement.

Unlike self-help authors, communication scholars are clearly not alone in relying upon a notion of communication as social interaction. Throughout the historical period engaged by this dissertation, if not long before, communication has been a grand, moving term, capable of uniting disparate peoples, staving off war and destruction, fostering love and unity. John Durham Peters tells us, in *Speaking into the Air* (1999), that William James, the influential, early American psychologist, contributed to the cultivation of communication's connotation as a powerful concept. But its power comes also from the dualism at communication's center; just as communication connects us, it also often fails to do so. In psychology, communication became a healing mechanism, yet Carl Rogers

claimed the primary work of psychotherapy was to repair failures in communication (Rogers 1961, 337, quoted in Peters 1999, 27). Our fears about potential “communication breakdowns” exist alongside and make possible our belief in the power of connecting communication.

Given that communication is bestowed with the power to create and destroy lives, it is unsurprising that it holds tremendous charge and weight for both good and ill. Yet in the self-help book context, we are rarely urged to examine the “power of thought” process exactly. Just what occurs when our thoughts “work,” or do not, often remains in the imaginary or magical realm. In this construction, one that diverges from psychoanalytic theory, the ability of thoughts to exert influence on reality, may be ruined when “over analyzed.” This lack of clear explanation of “communication’s” mechanisms is illuminated by Durkheim’s observation that a sense of awe is articulated in vague, religious terms (1915).

Self-help books position “thought” as the means by which people can transform themselves in the social world. But what does this mean? How is the therapeutic effect of thought enacted? What pathways transmit its therapeutic power? In communication research, theories of transmission (how “content” is transferred, relayed, absorbed, etc.) are often contrasted with or distinct from theories of effects, especially those that emphasize the restorative, ritualistic effects of communication (Carey 1989, Grossberg et al 1998). In self-help the power of thought, inscrutable in the Durkheimian sense, operates as both the therapeutic vehicle or conduit and the therapeutic effect or change.

In communication scholarship, the notion of “transmission” synthesizes a set of ideas that emphasize the nature of the communication pathway, or the mode of



communication. Communication theories that focus on transmission tend to emphasize processes, technologies, and channels, more than content or messages. Marshall McLuhan was most famous for this theoretical orientation on technologies, rather than “messages,” as the formative experience of media. The term “therapeutic,” on the other hand, refers to the scholarship that emphasizes the capacity of communication to connect and positively transform people. The therapeutic dimension of communication has been conceptualized as of particular importance as we have transitioned into a secular society in which the mass media play a greater role in the processes of cultural definition than traditional institutions of religion, family and local community (Giddens 1990, Weber 1958). The therapeutic communication model relies heavily on metaphors of health and illness, cure and disease; just as communication can succeed or fail, it takes both healthy and unhealthy forms.

Despite differing emphases on process and effect, these two concepts, transmission of thought and therapeutic effect of thought, share a closely related function in self-help books. Rather than remain distinct as they are in scholarship, in self-help books it is “transmission” (or merely the possibility of transmission implied in “contact”) that induces “therapeutic” impact in the textual characterization of communication. Often the content of that transmission is not revealed. What is communicated becomes simply the communicative act. Like the television long-distance ad from the 1980s, self-help books tell readers to “reach out and touch someone,” but they tend to have very little to say about what comes next after contact has been established. “Thought” in self-help, as it co-opts the power typically invested in communication, is subject to John Durham Peter’s criticism about the term’s general opacity when he writes, “Communication is

good, mutuality is good, more sharing is better: these seemingly obvious dicta, because unexamined, sweep too much under the rug.... [communication's] popularity has exceeded its clarity" (Peters 1999, 6).

### Mass Communication vs. Interpersonal Communication

As has already been suggested, the power of thought in self-help is that thought is said to enable individuals to achieve health and happiness. But just what sorts of thoughts are said to lead to these positive results? An irony is inherent in self-help literature's reliance on "thought;" it is a mass mediated form of communication that provides advice on the most personal forms of communication. Self-help books must do substantial work to reconcile the disjuncture between their status as a mass produced, mass mediated form and the interpersonal and intra-personal ideas of communication for which they claim authority.

The general connotations of mass and interpersonal communication that are prevalent in popular thought suggest why it is crucial that self-help texts downplay their mass mediated quality and emphasize their interpersonal voice. Mass communication tends to be popularly characterized as general, impersonal, and at times manipulative. The stereotypes of interpersonal communication are almost the polar opposites. Communicative interactions between people, interacting face to face, often carry the connotations of specificity, intimacy, and honesty.<sup>4</sup> The types of communication that

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<sup>4</sup> More recently, communication scholars have questioned the problematic division between mass and interpersonal communication as conceptual categories that impact

seem to be most highly valued among people are often those that feel most natural and immediate, communication that occurs with ease and yet with intensity. In the most intimate form of communication, language becomes unnecessary, perhaps even a hindrance; alternatively, connection is felt implicitly, tacitly. As one self-help author writes, "In intimate relationships this is frequently a crucial demand: that you will know what I want without my having to tell you; that you will be able to anticipate my unspoken thoughts and even my unformulated desires..." (Dowrick 1991, 42-3). In keeping with connotations in the popular realm, research into interpersonal communication has tended to explore the more positive and connecting attributes of communicative interaction rather than manipulative or abusive ones. Writing about an early influential study of interpersonal communication, Knapp and Miller acknowledge that the moral and normative underpinnings of their discipline shaped the direction of the research: "Given the prevailing climate, it is hardly surprising that a book such as *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967), which

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research design and analysis. Scholars argue that the term 'mass' fails to account for the nature of much mediated interaction. Turow argued that in light of a generation of technological and computing changes, the scholarly divisions between interpersonal and mass communication fail to capture the interactive nature of contemporary media use. Turow offered "mediated" as a more useful category (1992). Chaffee and Metzger (2001) argue that the qualities of "mass" (mass produced, lacking individual control, and limited by a finite number of channels), as defined collectively in media institutions, in society, and in the academic field of communication studies, "are not as true today as they once were" (369). These two categories of course have historically infused not only scholarly research, but popular rhetoric, as Tamar Katriel has argued in her ethnographic studies of popular conceptions of 'communication' (1981, 1991). While the terms may be inaccurate, the connotations they have long carried have considerable sticking power. In fact, one indicator of the continued negative associations attached to mass communication was the mid-1990s excitement about the Internet as an alternative to it. While categories of mass and interpersonal are indeed problematic divisions in terms of research and theory, they arguably still exert considerable impact on popular conceptions of media and its use.

exerted a profound effect on the subsequent study of interpersonal communication, had nothing to say about the ways communication can be used to extract money or concessions from others but offered considerable advice about the ways people can think about and perform their communicative activities so as to improve their personal relationships with marital partners and close friends” (Knapp & Miller 1985, 9). Similarly, the field of interpersonal communication has been suspicious of mediation, as reflected in Peter Harley’s definition of interpersonal communication in which he says that mediated communication and users lack of critical awareness of mediation “can lead to misunderstandings” (1993, 5-6).

Conceptions of interpersonal communication in popular culture share the connotations exhibited in scholarly research. In their analysis of communication as a “cultural category,” Katriel and Philippsen (1981) develop a popular definition of communication as “close, supportive, flexible speech which functions as the work necessary to self-definition and interpersonal bonding.” As this chapter’s following section on narrative structure will explore in greater detail, self-help texts claim to exhibit this direct, interpersonal type of communication by constructing an imagined connection between author and reader. In fact, the repetitive style implies that a great effort is required to communicate the message. As a historian of the earliest self-help books wrote of one of the genre’s first authors: “He was given to repetition; and it was with difficulty that he could be induced to have a repeated sentence or phrase stricken out, as he would say, ‘If that idea is a good one, and true, it will do no harm to have it in two or three times’” (Dresser 1919, 40-41). Throughout the decades during which self-help has grown increasingly popular, the genre has had to negotiate this awkward existence, as a

mass mediated form, carrying with it the connotations of the general while attempting to adopt the stance of an interpersonal interaction between author and reader, all the while, constructing the message that readers alone, through the power of their thoughts, shape this lives and their worlds. Horatio Dresser's explanation of Quimby's "method of healing," suggested how an interpersonal communication strategy was textually mimicked in self-help books:

Instead of putting the patient into a mesmeric sleep, Mr. Quimby would sit by him; and after giving a detailed account of what his troubles were, he would simply converse with him, and explain the causes of his troubles, and this change the mind of the patient, and disabuse it of its error and establish the truth in its place, which, if done, was the cure... (1921, 39).

Quimby's methods were mirrored in textual form. To substitute for the author's literal co-presence with his patients, self-help books provided stories of patients describing their "troubles." In these stories, authors listen and in turn "explain the causes" of these problems back to the patient, attempting to change the mind of the reader. It was this "change of mind" that was "the cure." This dissertation not only interprets self-help's narratives of thought, but also assesses how those narratives are made possible through the constructed, social relationship between author and reader<sup>5</sup>. The mechanisms by which this task is accomplished are discussed in the following section, which discusses narrative construction of authorship, and by extension, the author's construction of readership.

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<sup>5</sup> As narrative theorist Michael McGuire argues this does not mean that only one meaning, or a true meaning, can be attributed to a discourse. In fact it may be that no singular interpretation can claim to be "the correct one" (1989, 221). The task of narrative analysis, in addition to considering what a particular narrative means or what effect it has, is to consider how narrative works as a specific persuasive form.

## **Narrative Authority**

**In my writings, including several books, in my regular weekly newspaper column in nearly one hundred dailies, in my national radio program over seventeen years, in our magazine, *Guideposts*, and in lectures in scores of cities, I have taught these same scientific yet simple principles of achievement, health, and happiness. Hundreds have read, listened, and practiced, and the results are invariably the same: new life, new power, increased efficiency, greater happiness (Peale 1952, xiii).**

**In this introductory passage to *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Norman Vincent Peale, the most popular self-help author of the 1950s, acknowledged the social relationship he had with readers and admitted that this relationship, defined as powerfully transformative, was occasioned primarily by the mass media. The social dimensions of self-help stand as contrary evidence to the truth-claim most central to books such as Peale's: that thought alone can transform one's life. While defining his power to heal readers, Peale also revealed the paradoxical relationship between author and reader, mass mediated and yet of intimate proportions. Speaking to fundamental issues of health and happiness through broadcast mechanisms, popularly conceptualized as clumsy and coarse, required authors to reach across the divide generated by the very communication channels upon which they rely. Notwithstanding its mass mediated nature, Peale's book, like the genre as a whole, most often spoke in a voice suggesting a dialogue with a single reader. This first person narrative voice, along with the use of direct discourse, made the author more present than when speaking in third person voice using indirect discourse (McGuire 1989, 229). Additionally, in speaking one-to-one, Peale brought his success with many to bear on each healing communicative exchange between the author and his individual readers, thus also crafting a universalistic image of his readers. In this section,**

**I identify the characteristics by which authors construct this imaginary relationship; the subsequent chapters will place them in more specific historical contexts.**

**The meanings of self and thought were shaped not only by historically changing ideas and institutions but also by the constitutive acts of narration like those that Peale exhibited above. The constraints and opportunities involved in presenting a self-help book were varied: authors enlist the formulaic attributes of the genre, borrow from the conventions of storytelling, and mold the contours of the intended audience. The narrative form of self-help literature constructed persuasive ideas about the self and one's internal landscape, as well as one's communication with others – with God, spouses, co-workers, children, and so forth, but arguably the central relationship narratively forged by self-help books was that between author and reader. While based upon therapeutic and persuasive intent, the relationship between author and reader was, by its nature, distant and of imagined dimensions (Alasuutari 1999, 12). To counter this communicative distance, authors went to rhetorical lengths to generate intimacy and a connection with readers, as Stephanie Dowrick did in her 1991 book, *Intimacy and Solitude*, when she wrote, “when I needed it most and expected it least, I began to get a strong impression of the book's reader” (1991, xviii). The relationship between author and reader, as posited here, was reciprocal, with both characters nurturing the other. Authors would also characterize themselves as worthy of readers' attention and time and position readers as needy of authors' experience and advice. In this way, self-help texts inscribed notions of author and audience within the books themselves that were based on an imagined relationship of interactivity.**

This process involved what literary theorist Wayne Booth identified as the creative process of image-making (1983, 138). In telling their stories, writers constructed both the author's image and an image of the reader. Linking these two images was the relationship between them, the ways in which authors imagine being attended to by readers. George Herbert Mead (1967) argued that we begin to visualize ourselves as others do by 'taking on the role of the other.' In a cyclical, mutually informing manner, imagining the ways in which others view us in turn shapes how we view ourselves and how we represent ourselves when socially interacting. Reading self-help books for the ways in which they manufacture, to borrow again from Mead, a 'generalized' author and a 'generalized' reader, sheds light on the concept of a communicating self, and of telling the story of that self in a therapeutic context. It also helps to elucidate the ways language constructs reality, more specifically, the ways in which ideas of the self are on-going social creations (Crapanzano 1996). In other words, when we tell the stories of our lives we draw upon the social narratives we have learned while participating in culture.

### The Voice of the Author

Though one rarely gets this sense from the books themselves, self-help authors were doing a job, a task that entailed responsibility. Unlike other literary jobs, in which overt attention to the audience may suggest an uncouth concern with marketability and hence lessen the author's integrity, in self-help the author's primary responsibility was to the audience. The explicit motivation underlying the presentation of the text was that the



author intended to act as counselor, guide, or guru to the reader, and the most common, clear demonstration that authors provided to buoy that intent was demand by readers. As the author of the 1964 book *Games People Play*, Dr. Eric Berne claimed already in the second paragraph of his preface that “the need for this book” was articulated by “students” and “audiences.” (1964, 11). The motivation to write hinged upon the author’s therapeutic communicative intent and the reader’s stated desire for those healing words. Authors of other sorts of nonfiction and fiction may have a therapeutic intent, but other features such as the act of writing or the power of the words themselves rather than their reception and appreciation by an audience may lead to fulfillment. Self-help authors seldom, if ever, expressed such a personal rationale. Their sense of fulfillment was said to come from a connection with readers, and even more, from having a real, direct, and positive impact on readers’ lives. Author Henry Wood expressed this sentiment in late 19<sup>th</sup> century rhetoric: “The author of this book has no personal interest in the promulgation of Ideal Suggestion, other than his desire to freely give out such truth as makes him its channel” (1893, 106.)<sup>6</sup> To forge this connection and to accomplish their task of conveying healing messages to readers, self-help authors had to display themselves as worthy of their chosen role. Much of this display hinged upon the character that the author constructed for herself, as evidenced by narrative choice, language choice, and the like. Representing the credentials to speak with readers about personal life or health and happiness has typically been accomplished through the

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<sup>6</sup> Note also that Wood, unlike Peale, uses the more distanced third person voice. This was characteristic of late 19<sup>th</sup> century self-help.

enunciation of professional knowledge – both medical and religious — and, more characteristically, of personal experience.

### The author's professional voice

The psycho-religious self-help genre always had a conflicted relationship to the professions and with professionalism. Starting in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one of the first self-help practitioners, Phineas Park Quimby, established a contentious relationship with his contemporaries in medicine and the church by holding both responsible for all sickness and unhappiness in the world.<sup>7</sup> Quimby was prone to claims of tremendous curative ability, far more powerful than that of medical authorities, as when he wrote, “I have no doubt that I can go to an audience of one thousand persons and cure more persons in one lecture than can be cured by all the doctors in the state of Maine in the same time...” (1921, 277). Yet the first published self-help books by one of Quimby's earliest patients and students was written by the Reverend Warren Felt Evans. In chronicling the development of the “New Thought” movement's history, Horatio Dresser states that perhaps the learned Reverend was a more persuasive harbinger of New

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<sup>7</sup> As will be discussed in detail in chapter three, the first self-help books included in this dissertation are drawn from an group of alterative religious movements popular at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The terms “mind-cure” or “New Thought” are used interchangeably (Anker 1999a,147; Meyer 1965), to refer to the aggregate of different religious mental healing movements. The mind cure movements, including the better-known Christian Science, were most active between 1880 and roughly 1910, with the 1890s serving as their most active period. As the name implied, mind cure movements focused on using the mind to heal physical sickness. As a religious movement emphasizing healing, New Thought was a pivot between the Protestant ethos of salvation in the next world and the therapeutic ethos of health, wealth, and happiness in this world.

Thought ideology than Quimby, a clock-maker and mesmerist, could have been (1919)<sup>8</sup>. Yet, as the genre's popularity grew, rather than discount a movement that had wide appeal, some doctors, psychologists, priests, rabbis and reverends got into the self-help literary act. No longer then could psycho-religious self-help ideas be considered completely outside of established psychotherapy and traditionally Protestant ideas of wellness and healing. Instead, the books, written by professionals and nonprofessionals alike, borrowed liberally from multiple, at times conflicting, ideological orientations on the physical and metaphysical.

Set in contrast to the wider context of professionalism in society, which held "proper" credentialing in high esteem, professionalism alone rarely sufficed as an adequate demonstration of authority for a self-help author (Tuchman 1979; Zelizer 1992). Most often signs of professionalism were accompanied by demonstrations of personal experience, which in the self-help context, suggested that a more qualified person was positioned to advise others on personal life. Nonetheless professional credentials were often a central part of self-help authors' constructed identities. Often, a professional identity was implied, rather than directly stated within the pages of the texts. On book covers, explicit reference to medical or academic degrees or religious positions were more commonly made. For example, John Gray's overwhelmingly successful book on gender relationships of the early 1990s, *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, depicted the author's name as "John Gray, Ph.D." a credentialing common to self-help

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<sup>8</sup> It was within the New Thought movement that the psycho-religious self-help genre, as we know it today, began (Moskowitz, 2001).

book covers and author biographies. As a point of comparison, the covers of trade books by scholars rarely referenced the author's doctorate.

Some self-help authors recognized the utility of employing a softer touch when referencing the established institutions of medicine and religion. Ralph Waldo Trine, the best-selling author of New Thought's heydays of the 1890s, reframed the adversarial tone set by Quimby, complimenting both institutions on their contributions to "man's well-being." Authors of the 1920s and 1930s went further to align themselves with medical and religious professionals. While Trine had cast New Thought philosophies and practices as complementary to those of the professions, authors such as Napoleon Hill began to define their advice as science itself, or in Hill's words as "a law of nature" (1937, 55). The times were marked by the on-going influence of mechanization and theories of evolution and authors advocating New Thought ideas were not alone in the race to recast their ideas in scientific language. The immensely popular Lecomte du Noüy, writing in 1947, claimed that "the purpose of this book is to examine critically the scientific capital accumulated by man, and to derive there from logical and rational consequences." Tellingly, the statement was followed by, "We shall see that these consequences lead inevitably to the idea of God." (1947, xvi). Throughout self-help's history, science, writ large, was enlisted to serve the purpose of individual transformation, be that transformation social, physical or metaphysical.

### **Books by Religious Authorities**

Despite the fact that winning wealth, erasing illness, and even, as some authors claim, escaping death, all stand in opposition to traditional Christian ideas of redemption,

self-help books have long been written by religious authorities. The genre, which moved beyond its Protestant influence and base in the post WW2 years, more willingly incorporating Jewish, African-American and/or Eastern religious beliefs, retained its ecumenical tone and its wide but loose embrace of deism, while fundamentally transposing the metaphysical for physical benefit. Nevertheless, self-help books retained a closely intertwined ideological relationship with numerous faiths. Throughout the genre's existence, self-help literature was penned by religious men, and occasionally women.

Like less overtly religious self-help authors, Reverend Warren Felt Evans in the 1870s, Rabbi Joshua Liebman in the 1940s, and Spiritual Advisor Deepak Chopra in the 1990s all identified the central problems they aimed to alleviate as problems of faulty thinking on the part of their readers. But rather than social problems between spouses or even intra-personal problems between mind and body within a single person, these authors identified a pernicious problem of which these worldly complaints were merely a consequence – disjunctions between readers and God. Healing occurred, according to these writers, when the readers engaged in a proper dialogue with the word of God.

Given this orientation, the author presented him or herself as a facilitator in this relationship between readers and the divine, just as the medical doctor intervened between an individual's mind and body. But rather than model physical wellness, these authors provided the reader with a model, in the form of the author himself, of a fruitful relationship with the Divine, which frequently entailed repeated statements about the nature of God's love, teaching, or wisdom, as Fulton Sheen did in the 1953 publication, *Life Is Worth Living*, "He is the ultimate goal of life; from Him we came, and in Him

alone do we find our peace” (1953, 19). Real world benefits that followed from a right dialogue with the Divine, such as feelings of well being, or social and economic success, were frequently posited as secondary associated bonuses or pleasant by-products of a vigorous relationship with the Divine. For Sheen, God was defined as “our intrinsic perfection without which we are incomplete and with which we are happy” (19).

### Books by Medical Authorities<sup>9</sup>

For books written by doctors, on the other hand, a sense of mental and physical well-being might well have been the primary aim and message. Given the more secular tone, these books at times dismissed the metaphysical realm, while emphasizing the social and physical realms as the loci of personal difficulties. George Beard, one of the first doctors to become famous for writing a self-help book, hit upon a theme that has been repeatedly echoed since his famous book, *American Nervousness*, was published in 1881 (Meyer 1965; Lutz 1991). Discontent, Beard claimed, had reached endemic proportions because of modern life’s inherent stresses. Nervousness was a disorder especially pervasive among the more sensitive and keen among us, and as such, became something of a trendy illness among stylish urban elite (Moskowitz 2001). Among the sufferers were both Henry and William James. Seen as a problem of divisiveness within each individual’s self, from Beard’s medical perspective, the individual failed to “hear” herself and consequently attend to her needs properly because of the interfering,

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<sup>9</sup> Given that this study does not focus on books about physical health per se, but rather texts that emphasize the relationships between what we think and how we feel, fewer books in my sample are by medical doctors. Authors with training in mental health, psychotherapists, psychiatrists, and social workers are prevalent, however.

cacophonous noise of the surrounding society, a society characterized by the increasing, dizzying speed of transportation and information. Beard's ideas of the ignored or unacknowledged self were evidenced in such popular phrases as "not listening to one's body," as well as in central psychological concepts such as the repressed and ignored unconscious that must act out to gain attention. The social and physical environment, especially in urban settings and the industrial age, was largely to blame, according to Beard; many self-help books have held society responsible for individual stress ever since. Unlike many of the doctors who followed him, the resulting illness for Beard was a purely physiological one; nervousness was a "physical and not a mental state" (1881, 7). Beard's message was strikingly different from the concurrent, but still ten years from being actively embraced, message of New Thought. Whereas New Thought de-emphasized the role of society and held bodily ailments to be solely physical manifestations of mental disharmony or unrest, Beard spoke little about the metaphysical or mental causations of sickness.

Writing before Freud's influence reached North America, Beard was emblematic of an orientation to the relationship between mind and body that was soon to face considerable challenge. In part stemming from New Thought ideas and in part from psychological ones, nervous states and negative emotions came to be viewed towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by scientists as mental maladies. Author Annie Payton Call was an interesting case in point, charting the genre's transition of physical to mental attributions of much illness. Call's first and immensely popular book, *Power Through Repose* (Call 1898), shared commonality with Beard's *American Nervousness*, centering its advice on physical awareness and exercise as pathways to good health, (although

Call, unlike Beard, often disparaged the individual, holding him, and more often, her, responsible for working him or herself up into an agitated state.) By the mid-1890s mind cure was a more prevalent, popular, and powerful concept, and despite her initial success, rather than repeat her previous message in her subsequent texts, reiteration from one book to the next being a common enough self-help practice, all of Call's following books towed the New Thought line of mind cure as the be all and end all of health, happiness and wealth.

Unlike authors whose resourcefulness resided solely in their lay experience, medical professionals often accounted for their successful treatment of patients by referring to their professional insight. Psychiatrist Eric Berne considered the psychiatrist as the one "who is in the best and perhaps the only position to study games adequate" (1964, 163). Psychotherapist and author M. Scott Peck, in *The Road Less Traveled*, chronicled the cure of his patient and in so doing attributed the cure to his professional status (1978). Peck unlocked the key to his patient's problems, a buried negative worldview that Peck said stemmed from his social environment as a child:

But less obvious (except to psychotherapists) is the fact that the most important part of our culture is our particular family... We tend to believe what the people around us believe, and we tend to accept as truth what these people tell us of the nature of the world as we listen to them during our formative years (1978, 189).

Professionals, in this case, psychotherapists offered insight invisible to the majority.

Medical doctors of the last 30 years, and more commonly during the 1990s and today, more often embraced the notion of a fluid relationship between mind, body and spirit. The influence of Eastern philosophies made a sizeable impression on the genre. Dr. Deepak Chopra, a doctor trained in the Western medical tradition and an Indian



influenced by Hindu and Buddhist teachings, was emblematic of this hybrid identity. Yet Chopra, like so many self-help authors before him, retained the core self-help message that what we think and believe manifests itself in reality. Chopra argued that if we can visualize a world in which everlasting life is a commonplace norm, then it will be so. What is keeping us from “a land where youthful vigor, renewal, creativity, joy, fulfillment, and timelessness are the common experience of everyday life, where old age, senility, infirmity, and death do not exist...,” according to Chopra, employing a basic Western psychological argument, was our “worldview,” invested in us by our parents, teachers, and society (1993, 3). Chopra echoed the notion that the individual is kept from his best self by the limits of society, and in this message was consistent with the self-help genre historically.

In the case of both religious and medical authorities, in cobbling together ideas on thought and wellness, professionals also crafted their own identities. The intervening link between cause and effect, illness and cure, often was the author’s professional insight. Ironically, authors would often enlist their professional authority to gain credence, then attribute their power to cure to that professionalism, all the while supposedly communicating to readers that they had the power and authority to help themselves. Given this awkward relationship to professionalism, it has generally been a considerably less important mechanism for gaining authority than personal, lay experience has been.

## Personal experience or lay authority

Max Weber, in his classic text, *Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, constructed three models of authority: traditional, charismatic, and rational/legal. For Weber, rational or legal grounds of authority involved "a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands." Authority constituted on charismatic grounds depended on a "devotion to exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of the individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him" (1958, 215). The authority claimed by authors with religious and medical professional training was similar to Weber's legal authority, whereas authors who based their advice on personal experience asserted a kind of "charismatic authority constructed upon their identities as individuals" (1958, 312). In keeping with Weber's typology, personal experience, based on successful personal transformation, was the most central of the self-help authors' claims to knowledge and ability to help others. Beyond the publishing realm, lay people have been largely responsible for developing and maintaining the self-help group phenomenon. Within publishing, authors without years of formal education have often reached star status. The casting of the author in the role of naïve healer had a long history. Phineas Quimby, often referred to as the first psycho-religious self-help guru, claimed that his healing abilities were based on personal experience and witnessing. Referring to potential predecessors, Berkeley or Swedenborg, Quimby's biographer insisted that Quimby's ideas sprang solely from his own experience for he "was not a reader of philosophy or theology" (Dresser 1919).

Over time, the degree to which authors exposed themselves in self-help increased, as did the use of the personal pronoun. In 1902, Frenchman Charles Wagner in *The Simple Life* saw fit to begin his preface by talking hypothetically and in the third person, “The sick man, wasted by fever, consumed with thirst, dreams in his sleep of a fresh stream wherein he bathes, or of a clear fountain from which he drinks in great draughts” (1902, xxxvii). Wagner hoped that his text would serve metaphorically as the water which would revive his readers, helping them to live a simple life in complex times. Continuing in classic self-help form, Wagner then began his first chapter with the story of one “Mlle. Yvonne” who is to be married, and stereotypically beside herself. Her wise “Grandmamma” declared “the world is growing too complex; and it does not make people happier – quite the contrary!” (1902, 3) While Wagner’s story, with some change to the language, could easily be found in a self-help book of the 2000s, a more characteristic start is found in Melody Beattie’s *Codependents’ Guide to the Twelve Steps*. The first sentence of her introduction reads, “The first time I was exposed to the Twelve Steps, I was forced into a state hospital to recover from chemical addiction” (1990, 1). We would be hard pressed to find a more blunt example of authority constituted on difficult, transformative personal experience. Beattie, of course, went on to chronicle the ways in which she beat her addiction and in so doing gained the insight she passed on to her readers.

In keeping with self-help ideals, the transformations that authors convey are of a personal nature, motivated by personal circumstance and undertaken through personal will. They are most often devoid of social analysis. Links between poverty, race, class and gender have generally been anathema; links between difficult world events and

subsequent sadness or depression, while at times acknowledged, were rarely seen as causes for personal difficulties. Whether one is fulfilled or unfulfilled was dependent overwhelmingly on explanations of the personal interior. Thus, it has been consistent with the ideological orientation of self-help for authors to gain the right to speak through personal experience.

Resting upon stereotypical ideas of the plainspoken person as forthright, writers who base their authority on charisma often communicated using the popular jargon of their day. As tracts of advice, these books attempted “to be both simple and pragmatic and profound and metaphysical” (Meyer 1965, 35). Attempts to strike this balance greatly impacted the form in which advice was communicated. Like the messages in self-help on the nature of thought itself, the language used was suggestive of and related to those messages. In *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, Dale Carnegie told readers, “If you wish to get the most out of this book, there is one indispensable requirement [...] What is this magic requirement? *Just this: a deep, driving desire to learn, a vigorous determination to stop worrying and start living* (1944, xxi, emphasis in original). By employing direct, simple, contemporary language, self-help authors claimed that language itself did not get in the way of their message. For example, in *How to Live 365 Days a Year*, John A Schindler, M.D. claimed that in his book “the many varieties of help given us by modern psychiatry and psychology are leveled down to the common terms of daily life, and integrated into a one-two-three system for directing the course of your living from one minute to the next” (1954, xiv).

The author closely associated himself with the reader, rather than with “experts” (Rice 1992). Authors couched their expertise as deriving from personal experience and

observation. In *Simple Steps to Impossible Dreams*, author Scott used first person and direct address to argue that his “steps” were available to all, that he himself had had good and bad times, that success was a matter of free choice for the reader:

Chances are pretty good that you think people who achieve their “impossible dreams” are in a different league from you. That’s simply not true....They simply learned and utilized some specific techniques that enabled them to “dream big,” and then to achieve those dreams....If I had to guess, I’d say 30 percent of American adults are dreamers, 69.9 percent are dream0breakers, and only one-tenth of one percent are dream-makers. Which category do you want to be in? I’ve been in all three, and I can tell you with all certainty that being a Dream-Maker is infinitely more rewarding (1998, 24).

He compelled the reader to want to change, to see him or herself as presently unfulfilled (i.e. sick), but capable of change, all within the context of an intimate conversation between author and reader which engaged the reader as part of the story. Central to these rhetorical moves was Scott’s emphasis on his own personal experience or “journey.”

The communication scholarship on journalistic professionalism and authority provides a useful foil to the study of the self-help phenomenon, where authors must, like their journalistic counterparts, demonstrate their right to speak. While journalists forged a sense of professionalism without the typical credentialing of other professions (Zelizer 1992), self-help authors constructed a differing sort of authority, a sort of “lay expertise” based on personal experience. Authors did not aim to distinguish themselves from their readers, but rather to embrace them as part of the same clan, one defined by experience, as the passage from *Simple Steps to Impossible Dreams* illustrated above, on “having been there too.” Based on this “lay expertise,” self-help authors gained the right to tell their story. The scholarship on journalism suggests journalists similarly cultivated and

demonstrated their right to speak for many. While producing “public knowledge” (Schudson 1995), journalists simultaneously established their right to be the spokespersons (Zelizer 1995). But the goal of telling “true stories” was often accomplished not solely on the basis of how well journalists conveyed facts. Ettema and Glasser (1998) persuasively argued that journalists acted as “custodians of conscience,” forging our culture’s moral frameworks. My research bore out a similar interpretation, that self-help authors helped to define thought or “positive thinking” in moral terms, as reflecting reality, and while doing so also defined themselves as the lay purveyors of that knowledge.

One of the main weaknesses of mankind is the average man’s familiarity with the word “impossible.” He knows all the rules which will not work. He knows all the things which cannot be done. This book was written for those who seek the rules which have made others successful, and are willing to *stake everything* on those rules. (Hill 1937, 27, original emphasis.)

Napoleon Hill’s “self-confidence formula” was a set of statements readers were instructed to say aloud repeatedly, such as “I know that I have the ability to achieve the object of my definite purpose in life...I realize the dominating thoughts of my mind will eventually reproduce themselves in outward, physical action, and gradually transform themselves into physical reality” (1937, 54). Hill invested innate, magical, moral, and curative power in these utterances: “Back of this formula is a law of nature which no man has yet been able to explain...The important fact about it is – it WORKS for the glory and success of mankind, IF it is used constructively. On the other hand, if used destructively, it will destroy just as readily” (1937, 55). Readers were encouraged not to challenge or question the validity of Hill’s talking cure; in fact to do so, he said, will make them impotent. They had to have faith. Authors tended to frame their knowledge

and advice as insular, as unique, as disassociated from the greater world of social knowledge. This effectively separated out or divided off the intimate sphere constructed by the author and shared with the reader within the text, and everything else. Just as the author's knowledge stemmed from personal experience, the reader was not directed to look outward, beyond either the pages of the text or himself, for additional information, inspiration, or advice. The curative systems similarly were posited as complete, self-sufficient, relying not at all on the world beyond.

This emphasis on personal experience was largely dependent on and related to notions of character. It was not only experience, but what authors made of their experiences that built communicative authority. Despite differences between writers with formal credentials and those with only lay experience, as a whole, in crafting their collective image, these authors shared much in common. Beyond a near universal success in treating patients, self-help authors, regardless of formal education, tended also to have many of the same character qualities.

#### Character qualities of authors

Authors often asked readers to do quite difficult, some might say impossible, tasks (although they are often constructed as easy and immediate, like throwing a light switch). As mentioned previously, Chopra asked readers to reject the conventional knowledge of the medical community and adopt the alternative belief that death is escapable and merely a product of our belief. To advocate such seemingly insupportable ideas required that authors profess and display credibility, and perhaps the most central

characteristic of credibility is persuasiveness both of the author's message and of the author's intent. The persuasiveness, intimately related to truthfulness, of the author's message (specifically, of the effectiveness of positive thinking) was embedded within the numerous narratives of healing patients. Truthfulness of the author's intent entailed a demonstration of proper motives, more often communicated through direct statements of desires to be helpful, to share the wisdom, and the benefits drawn from that wisdom, with others. Painting a picture of themselves as giving, nurturing, even selfless, authors claimed that their aim was to alleviate suffering among the readers; no author mentions the financial rewards of publishing.

The quality of modesty has been a conflicted one in this genre. On the one hand, authors often claimed to have single handedly discovered or invented a new system of healing, as the Mary Baker Eddy did here: "It was in Massachusetts, in the year 1866, that I discovered the Science of Divine Metaphysical Healing, which I afterward named Christian Science" (1902, 28). In keeping with this tendency, authors rarely acknowledged their influential teachers, the religious or psychological roots from which their ideas draw (with distortion), or even the formulaic aspects of the genre within which they worked. Alternatively, as already discussed, knowledge was attributed to personal experience. Claiming novelty for ideas that had appeared on the printed page over at least 150 years was usually couched in terms of inspiration or hard individual work, as was the case claimed by Robert Ringer in *Winning Through Intimidation* who formed "a workable philosophy over the years" (1973, 30). More frequently authors repeatedly attributed their wisdom to epiphany, claiming that they had realized the mechanisms of their unique systems of healing and happiness in an instant, and that they manifested



themselves in their minds in complete and perfect form. John Gray claimed such an instantaneous wisdom: “By learning in very practical and specific terms about how men and women are different, I *suddenly* began to realize that my marriage did not need to be such a struggle. With this *new awareness* of our differences Bonnie and I were able to *improve dramatically our communication* and enjoy each other more” (1992, 3, emphasis added). In an argument that renounced invention but was said to be similarly instantaneous, authors, especially in more religious texts, posited themselves as vehicles merely transferring divine knowledge, of which they were fairly passive recipients, to the wider community. Early authors maintained a sense of modesty by attributing their wisdom to insight bestowed by the Divine. What is striking about this bifurcated representation of modesty is the split itself, the fact that few authors claim the middle ground. Rarely do authors claim some middling degree of insight and skill, opting instead to either claim full credit or deny personal responsibility for the ideas they put forth. Of course, there are those authors who manage to do both, in one passage donning the title of inventor or creator, while in another passage, taking the simple shape of conduit or medium. After chronicling his discoveries of his “self-confidence formula,” Napoleon Hill contended that “no man has yet been able to explain” why autosuggestion succeeds (1937, 55).

Working in concert with persuasiveness, the vast majority of self-help authors attempted to construct a persona characterized by compassion. In some sub-genres of self-help not included in this research, authors took on the taskmaster’s tone, ordering and commanding readers to shape up, to stop behaving badly, or stop feeling sorry for themselves. This boot-camp rhetoric was decidedly not evidenced in the general, psycho-

religious self-help studied here, although scolding the reader was more prevalent in the early days of the genre. Annie Payson Call, for example, expressed frustration with the “ignorant” who “shunned” her all important topic of the human nervous system (1898, 9). More commonly, authors expressed compassion and concern for their readers, sympathy for their problems, and encouragement in the face of difficulty. In *Homecoming: Reclaiming and Championing Your Inner Child*, John Bradshaw employed a common formulaic narrative by beginning his first chapter with a personal narrative – a story in which having inexplicably raged against his innocent family, Bradshaw first recognized his wounded inner child. After then detailing the many behaviors that characterize the inner child (and we all have one, according to Bradshaw), the author concluded the chapter by directly addressing the reader for the first time: “My hope is that you can see what serious issues your wounded inner child continues to present in your adult life” (1990, 25).

The ways in which authors bundle together a cohesive notion of themselves is conveyed not only by explicit statements but also in the narrative shape taken by their books. In conveying persuasiveness, honesty, and compassion, authors frequently started their books with a personal story of their own moment of epiphany or transformation. Of all the methods authors used to gain the moral imperative to impart the lessons of “communicative healing,” personal stories were the most prevalent, and they were usually found in the early pages of the text. The first demonstrative narrative of Covey’s *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* was a personal one in which the author identified a problem in his own life and addressed the problem by thinking differently. Before beginning his introductory story, Covey first identified the illness his book helped

to cure: whether at work or home, his patients felt unsatisfied and disconnected from those around them. With his personal story, Covey illustrated that he could relate: “A few years ago, my wife Sandra and I were struggling with this kind of concern.” Their son was not only having academic difficulty, he was also socially and physically immature. Both he and his wife wanted to succeed as parents and to help their son. Covey described “expectancy theory” in language reminiscent of mind cure and positive thinking – what we mentally perceive is what we see reflected in reality, “that the lens itself shapes how we interpret the world” (1989, 17). In conversation together, Covey and his wife discovered that they had a negative perception of their son, that they saw him as “behind.” With this came the realization that:

if we wanted to change the situation, we first had to change ourselves. And to change ourselves effectively, we first had to change our perceptions....Through deep thought and the exercise of faith and prayer, we began to see our son in terms of his own uniqueness. We saw within him layers and layers of potential that would be realized at his own pace and speed....As the weeks and months passed he began to feel a quiet confidence and affirmed himself. He began to blossom...(20).

While Covey used the visual metaphors of seeing and perception, the story pivoted on notions of positive thinking, on what he and his wife said and thought about their son, about what their beliefs conveyed to each other and to him. Locating his insight in personal experience, Covey’s story was a compelling, but by no means unique, invocation of the trope that what we think has the power to change reality. In addition, Covey’s story placed connection among people, in this case, family members as of critical import. Perceptual change was not necessary only to change the self, but to better one’s connection with others, an expressly social end.

The purpose of this discussion has been to generalize the qualities of the voice of the self-help author. Self-help authors on the whole displayed a care with self-demonstration; they told stories in which they played the role of a persuasive, truthful, compassionate, giving teacher. Demonstrating their motives to undertake the writing of a self-help book figured prominently, often in the form of a narrative about personal transformation. Through these stories of self-transformation and newfound wisdom, authors located the knowledge they wished to share with readers in personal experience. Compassion grew increasingly important as the genre developed. In the end, the generalized author has an oddly dual nature – as both a character of considerable wisdom and power upon whom readers should model their own behaviors and simultaneously a character much like the generalized reader, a character who may be further along the road toward wellness than the reader. By sharing the same pathway, author and reader are portrayed as much alike.

#### The author's image of the reader

If one who has never made any systematic effort to lift and control of thought forces will, for a single month, earnestly pursue the course here suggested, he will be surprised and delighted at the results, and nothing will induce him to go back to careless, aimless, and superficial thinking (Wood 1893, 70).

Like the textual construct of the generalized author, self-help books were also read for the collective image of the reader that authors produced. This generalized reader was clearly distinguished from an empirical audience of actual people, for in literary narrative, as Walter Ong pointed out, a writer's audience is a fiction (Ong 1982). Textual theorists have been roundly criticized for well over twenty years for overemphasizing the

audience constructed in the text to the neglect of audiences outside the text. Perhaps most famously, Jacques Derrida argued that meaning does not dwell in the text *per se* but in writing and reading (Derrida 1978), in the human interaction with text. All forms of evidence carry particular biases. While admittedly the textually constructed general reader tells us little about actual self-help readers, the construct does inform what we know about authors and what readers are exposed to. Media scholars pointed out that “the audience” is constructed in multiple ways, by producers, in texts, and by consumers themselves (Alasuutari 1999).

James Anderson argued that ideas of audience stem from ideas of the individual (1996). He drew a quick schema, starting with Enlightenment conceptualizations of the rational individual, through cognitivist ideas of the individual as a site where values, beliefs, schemata etc. are located, moving on to sociological ideas of the individual as a product of larger, external social forces, structural ideas of the individual as the result of society and language, and concluding with poststructuralist ideas of individual agency existent within a socially bounded field (Anderson 1996, 77-78). It is on this last poststructuralist idea of the individual that much current thought on audience studies hinged.

The relationship between playwright and audience, as characterized in the Greek tradition, was informed by proximity. The author might well be in attendance at a performance, the audience could directly address the playwright (Anderson 1996). In concert with Radway’s reminder, the relationship carried with it an interpersonal dimension in which audiences would know and identify with the author to varying degrees. Self-help texts attempt to infuse their mass mediated texts with this connotation

of intimacy between author and audience. In keeping with this effort, the relationship between author and audience took on the tenor of therapist and patient or clergyman and parishioner.

In keeping with the poststructuralist tradition in which readers were involved in productive work but under determinate conditions, this dissertation started from the opposite side of the communicative relationship between “text” and “reader,” exploring the “determinate conditions” of the text, rather than the various interpretations by audiences. Starting with the premise that *textual* audience constructions do not imply *empirical* audience constructions, the following reader typifications did not necessarily fully account for reader constructions by individual authors, but rather attempted to capture the generic qualities attributed to readers across time. As constructed in the text, the reader became the author’s foil, expressly in need of what the author offered. The reader then could be seen as the author’s mirror opposite, readily absorbing what authors gave, willingly providing what authors expected in return. In keeping with this circularity, authors wrote as if communication were always successful, that the reader had understood, agreed with, and perhaps even instituted the author’s advice.

#### Generalized, universal reader

The books studied in this dissertation were of the most general sort, and as such they attempted to appeal to a wide swatch of people by appealing to universal experience, framed in the most general terms. In doing so, the texts brought the greatest number of readers into the story’s purview. In 1897, an article in the *Journal of Practical*

*Metaphysics*, defined its audience as “all who desire to know the truth...” (86). The individual reader was framed as existing within a wider community of people who shared similar concerns and problems, and more persuasively, as part of the community of healed patients referred to in the text. The reader’s ability to imagine him or herself as benefiting from the text was contingent upon adoption of the therapeutic remedies the text offered.

It is unsurprising, then, that at the general level, just as authors were framed as persuasive, readers were portrayed as willingly giving of their attention and trust. In some texts, trust in the author was expressed in terms of a willingness to suspend disbelief. What authors most frequently demanded of the reader, as constructed in the text, was a willingness to change. In speaking of the techniques required to adopt the “habits” he endorsed, Covey, author of the best selling *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, said: “Unless I want to listen, unless I have the desire, it won’t be a habit in my life” (1989, 47). In the classic 1937, *Think and Grow Rich*, Hill demanded a greater commitment:

One of the main weaknesses of mankind is the average man’s familiarity with the word “impossible.” He knows all the rules which will not work. He knows all the things which cannot be done. This book was written for those who seek the rules which have made others successful, and are willing to *stake everything* on those rules. (Hill, 27, original emphasis.)

Authors encouraged readers to want to “do things differently,” which usually meant talk differently, as Beattie did: “We can learn to do things differently. We can change” (1987, 36). This change took expressive form: “real power comes from feeling our feelings, not from ignoring them” (1987, 100). As readers, to convince not only ourselves but also those around us, demonstrating “feeling our feelings” took communicative form. This

characteristic has been constant in self-help books from the beginning. In Henry Wood's 1893 classic, *Ideal Suggestion Through Mental Photography*, "some measure of *desire* for release is pre-supposed" (103-104). Wood's reader foresaw the reader of the 1950s with its ring of psychology and the colloquialism, "you first must want to change."

Readers who acknowledged a willingness to change implied also a need to change, and as such were imperfect people and likely suffering from some sort of discontent and unhappiness. Texts categorized readers as suffering from a wide range of personal difficulties, as did Wood when he said, "those in servitude to any kind of fear, or who are carrying burdens of grief, poverty, disappointment, anxiety, or melancholia, will find *Ideal Suggestion* a free and sovereign remedy. To any who were overcome by, or in danger of yielding to passion, lust, envy, avarice, jealousy, or crime, it furnishes not only an antidote, but a radical cure" (1893, 104). So many types and degrees of personal and social problems fell under the texts' purview that the problems themselves, in being so abundant, appeared less shameful or stigmatized. Additionally over time, while readers in early texts were clearly characterized as people with problems, in contemporary texts readers became, more palatably, simply those who would like things to be a bit better, who would like to be a bit wealthier, or a bit more organized, etc. Who did not fit this bill?

The textual emphasis on a close and corresponding fit between the character qualities of the author and those of the reader, however, could not overshadow an even more prominent textual claim: that the cure, the positive reorientation of one's thoughts, was enacted by the individual reader. Charles Fillmore, in his *Temple Talks* (1912), was emphatic on this point: "People say, 'What can a man do with the thoughts of his mind?'"



He can do everything with them. They are under his absolute control. He can direct them. He can coerce them. He can hush them or crush them. He can dissolve them and put others in their place.” In keeping with his and the larger New Thought orientation on the power of thought, he goes on to say that, “there is no other spot in the universe where man has mastery. The dominion which is his by Divine right is over his own thoughts” (1912, 37). If readers supposed that the social world held some sway over their mental terrain, self-help authors were there to relieve them of that misconception. “Heretofore we have sought knowledge and help from outside sources, not knowing that the source of all knowledge, the very Spirit of Truth, was lying latent within ourselves...(Cady 1919, 8).

This generalized construction of the reader as one who was willing to change, trusting the author, and yet simultaneously an individual with agency was a loose and potentially problematic categorization scheme when considered in conjunction with the narrative relationship forged between author and reader. While the text claimed that readers “go it alone” and use their thoughts to positively transform the social world, the texts simultaneously cultivated a reliance on the part of readers upon the author, a move that undermines the claim that an individual’s thoughts, independent of the social surround, manufacture reality. Instead, those thoughts can be seen as stemming from popular narratives of the text.

## Forging a relationship: Authors talk to and of readers

In the spirit of Christ's charity, -- as one who "hopeth all things, endureth all things," and is joyful to bear consolation to the sorrowing and healing to the sick, -- she commits these pages to honest seekers for Truth. Mary Baker Eddy (1902, xii).

Clearly not penning private documents, self-help authors intended to speak to others. The therapeutic relationship that dominated self-help was not a solitary one, but one characterized as between author and reader, a one-to-one exchange. Authors made clear that they had the readers in mind and in return expected the reader's attention. What were the particular narrative links between authors and readers in self-help? In Eddy's case, she both complimented her readers and commanded them to be "honest seekers of the Truth," while she characterized herself as a martyr who endured in the hope of helping others. Nineteenth century authors more typically referred to the "dear reader" and spoke of themselves in third person, again as Eddy did, while twentieth century authors more likely enlisted the simple "you" and "I." In addressing readers, self-help authors hoped that the reader would not merely attend to the text but would change his or her attitudes and behaviors. Unlike fiction writers, they need not tell a story with guts and glory to keep readers' attention, although at times tales of past personal failures, bookended by moral lessons learned, allow the author to do just that. But a seedy story was the exception to the self-help rule. Alternatively, a characteristic so ubiquitous as to seem a requirement of the genre was the articulation of understanding; authors empathized with readers. John A. Schindler, author of *How to Live 365 Days a Year* (1954, v), went so far as to dedicate the book to "the unsung magnificence of

ordinary people [... who] have shown the courage to endure and the determination to make the best of it.”

Understanding both the reader’s strengths and weaknesses and being able to help the reader implied that the author imagined an audience that shared his or her central concerns, and, even more likely, was bothered by patterns of behavior that the author had learned to overcome. Authors and readers connected through shared experience and concern. Authors cultivated this common ground for a number of legitimizing ends. A dual sense of community and anonymity was possible for readers, who recognized people like themselves in the stories authors told, experiencing a one-to-one dialogue with authors while maintaining silence and the safety of distance. Authors cultivated an additional sense of safety for readers, safety in numbers, given that the author has personal experience with the difficulties confronting the reader. Take, for example, the case of best selling contemporary author Iyanla Vanzant. In an *Ebony* magazine profile, the article’s author suggested: “Vanzant’s secret may be in her kinship with readers. In her life story, they can see fragments of their own bad judgments, challenges and hopes for something better” (Starling 1998).

An additional way that authors attracted and kept the attention of readers was by promising easy transformations that were universally effective. A primary criticism of self-help in popular culture has been the genre’s glib tone. As sarcastically stated in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, “every Big Thought is broken down into easily digestible nuggets of information” that fail to have the nutritional quality of their more complex counterparts (Weiner 2000, K1). Authors also curried favor with readers by cajoling them, as the best selling author of the 1990s, Iyanla Vanzant, did when she said: “Get

this: Your progress has been phenomenal!” (Vanzant 1998, 65). This sort of coaching, of course, would be variously interpreted by actual, as opposed to textually constructed, readers, as perhaps either encouraging or artificial, condescending or uplifting.

Rather than the articulation of authors’ and readers’ common experiences leading to a narrowly constructed audience, however, the problems afflicting the audience and the resultant general dissatisfaction with life were defined with such breadth that they came to plague just about everyone. Writing in the New Thought journal, *Mind*, in October of 1897, Cassins MacDonald defined “every living soul with longings” as the population who would benefit from the publication (43). Similarly, problems of both body and mind have long been defined in great breadth. In *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989), Covey identified just such an indiscriminate illness: whether at work or home, his readers felt unsatisfied and disconnected from those around them. By rhetorically linking disconnection with illness and unhappiness and connection with health and well-being, it was all the more crucial that self-help authors demonstrated connectedness in their own lives and with their readers. But just as they did so, they also exposed the fallacy of the notion that thought alone, without social interaction, could change readers’ lives for the better. The importance of social interaction, which the books cannot fully banish from their pages, exposed the books’ troubled and misleading reliance on “thought.”

## Conclusion

The psycho-religious self-help genre has particular narrative characteristics that position the genre as a vehicle for popular idea that thought, without social interaction,

shapes reality. At the same time, the relationship between author and reader, mimicking one of real social interaction, simultaneously undermines the persuasiveness of the idea that thought constructs reality, in that authors acknowledge the role of relationships in self-help through their mimicry.

The authorial voice borrows from professional medical and religious authority, and more importantly from personal experience. Drawing from the personal realm, authors construct themselves as persuasive, credible, truthful, modest, giving, and compassionate. In turn, authors construct a reader that is the perfect complement: trusting, willing and needing to change and to take the author's advice.

Just as writing self-help constituted an act of communication, these social texts about the personal called authors to the art of persuasion. The moral authority of the author was central to self-help books' persuasiveness. Hayden White described the construction of "true stories" as narratives about reality. White held that the power to narrate was a moral one: "...narrativity, certainly in factual storytelling and probably in fictional storytelling as well, is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality" (1980,13-14). What did authors do with this moral authority? They used it to meld their personal healing narrative with that of those they had healed into a metanarrative of popular therapeutic healing.

Not surprisingly, the relationship between self-help author and reader could be likened to that between therapist and patient. From a narrative perspective, self-help literature mirrored this two-person treatment; the author became therapist and the reader patient. In his analysis of the narratives of the psychoanalytic dialogue, Schafer positioned the therapist in the interpretive role of recasting, rearranging, and retelling of

patients' stories. With each retelling – “What I hear you saying is...” or “In other words, it's a matter of...” – the therapist redefined the patient's life stories into “the only narrative it makes good enough sense to tell at that time” (1980, 40). Schafer defined a number of common narratives: the introspection narrative allowed patients to witness their lives from a detached vantage point; the drive narrative, “the partly moralistic and partly Darwinian-scientific talk that at heart we are all animals;” and the wishing narrative which helped the patient acknowledge that he was passive in relation to a drive (1980, 37).

Despite differences, psychotherapy and self-help conveyed a similar stance toward “reality.” The narrative structure of both suggested that, rather than a reality “out there,” reality was mediated by narration. But as Schafer put it, “Far from being innocently encountered or discovered, it is created in a regulated fashion” (45). Schafer argued that the patient's stories were “retold in a way that both summarizes and justifies what the analyst requires in order to do the kind of psychoanalytic work that is being done” (49). Similarly, self-help readers were encouraged to mold their pasts, presents and anticipated futures into the talking cure narrative presented in the text. In the struggle to command their supposedly individual thoughts, the reader was intimately dependent on the author, a relationship informed by the fact, as Zelizer argued, that authority is a communicative act (1992).

There were differences, most obviously temporal and spatial ones, in the relationships between psychotherapist and patient and between the self-help author and reader that gave the reader increased autonomy. As Grodin's research (1991) suggested, in comparison to the therapy patient, readers had greater choice over which textual

aspects they incorporated into their life stories. Additionally, authors could not respond to readers, making this a one-way communication in practice, despite the textual effort to construct a dialogic sense of reality. On both accounts, authors attempted to overcome these weaknesses by generating a sense of intimacy and compelling readers to adopt their stories, suggesting, by way of anecdote, that they were “listening” to their readers. Authors recounted experiences in which, by listening eagerly and sympathetically to the stories of numerous others, they were able to respond and ask prodding questions which enabled the patient to talk curatively. For example, in *The Road Less Traveled*, Peck told the story of Stewart to demonstrate not only his philosophy on “worldviews,” but also his ability to respond to patients, work through issues and misunderstandings, and persevere until problems were solved. This work entailed listening as well as speaking. Peck held that the more one practiced his principles of “discipline and love and life experience” (as defined in the preceding chapters), the greater one’s understanding of the world, i.e. the more correct one’s worldview. In short, the more his readers thought and spoke as he did, the closer they came to correctly seeing reality. Peck aimed to alleviate his patients’ confusion and sadness by helping them to adopt his worldview. Demonstrating the depth and urgency of his patient’s problems, Peck told readers that Stewart, a patient he had cured, had made two serious suicide attempts; he had a “worthless self-image.” Through therapeutic conversation, Peck began to identify the source of the problem when Stewart recounted a dream:

Something clicked in my mind... ‘Stewart,’ I said, ‘you have told me that you’re an atheist, and I believe you. There is a part of your mind that believes there is no God. But I am beginning to suspect that there is another part of your mind that does believe in God – a dangerous, cutthroat God.’ *My suspicion was correct.* Gradually, as we worked together, reluctantly, striving against resistance, Stewart

**began to recognize within himself a strange and ugly faith: an assumption, beyond his atheism, that the world was controlled and directed by a malevolent force...(1978, 188, emphasis added).**

**In this passage, Peck successfully diagnosed his patient (illness due to an unconscious and negative world view), treated him (therapeutic conversation continues until Stewart is able to identify this world view himself), and produced a cure (identifying the negative view induces the cure, or at least the road to wellness is identified). This last was one of attributes bestowed upon thought: that naming itself was a solution, articulation effected the change and cure. Stewart's illness was a result of his confused and conflicted worldview – meaning that his thoughts and perceptions of the world were making him sick. Peck enabled Stewart to see this through “work,” i.e. conversation between them. In this dialogic process, Peck listened and helped Stewart formulate his new worldview, and in doing so, undermined the texts claim that thought alone was responsible for constructing reality.**

**The next three chapters of this dissertation explore a core component of the self-help genre's “worldview,” the various evolving ways in which “thought” has been defined – as the mental process that constructs material reality, as the means by which individuals understand themselves, connect with the metaphysical and social realms, and live happy and healthy lives, all without the need for social interaction. The feat of the genre has been its success in popularizing such a notion, despite its clear limitations.**



### **Chapter Three: THOUGHT AS COMMUNICATION BECOMES CUREALL, the Early Period of Psycho-Religious Self-Help, 1880-1910**

For the last 25 years I have been trying to find out what is and at last have come to know [...] I was what I was looking for. – Phineas Parkhurst Quimby 1921, 276

Phineas Parkhurst Quimby was arguably the first person to write about a set of ideas that would later be labeled “positive thinking,”<sup>10</sup> seen by many as a precursor to contemporary notions of self-help. The statement above captured Quimby’s rendition of what would become self-help literature’s generic quest narrative, in that after roaming far and wide for the cure to what ailed him, Quimby found his answer within his own internal landscape. Quimby’s remark, a distillation of self-help’s messages, seems timeless, but when he made it in the 1860s, it signaled something new. In arguing that each individual had the mental capacity to receive God’s healing power without the mediation of an intervening authority, Quimby flouted the church and hospital in which such authority was typically invested. This “power of mind” -- which in essence argued that an individual’s thoughts brought material reality into being and that thoughts of wellness would manufacture good health and thoughts of wealth would materialize riches -- would become the central theme running through psycho-religious self-help books throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At its core, it was an idea about the tremendous power of

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<sup>10</sup> Quimby, who died in 1869, did most of his work as a healer in the 1860s in northern New England. He developed an active following of student/patients as well as some attention from regional presses. The ideas Quimby developed – that our thoughts become materialized, for instance, if one thinks of oneself as weak and prone to illness that is the physical condition that will be experienced – would become much more prevalently adopted in popular culture in the decades following his death, as his students and others published and publicized their practices and organizations. While Quimby wrote about his beliefs and practices, his work was not published until the 1920s, as the New Thought movement was experiencing the tail end of its decline in popularity.

thought and speech to place the individual in his chosen location within the social geography. As the power that puts ideas into practice, as both savior and destroyer, self-help literature of the 1880s-1910s put “thought” in a troubled, tenuous place in popular discourse, a position the term would retain in the literature through today. Beginning with this early self-help literature of the late nineteenth century, this chapter explores how the rhetorical weight placed on the concept of thought molded associated ideas of self, divinity, science, society, and the interactions among them.

Self-help books began their long romance with notions of thought as the primary operator of the self’s experience, however variously and nebulously defined, toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – a time typically remembered as infatuated with science. How then were these popular authors of metaphysics perceived? Did their texts retain credibility as industrialization and urbanization upset the existing social terrain? It was in fact the context of social, economic and political change that bestowed a sense of purpose to the “mind cure” message, which could be interpreted as empowering individual agency. In the midst of bewildering change, a frequent response is to attempt to control and regulate the lone realm upon which the individual might maintain power: the self. This is not to say however that self-help books and their authors were perceived as credible and honest brokers of a legitimate healing practice. Just as in contemporary portrayals, journalists in particular often poked fun at the magical claims of self-help authors while medical doctors were wary and suggested their patients be the same (Anker 1999, 184).

All historical researchers must grapple with the question of when to begin their story; the desire to “start at the beginning” can lead to a tempting but potentially time

consuming problem of infinite regress as the researcher reaches further and further back, searching for elusive origins. But there is no singular or true beginning to history; instead, there are always multiple antecedents, just as there are to the story I tell here. The core beliefs that began to congeal into a literary form with the New Thought movement – ideas of the power of thought to manifest itself in material reality and the centrality of the individual to his or her own spiritual and physical well-being – are ancient and enduring. Nonetheless the literature of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century metaphysical movements constituted a starting place of sorts.<sup>11</sup> Religious historian Robert C. Fuller credits the metaphysical movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with “creating an enduring tradition in unchurched American spirituality and developing a middle class penchant for ‘exotic philosophies’ including Eastern faiths, Native traditions and pagan practices” (2001, 11). The “unchurched” – avid readers, questioners of authority, searchers for alternative belief systems – initiated religious and spiritual movements that would multiply during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Wuthnow 1998).

Unlike success literature, most often characterized by Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*, his *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, or Horatio Alger’s rags-to-riches tales, the New Thought Movement’s advice on a successful life appeared unconcerned with negotiating the social, economic, or political world.<sup>12</sup> These were not “up by the

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<sup>11</sup> Other scholars have defined New Thought literature, and Quimby’s writing in particular, as the beginning of the self-help genre (Braden 1963; Meyer 1965; Moskowitz 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Religious mind-cure beliefs have long had secular counterparts: Jefferson, Franklin, Horatio Alger, and in fact, as one researcher argues, it was the general success literature from which the therapeutic literature of mind-cure sprang (Starker, 20). While something of a forced distinction, this project considers “success” literature as outside of what I

bootstraps” stories of social climbing propelled by individual tenacity. Also, unlike the secular permutations that Positive Thinking would take in the next century, the psycho-religious strain of self-help literature of the late 1800s (and here I exclude popular etiquette manuals in addition to “success” literature) were steeped in the Christian rhetoric of living a life in harmony with the word of God, and more specifically, of conversion (Shea 1968, 91). For instance, in 1863, P.P. Quimby described his movement “from disease to health” as “conversion” (Dresser 1921, 26).<sup>13</sup> And yet, self-help

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have been considering a religious/psychological belief paradigm. Success literature has a unique American history originating in revolutionary times, a history that has been documented to a greater extent than the self-help books considered here (Anker 1999a; Cawelti 1965; Huber 1971). To incorporate success literature and “do justice” to its historical surround would have made this project unwieldy and unfocused. Yet, the basic belief in the power of communication to transform the individual and the world around him is similar in success books, although in secular form. Admittedly the lines between success and psycho-religious self-help are often crossed. For example, success and religious self-help became intertwined when Norman Vincent Peale succeeded in appealing to the burgeoning middle class’ sense of unrootedness and their desire for wealth and status. Peale uncritically encouraged his readers to acknowledge their desires and to foster their attainment, and often these desires were not only spiritual or moral, but economic and material (Peale 1952). And still today, books on the personal enlightenment road to wealth sit along side psychologically and religiously oriented self-help.

<sup>13</sup> Myrtle Fillmore, with her husband, founded the Unity movement, one of New Thought’s groups that institutionalized to a greater degree than was the norm, published voluminously and still has fairly active vestiges to this day. Myrtle Fillmore’s conversion story (and the fact that it is a story, a narrative of verbal proportions, is central) has been told in print repeatedly by Unity followers, so much so, that like the original tale itself, in its retellings, it takes on the characteristics of incantation – of investing words with transformative power. Biographies of Myrtle Fillmore emphasize the centrality of language to Fillmore’s healing communication conversion. The story is retold in which Fillmore, attending a lecture by a traveling New Thought lecturer, heard the “simple truth” that she was “a child of God and therefore I do not inherit sickness.” This sentiment, traveling directly to her core, was then echoed repeatedly in Fillmore’s mind:

Over and over in her mind the words tolled like a bell: *I am a child of God and therefore do not inherit sickness...* Even as she stepped out of the doors of the hall, this new, this divine realization was working in her, not only in her mind but

books stood apart from organized religion. As purveyors of popular books in which authors spoke compellingly to individual readers about their own communicative powers to affect a wide range of positive changes in their lives, New Thought authors offered an influential alternative to established religious institutions. New Thought gathered together disparate threads long existent in practice into published form. This sub-genre of self-help was obsessed with universal applicability of its core concept to all people. The books therefore were of the most general sort, targeting a general reader concerned generally with mental health and happiness. The books were a foreshadow of the role narrative would come to take in the next century. Kahler's (1973) *The Inward Turn of Narrative* was not alone in charting the 20<sup>th</sup> century shift in the increasing prevalence of stories focused on inner, personal crises (Rieff 1966; Lasch 1978). While self-help books in general can be seen as an archetypal (and certainly tremendously popular) form for stories of personal transformation, the 20<sup>th</sup> century transitions, manifested in multiple cultural forms towards ever increasing emphasis on the self, were specifically rooted in New Thought books of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Scholars have usefully gathered together a number of late nineteenth century metaphysical movements under the headings "mind-cure" or "New Thought," often used interchangeably (Anker 1999a,147; Meyer 1965), an aggregate of different mental

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in the very cells of her body: *I am a child of God and therefore do not inherit sickness.* (Freeman1978, 44-45, quoted in Albanese, 1993)

This event, the lecture and conversion that followed, occurred in 1886. For historian Catherine Albanese Fillmore's conversion story invests the word with a new power. "In the formulaic repetitions of the prayer, with the desired condition invoked as actually present, the word became magical instrument and sacramental tool...religion used the word to order the world as humans, in their best moments, wanted it to be." (Albanese 1993, 336-337).

healing movements, most of which extended their influence through the media.<sup>14</sup> The mind cure movements, including the better-known Christian Science, were most active between 1880 and roughly 1910, with the 1890s serving as their most active period. New Thought should be considered a loose amalgam of a number of organizations. Just as the organizations that represented them lacked a certain solidity, the ideas associated with New Thought were loose in the air rather than doctrinal. As such, they were not well constituted into institutions with staying power. As the name implied, mind cure movements focused on using the mind to heal physical sickness. Sick people, often those with vague yet crippling illnesses that had not responded to conventional medicine, were the first to be persuaded of mind cure's efficacy. As a religious movement emphasizing healing, New Thought was a pivot between the Protestant ethos of salvation in the next world and the therapeutic ethos of health, wealth, and happiness in this world.

The recent past has been marked by significant and at times exhilarating or disconcerting cultural change. The countercultural movement of the 1960s is popularly thought to have given rise to unconventional and diverse interests along political, religious and cultural lines. Continuing into the 90s, the New-Age movement borrowed confidently and liberally from many traditions, manufacturing a resulting spiritual potpourri with perhaps only one constant: namely, that each individual trust his or herself in assembling and practicing spirituality, a piece-meal procedure of modern life defined

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<sup>14</sup> New Thought took a long time to gain momentum, largely because its early proponents failed to publish. So while New Thought can be dated to Quimby's practice of the 1860s, it was not until thirty years later that it reached its wider popularity, as authors like Ralph Waldo Trine, Charles Fillmore, Helen Bigelow Merriman, and Mary Baker Eddy (who insisted that her work be considered independent of the New Thought network, but is fundamentally alike), began to publish in earnest.

by Levi-Strauss as bricolage. Often when defining the present as a time of social transition, the more distant past, in comparison, is characterized as a time of relative social stasis.<sup>15</sup> The nineteenth century can be similarly characterized as a time of rapid cultural transition with a growing focus on the self (Anker 1999a). And like today, some of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's most popular literature focused on the themes of the stresses of the time, of living a satisfying, rewarding life, and of an individual's thoughts as the primary variable in negotiating the social and physical world, thereby suggesting that, while the formulaic qualities of the genre have shifted over time, "thought," self-help's favorite subject matter, was popular and prevalent long before what has often been defined as the start of the self-help movements in the 1930s.<sup>16</sup> Self-help's simultaneously universalistic and individualistic messages of the therapeutic power of thought spoke to a society that considered itself amidst upheaval.<sup>17</sup>

Despite a popular image of the nineteenth century as a tranquil time after the tumultuous formation of the country and before the challenges of modernity, "the nineteenth century was a remarkably diverse, unpredictable, and often discordant patchwork of people, practices, ideas and attitudes in just about every sphere of its life...(Anker 1999a,145). A unifying characteristic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's popular religious

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<sup>15</sup> Raymond Williams (1973) explored a similar historical mechanism at work in the British imagination: characterizations of the city versus the country in which the city became a bustling potentially corrupting place and the country remained a healthy, honest place. Williams argues that this characterization did not come about with industrialization in the late 19th century, but had been the way in which the country and the city had been comparatively conceptualized for centuries.

<sup>16</sup> This suggests that while scholars Katz (1993) and Cloud (1998) mark the beginning of "self-help" with England's mutual aid societies in the 1930s, the philosophical underpinnings of the genre certainly predate this time.

<sup>17</sup> The characterization of society as amidst disconcerting flux has been constant within self-help books and among scholarly explanations of them since the genre's invention.

movements was the mental healing strategies that typified them. Numerous religious and spiritual movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – such as transcendentalism, mesmerism, as well as a substantial interest in magic and the occult – remind us that this was a time of religious and spiritual experimentation. As Anker puts it, “Well before the Civil War, diverse strands of unconventional religious currents, scientific curiosities, health fads, and philosophical idealism surfaced within a disoriented and disorganized American society...” (1999a, 147).

Several cultural shifts allowed “mind-cure” movements to blossom in the later decades of the nineteenth century. The Second Great Awakening from 1800-1840 was said to have dislodged Calvinist Puritanism by calling for “individualistic autonomy and subjectivism in piety and ethics...The locus of religious authority shifted from the Puritan’s hierarchical corporateness to individual judgment” (Anker 1999a, 147). This significant transition prepared the ground for further beliefs in the power of the individual to connect with God. The empowerment of the individual brought with it a responsibility for one’s own salvation, a characteristic of selfhood that has remained significant in popular thought since. The development later in the nineteenth century of mind-cure movements like Christian Science and New Thought shared these central tenets as well as an orientation to the material world that followed from them. The self, which could attain spiritual and moral perfection through mental exercise, was not confined by social bonds or even by the body’s own corporateness. For Unity believer Emilie Cady, for example, the key to wellness was the simple realization that the self was the “most marvelous of teachers”: “Heretofore we have sought knowledge and help from outside sources, not knowing that the source of all knowledge, the very Spirit of Truth, was lying



latent within ourselves, each and every one, only waiting to be called on to teach us the truth about all things -- most marvelous of teachers, and everywhere present, without money or price!" (1919, 8). All one needed to do to achieve the heart's desire was learn to use the mind properly to communicate one's wishes, initially to God and as society grew increasingly secular, later to oneself (Starker 1989, 21).

These ideas signaled a significant departure from the dominant notions of the preceding Protestant Ethic that lauded industry and persistence in the struggle for success (Elias 1982). While Puritan and Protestant ideals continued to have considerable social impact, as Alger's "rags to riches" stories evidenced, by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, they vied with New Thought notions in which achievement of success, health, and happiness could be easy and immediate, accomplished solely by a change in thinking. Attitudes towards the relationship between the individual and the social world similarly diverged. Whereas the dominant tradition required active participation in the material world on that world's terms, New Thought notions called for internal reflection as a means of enacting perceptual shifts that in turn altered the social landscape. This notion can be alternatively interpreted, not as a rejection of industrialization, but as an effort to accommodate it. The texts, responding to a hurried world, encouraged readers to find the eye of personal calm in the midst of the surrounding social storm. This characteristic of New Thought, of its adamant rejection of physical stress or material confinement through an insistence on the power of the inner life, remained the conceptual center of psycho-religious self-help throughout the next century.

The social surround during the time of New Thought's popularity informed the movement and *vice versa*. Sociologist and communication theorist Michael Schudson

asks a series of questions that serve to unpack the relationship between self-help literature and the social world that constructs it. He asks:

[...] how do specific changes not only from one medium to another, but transformations in organization, ideology, economic relations, or political sponsorship within a given medium relate to changes in human experience? [...] The history of communication [...] asks how you constitute and are constituted by self, the experience of space, the notion of public, the concept and experience of politics and society, and languages to which people understand and experience any part of the world (1991, 181).

Schudson's is a tall order. Employing a strategy that is repeated in the fourth and fifth chapters, I attempt to roughly fill it first by sketching some of the religious, political and social influences concurrent with the New Thought movement, and then in the later part of the chapter, I turn amended versions of Schudson's questions back to self-help books themselves. I ask how the texts construct notions of selfhood, of society or community, of religious vs scientific order, and, most centrally, of the power of thought, the tie that for self-help books binds all these concepts together.

As already stated, the late 1800s were a time of significant social change, marked by the rejection of Victorian values, the increase in manufacturing, and the resulting affluence, as well as the development of a more extensive government focused on administration. Economically, the corporation became the dominant financial force. Technological advances intersected with culture, such as the new and exciting but potentially corrupting medium of film. In total, these transformations amounted to a reorientation of American ideals and values, that included a heightened penchant for organizing one's self and one's life (Moskowitz 2001, 19). It was in this atmosphere that the ideas of individual authority that Quimby had articulated 25 years earlier found fertile ground.

## **Mass Mediating Early Psycho-Religious Self-Help**

A controversy surrounds the New Thought movement concerning who was the ‘original’ purveyor of New Thought beliefs: Phineas P. Quimby, Warren Felt Evans, or Mary Baker Eddy (Meyer 1965; Anker 1999a).<sup>18</sup> This controversy makes clear that mass media, books in particular, were the primary methods by which early psycho-religious self-help found an audience. Evans and Eddy, both students of Quimby, published long before Quimby and consequently earned a greater notoriety in their day. But those who would later take on the role of keepers of the New Thought flame invariably held Quimby to be the inventor of a new therapeutic practice and the true father of the movement. Why was Quimby relatively unknown compared to his students? He failed to publish. The controversy, though tangential to my focus on the movement’s textual portrayals of self and the transformative powers of thought, revealed that mass media were the primary communicative modes of New Thought, able to impact ideas about the self and communication in ways that individual authors/teachers/healers through ‘private practice’ and lecture tours alone could not.

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<sup>18</sup> While Quimby may have been the original source, it was certainly during the height of Eddy’s popularity that New Thought took hold of the popular imagination. One explanation of Quimby’s relatively minor influence during his lifetime was that he failed to publish his work. Quimby’s “texts” comprised short, scattered, and repetitive missives, which were guardedly held by his son until long after his father’s death. It was not until the 1910s that Horatio Dresser finally persuaded the younger Quimby to allow him to edit and publish Quimby’s papers, and he did so in 1921, allowing them to “see the light of the printed page for the first time” (Dresser, 1921, 7). Quimby died in 1866, and while he received both considerable press attention and a devoted following, it was really not until the 1890s that New Thought grew into a sizeable movement, replete with organizations, institutions, and most significantly, books and magazines.

A historian of New Thought as well as the son of two of its famous proponents, Horatio Dresser suggested that readers gathered together disparate strands of the New Thought philosophy by reading a variety of self-help books, fostering a “commingling of ideas” that formed a collective “mental science” (1919, 128). Despite the popularity of particular figures and the loyalty of their patients/fans/readers, through reading a variety of books, psycho-religious self-help became detached from any singular personality in the minds of many. The influence of mass media was also indexed in part by the fact that those who published often remained influential long after their deaths. Conversely, those who were actively involved within New Thought institutions but did not publish carried relatively less influence than authors completely outside regional institutions, yet whose books were popular sellers. Ralph Waldo Trine lived far from the active urban centers where New Thought generally fared well, yet still, with his *In Tune with the Infinite*, rose from anonymity to become one of the most persuasive voices of mind cure beliefs (1897). While cultural centers of New Thought practice were important, the wide impact of the movement came about through mediated forms, and it was those who wrote who in turn built the capital which enabled them to institutionalize. The most vivid marks of the New Thought movement were made by those with the most active publishing careers, the Christian Science of Mary Baker Eddy and the Unity Group of Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, both of which have left legacies still evident today.<sup>19</sup>

The mind-cure story, then, turns on the avid use of mass media. Meyer (1965) says that, “Books and magazines were in fact a significant index of mind-cure: it was a

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<sup>19</sup> Towns across the United States still have Christian Science Reading Rooms. Amazon.com has a “New Thought” link (within its religion and spirituality category) on its website, suggesting that it is an area of interest today.

religion of people who could financially, would culturally, and did in fact spend money for reading.” The fact that self-help ideas traveled most successfully when conveyed in book form was unsurprising given the rapid increase in literacy and in the publishing industry that characterized the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Historians suggested that in the mid-1890s “publishing appeared set for unlimited growth” (Brake 2001) and the self-help genre grew as part of the generally expanding publishing industry. Rising literacy rates generated a larger pool of book consumers, just as the technological development of the steam powered cylinder press combined with the decreasing cost of paper to enlarge the speed and profitability of production (Turow 1996, 87). Book historian John Tebbel described the period between the Civil War and World War I as a time when “publishing came to full flower, rooted more deeply in the national culture than any other means of communication, and influencing it more than any other medium until the advent of television” (1987, 80). Prior to this time, the industry had been slow to develop in the Americas, but after the Civil War, reading, not only of books, but also of newspapers and magazines, rapidly became one of the nation’s favorite pastimes, a source of pleasure in the budding consumer economy. But reading solely for pleasure was seen as a dangerous vice, likened to card playing, gambling, and theatergoing (Lehuu 2000, 12), and so sprung up a whole field of advice literature, to which the books studied here are akin, discussing the proper uses of print. Like the lessons of health and wellbeing found in psycho-religious self-help, readers were urged to demonstrate self-discipline and self-control to counter the insidious influences that print culture brought to life.

While psycho-religious self-help books emerged simultaneously with increased opportunities within the growing institution of publishing, it was also during this time

that the self-help genre began its long tradition of publishing independent of the publishing industry's mainstream. This alternative publishing network may have been necessary because of the general skepticism directed at new thought. One author complained that "sensational and exaggerated accounts of occasional failures in the new practice are spread broadcast by the daily press, while it is rare that any allusion is made to the numerous cures of those who had previously exhausted the 'regular' systems" (Wood, 1893). However, as has been well documented, the publishing industry did not hesitate to publish material deemed lowbrow or sensational (Lehuu 2000; Bonn 182). A more likely explanation is that those with an entrepreneurial bent realized that spreading the new thought word would prove profitable. Organizations like Charles and Myrtle Fillmore's Unity church established a long running and far reaching publication program. The *Daily Word* was their "pocket-sized, monthly devotional magazine," offering a devotional for each day of the month, prayers, poems and "affirmations" of Unity Truths (Anker 1999a, 216). Both of the Fillmores released numerous accounts of their conversions and copies of their sermons. They also were quick to adopt radio, in 1922 purchasing WOQ, the oldest Midwest station (Anker 217). Showing business savvy and initiating what would later become a popular public relations practice, when owning stations proved too costly, Unity turned to producing programming and distributing it to local stations.

New Thought, anticipating the self-help movements to come, proved popular and profitable enough to find its way into mediated forms through both mainstream and alternative production venues. While future authors would rarely acknowledge their New

Thought predecessors, the success of their books inspired the future waves of self-help books.

### **Shifting Roles of Scientific and Religious Sense-Making**

This period, when so much was in flux, was characterized by the two seemingly conflicting belief systems of religion and science – both of which claimed the authority to define and explain reality and each individual’s place within that reality. Scholars of modernity argue that scientific and technological change, from Darwin on, produced the increasing secularization of society (Giddens 1990). Many books sought to provide readers with guidance in navigating “the great struggle between religion and science that marked the closing half of the nineteenth century” (Hart 1976, 162). The self-help of this era provided one index of that struggle while simultaneously proving the robust resilience of religious rhetoric in the face of the growing persuasive powers of science to explain human experience. While in American culture of the late 1880s scientific knowledge began to unseat religious beliefs as the primary mechanism by which we understood the world, this was accomplished after a period of confusion and cross-fertilization. During this time, when New Thought’s publishing was at its height, science and religion commingled in self-help literature in a messy ideological soup. A temporary stasis between them was reached when science was said to reveal the divine order and therefore put in subservient service to religion (Reynolds 1996, 242). Science alone, without an underlying religiosity, was considered incapable of revealing truth according to self-help authors. “Keen searchers after causation are peering into matter to discover it, but no scalpel will ever reach it, nor microscope bring it to light” (Wood 1893, 90).

Alternatively, self-help authors insisted that workings of the mind, invisible to concurrent scientific methods, held the keys to truth.

Mind-curers claimed the moral authority of both science and religion while disparaging the dominant strains of each. Speaking of the mind cure ideas as “laws of nature” and as a mark of divine order, New Thought authors liberally mixed the rhetorics and authority of both science and religion to serve their persuasive purpose. Henry Wood, author of *Ideal Suggestion Through Mental Photography*, did as much when he wrote, “the Bible has been regarded simply as a moral code, but a deeper insight shows that it is also full of scientific exactitude” (1893, 88).

As fundamentally religious texts, many self-help books accommodated the expanding reach of science by defining ‘science’ loosely and simply as a method of truthseeking, governed by law; therefore, any endeavor using systemic methods and attempting to unearth truth was by definition a science. In the following passage, Fillmore redefined “true” science as religious: “the lawful truths of Spirit are more scientific and constantly shifting intellectual standards. The only real science is the Science of Spirit. It never changes” (Fillmore 1912, 5). Trine turned science on its head as a means of arguing that visibility does not equate with reality. “As science is so abundantly demonstrating today, -- the things that we see are but a very small fraction of the things that are” (Trine, 33). A set of New Thought authors, (Quimby, Eddy, Dresser, Evans) more actively positioned themselves as contrary to mainstream scientific and religious teachings, which they argued idealized human suffering and were thus to blame for their part in contributing to the society’s ill health. As an example of this, Quimby



wrote, "I know what I say is true: that if there had never been a physician in the world there would not have been one-tenth of the suffering. It is also true that religious credence have made a very large class of persons miserable, the religion like all credence based on superstition must give way to Science" (1921, 277).

Ironically, while voicing frustration with mainstream religion, the believers in mind cure defined their beliefs as religious and themselves as converts, as Horatio Dresser wrote in his *History*:

There were able and earnest men and women among them who put into their work and their teachings the persuasive power of the evangelist giving to the masses the great truths which the world needed. They one and all owed their recovery to the new method. They one and all found a religion, a rediscovery of Christianity in their service among the sick....Consequently, with little previous preparation, oftentimes without notes or any subject chosen in advance, these speakers gave forth what was to them the very truth, 'the science of life and happiness,' as Quimby had called it (Dresser 1919, 134-135).

Over time, authors warmed to mainstream religion, positing their books as complementary rather than contradictory to mainstream practices (Trine 1897; Wood 1893). In a somewhat defensive statement, but also one that demonstrated the intertwining of religious and scientific rhetoric, Henry Wood addressed the readers, "To those who already have some understanding of the laws of spiritual and mental science in their relation to human wholeness, the logic, and rationality of the "Suggestions" will be easily understood. There is nothing *super-natural*, *un-natural* or illogical about them. The system is only a plain scientific *application* of well-understood means to ends, and is in perfect accord with law, nature, and practical religion" (1893, 99, emphasis in the original). Yet in the same text, he qualified his authority to cure, giving it instead to the

medical institution, by saying, “It is not for a moment expected that Ideal Suggestion will, in any degree, displace regular mental treatment” (8).

In addition to conventional Protestantism, New Thought movements drew from popular 19<sup>th</sup> century spiritual practices to form their central ideas. Continuing to inform spiritualism throughout the century, Transcendentalism, most active during the 1850s and 1860s, had posited real religion as living in tune with the divinity within oneself, and listening for the answering divinity in nature and spirit (Albanese 1988, 1117). This meant openness to intuitive knowledge and awareness that intuition corresponded to reality outside the self. In short, living in harmony with the cosmic law meant cultivating the ground for mysticism (Anker 1999a, 121-22). The communication metaphors that would pepper New Thought self-help books derived from the notions of “flow” and “influx” that were central to transcendentalism. Syndey Ahlstrom, in *A Religious History of the America People*, identifies transcendentalism as one of “those forms of piety and belief in which spiritual composure, physical health, and even economic well being are understood to flow from a person’s rapport with the cosmos” (1019).<sup>20</sup> In his 1919 *History of the New Thought Movement*, Horatio Dresser, son of Quimby’s student-patients Annetta and Julius Dresser, credited transcendentalism’s influence by saying, “[transcendentalism] emphasized Thought as the cardinal principle. It sought to explain all things by reference to this Thought” (1919, 3).

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<sup>20</sup> Ahlstrom goes on to make the familiar argument regarding New Thought’s popularity. The author argues that the success of New Thought ideas was due to the fact that they responded to the “diffuse anxiety” felt in the face of modernism (1029).

Mesmerism, incredibly popular in the United States for a number of decades in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, influenced the development of mind cure movements. Frenchman Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) claimed to have identified an invisible fluid that ran throughout the body and beyond, providing it with its dynamic energy (Darnton 1968; Reynolds 1996). This force had to be in balance or ill health was expected to result. Mesmer's cure, exercised by passing magnets over the body, claimed to be the single unifying cure for all illness, resonated nicely with Enlightenment interests of the time in identifying the mechanical, physical, or material basis of life (Anker 1999a, 178). But Mesmer enhanced his scientific method with artistic flourish. "He embellished his healing practices as well, imbuing them with a cultic flavor and flamboyant ritual by often wearing a purple cape and utilizing a wand" (Anker, 178). Historian of religion Robert Fuller explains that Mesmer's ideas appealed in two senses. His notion of unitary, mechanical suasion provided hope for an immediate solution to human illness, while paradoxically signaling "a death to human experience which defied reduction into the mechanistic categories of Enlightenment (and Mesmer's own) rationality" (Fuller 1982, 10). Mesmer's ideas, as New Thought ideas would do as well, simultaneously supported both Enlightenment rationalism and Romantic claims of a mysterious self. Invoking a common explanation, historian and psychologist Robert Cushman accounted for Mesmer's influence by pointing to the disconcerting social change that typified the age (1995, 118). Nineteenth century America "faced a paradox of wealth of 'virgin' continent juxtaposed with the psychological wounds occasioned by immigration, racism, weakening of tradition and community" (118). Cushman argued that mesmerism answered that paradox by providing an American sense of self that was "inherently good,

potentially saturated in spirituality and capable of controlling the external world, it was an enchanted interior, a fitting partner for the enchanted geographical ‘interior’ that spread westward to the Pacific” (118).

Unlike Mesmerism, the agency or power of both illness and health migrated in New Thought’s conception from Mesmer’s physical fluids to a psychological perspective in which thoughts are the curative agent. At first enthralled by Mesmer’s ideas, Quimby came to believe that a clairvoyant intermediary, Mesmer’s dramatic personae, was unnecessary in changing patients’ beliefs about sickness and health. In comparing the New Thought methods with those of mesmerists, Dresser credited the former with providing the patient with a greater degree of self-control and self-understanding. While the mesmerist attempts to “control another’s mind,” “the spiritual healer regards himself as an organ of the divine life, a means only, not a controlling agent. He does not try to influence. He makes no attempt to control” (1919, 49). Dresser’s assessment of the new thought healer’s role denied the fact that patients and readers alike hear and learn solely from healers and authors, who are inherently in an “influential” and even “controlling” position, as the following section will argue.

### **Early Self-Help’s Depiction of the Power of Thought**

Take the thought, “God loves me, and approves of what I do.” Think these words over and over continually for a few days, trying to realize that they are true, and see what the effect will be on your body and circumstances.

First, you get a new exhilaration of mind, with a great desire and a sense of power to please God; and then a quicker, better circulation blood, with a sense of a pleasant warmth in the body, followed by better digestion, etc. Later, as the truth flows out of your being into your surroundings, everybody will begin to

**manifest a new love for you without your knowing why; and finally, circumstances will begin to change and fall into harmony with your desires, instead of being adverse to them. (Cady 1919, 21)**

**Emilie Cady held that thinking that “God loves me, and approves of what I do” had the power to change not only an individual’s mental orientation, but also one’s physical health and one’s relationships with others. To analyze how self-help books construct notions of thought as the power by which individuals manufacture their lives raises simultaneously a number of questions that hark back to those quoted by Schudson earlier in this chapter. How are the subjects, those who are thinking, defined? What is the nature of the content or messages about thought? Are the “messages” universal in nature, mass mediated to everyone, or are they specific and interpersonal, targeted to individual people? What are the goals or desired consequences of thought? What sort of therapeutic impact or effect do the texts define as desired and how is that impact achieved, through what mechanisms or channels? These questions illuminate the subjects with which self-help books are preoccupied – relationships between individuals and others, and the communication that connects them. In turn, the answers that early self-help books provided to these questions informed the genre throughout its history. As self-help rhetoric reverberated beyond the texts themselves and into the wider popular cultural discourse, the genre informed ideas on the self and communication within the larger social world with which each of us must engage.**

**The ways in which “thought” was articulated were based upon the premise that something was amiss. Part of New Thought’s appeal lay in the implied acknowledgment**

that many people were unhappy, unwell, and lonely.<sup>21</sup> Of course, all sadness and sickness were attributed to an inability to acknowledge the primacy of the self: “Many shrink from such as searching inward reconstruction, because they instinctively feel that it will reveal them to themselves. They are willing to look outward, but cannot abide introspection.” (Wood, 24). For New Thought believers employing a circular logic, negative emotions and feelings resulted from flawed thinking, just as flawed thinking produced negative feelings: “If mind is the field of operation, it is evident that it must be kept pure, clean, and entirely free from disorderly and diseased pictures. The thoughts, ideals, and suggestions must all be of health, perfection and harmony” (Wood 25). While the genre acknowledged individual difficulty when many other facets of popular culture denied that difficulty, the explanatory mechanisms and reasons for difficulty changed over the course of New Thought’s popularity. In earlier New Thought, drawing upon popular mid-century religious movements, these problems of communication had a single, essential origin: a disjuncture between the individual and God. As Clara Elizabeth Choate wrote in the New Thought journal, *Nautilus*, in an article entitled *Committing Sickness*, “Ignorance of man’s God given dominion over all things is the basic cause of incorrect thought” (1905, 15), and “incorrect thought,” for new thought believers was the cause of all sickness. While sickness remained an expression of communicative failure, the emphasis on God’s influence decreased over time, until the point at which the

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<sup>21</sup> This orientation opens to question the academic critique that argues that the genre ignores serious personal problems (Cloud, 1998).

Divinity that was initially at the heart of New Thought became occluded, passed over in favor of the real world material benefits of health and happiness.<sup>22</sup>

Where do thoughts come from? Of whom are we thinking?

Focusing first on the New Thought books that emphasize communication with God, these texts argued that health was achieved through “unity” with God, the concept from which Charles and Myrtle Fillmore’s Unity church drew its name. This unity was characterized by utter harmony, in the sense of oneness, or of no communicative distance between God’s thoughts and those of the individual. Horatio Dresser characterized the relationship with God thus: “The theory of an essentially spiritual cure starts with the principle that there is but one source of life, that life emanates from this one living center, from God, and is communicated to all, and is communicable to others through us” (Dresser 1919, 84). “Thought” took on attributes of communication as this sense of sameness diminished distance, simultaneously decreasing the distortion inherent to communicative exchange, thereby making “translation,” or the deciphering of meaning, obsolete. As best selling author Ralph Waldo Trine wrote in his preface to *In Tune With the Infinite* (1897), “There is a divine sequence running throughout the universe. Within and above and below the human will incessantly works the Divine will.” When the human and divine were in sync, the two entities (in New Thought’s permutation, God and you, the individual reader) understood each other as well as one could possibly understand one’s own meaning. In *Temple Talks*, the leader of The Unity Society of

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<sup>22</sup>This transition away from a focus on religion and God came about as a result of market forces. Authors realized that books promising health and happiness sell better than those promising “right communication with God.”

Practical Christianity, Charles Fillmore, commanded his readers to “[lay] hold of the indwelling Spirit, and [make] yourself consciously one with it” (10). Quimby also framed this concept in terms of connection between two individuals: “when two persons are in harmony in regard to a fact, they are as one, for there is no jar. The fact may be of truth, or error, but if they are of the same opinion in regard to it, then they harmonize” (221). Communication theorist Peters defined such intimate, immediate oneness, a utopian fantasy which almost does away with communication itself, as the ideal communicative state in Western traditions (1999, 64).

New Thought started with the premise that this potentially perfect communicative harmony between the reader and God was interrupted or silenced by the surrounding distracting society. To bring about the cure, the reader needed to bring his thinking into alignment with God’s, as Henry Wood, in *Ideal Suggestion Through Mental Photography*, made clear: “If God be infinitely and eternally perfect, His part is already complete, and it only remains for man to come into harmony with truth, which is the divine method” (1893, 20). Similarly, he stated, “man will be restless until he learns to rest his thinking upon God” (39). Charles Fillmore characterized his “Law of Thought Unity” thus:

among our associates we like and are attracted to those who understand and sympathize with our thought. The same law holds good in Divine Mind – its thoughts are drawn to, and hold expression in the minds of those who raise themselves to its thought-standard. This means that we must think of ourselves as God thinks of us, in order to appreciate and receive his thoughts and bring forth the fruits. If you think of yourself as anything less than the Perfect Child of a Perfect Parent [God], you lower the thought-standard of your mind, and cut off the influx of thought from the Divine Mind. (1912, 23).



As this passage made clear, according to New Thought ideas, thought did not exist solely within the individual mind, but invisibly travelled forth, even when not expressly spoken but merely thought, into the minds of others, of God, and then back again in a circuited connection in which none of the components may be removed. The greater the degree of correspondence one's thoughts shared with those of the Divine was directly correlated with one's health and happiness. Secondary in Fillmore's "Law" was the search of happiness, and in this characterization his sentiment was in keeping with the bulk of the first New Thought texts. Happiness was a reward, but not the principle goal of attaining a proper dialogue with God.

#### **Influence of social world**

Modern man struggles amid innumerable complications (Wagner 1902, viii).

Fillmore's passage characterized the social world as an extension of that connection flowing through the Divine. Some New Thought authors took this depiction further, suggesting that the physical world (including its political and social dimensions) was merely a manifestation of thought, and the ideas of the Divine, as when Emilie Cady wrote that "God as Spirit is the invisible life and intelligence [...] which underlies all physical things" (6).<sup>23</sup> But for these early self-help book authors, the social world, while largely obscured, did not disappear due to our dependency upon the communicative relationship with God. Rather, as a consequence, when all was right with the world, a

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<sup>23</sup> This initial positioning, of God as origin of the physical world, was dislodged within the genre as the self, and its perceptions, were said to produce the real world.

secondary unity stemmed from that central relationship: since each of us was connected to God, we were also connected, through God, to each other.

Reflecting the ideal of connection without words, Horatio Dresser described Quimby's ability to commune in an intimate, nonverbal way: "...Quimby had remarkable insight into the character of the sick. He judged character, not by external signs, not through reasoning from facts to conclusions, but by silent impressions gained as he rendered his mind open to discern the real life and "see it whole" (1921, 7). Fillmore's description of the "Law of Thought Unity," like Quimby's opening of his mind, also hinted that the mechanistic aspect of communication between God and individuals, and between New Thought healers and their patients. In this idealized view, concepts such as "flow," "influx," and "ether" suggested an invisible medium capable of movement within individuals, from one person to another, and from God to each individual.

A central task that New Thought books gave their readers was that of controlling, shaping, redirecting or changing the tenor of this "flow" to bring it into the idealized state. In *Ideal Suggestion*, Henry Wood expressed the flow like this, "We find that the great force called thought has scientific relations, correlations, and transmutations; that its vibrations project themselves in waves through the ether, regardless of distance or other sensuous limitations; that they strike unisons in other minds and make them vibrant; but they relate themselves to like and are repelled by the unlike; that their silent though forceful impact makes a distinct compression; in fact, that they are substantial entities, in comparison with which gold, silver, and iron are as effervescent as the morning dew" (1893, 52). Thought in this construction shared much in common with the mesmerist's notions of magnetic flow in which like is attracted to like and repelled by dislike.

Thoughts (functioning as “likes” and “dislikes”) had the power to attract and repel each other, and in doing so, constitute the self and forge relationships with similarly thinking others. A morality of right and wrong was inherent in this system in which the nature of one’s thoughts were responsible for the course of one’s life, whether one was well or ill, content or unhappy, and while not explicitly stated, loved or unloved. For author Annie Payton Call, ‘influx’ was linked with God’s “laws.” She wrote that the sick were those who failed to follow God’s rule:

Then, when the inevitable nervous exhaustion follows, and all the kindred troubles that grow out of it she pities herself and is pitied by others and wonders why God thought best to afflict her with suffering and illness. "Thought best!" God never thought best to give anyone pain. He made his laws, and they are wholesome and perfect and true, and if we disobey them we must suffer the consequences! (Call 1898, 42).

But while readers were told in no uncertain terms that controlling the flow of thought was central to their well-being, the books insisted that readers exercise control without fully or comprehensibly explaining how control was to be exercised. It was as if “controlling thought” was a clear notion, requiring no explication and that self-policing was similarly plain. The reader’s task became one of searching the mind for incorrect thinking. Call explained, “The only way to keep truly free, and therefore ready to profit by the help of Nature always has at hand, is to avoid thought of your form of illness as far as possible” (1898, 164). Discipline was demanded. “Let us be sincere in our work, and having gained even one step toward a true equilibrium, hold fast to it, never minding how severely we are tempted” (1898, 164).

But where did wrong ideas, or temptations, or concepts of illness, come from? If it was easy to think only pure thoughts, why did thoughts go awry to begin with? While

flow and influx often had a positive characterization in these books, and in fact were the essence of healthy, happy thoughts, a negative undercurrent ran through them too. This was a notion of social contagion, which sometimes went so far as to suggest that individuals needed to create distance to protect themselves from the contaminating thoughts of others. Warren Felt Evans, New Thought movement's first author, put it succinctly in 1869, "all our mental states are contagious" (70). In his *Temple Talks*, Charles Fillmore argued that negative emotional states flowed from the outside world into the individual: "many people are burdened with the word of fear. Sometimes they know not what they fear -- the fears come from the thought atmosphere" (1912, 4). Fillmore's "thought atmosphere" could be thought of as the medium in which we live, like the air we breathe. For Annie Payton Call, writing in her 1898 best seller, *Power Through Repose* the individual was easily swayed by social influence: "it is of course a natural sequence that from the decadence of an entire country must follow the waning powers of the individual citizens." While Call painted a morally decayed social world, for Henry Wood, society was a rule-bound, rigid, conservative system, more interested in maintaining the status quo than in finding (New Thought's definition of ) truth, a truth that brought health and happiness: "While mankind generally, as individuals, earnestly desire to find the truth, formulated systems, backed by prestige, literature, and authority are ultra -conservative" (Wood 1893, 17). While offering varying views of society, new thought authors collectively held society largely responsible for "wrong thinking," but in doing so they in no way relieved the individual of culpability.

For Phineas Quimby, as for many of his New Thought followers, disease was a social fabrication. He made the argument, one still active in today's self-help books, that

disease existed because of misplaced beliefs. Quimby argued that if we stopped believing in disease and stopped thinking that “disease is real,” then the physical manifestation of disease would disappear. The social surround, and its firm belief in illness, was seen to infect each individual. Writing in the hypothetical, Quimby stated, “A person is exposed to the cold. Ignorance and superstition have reduced [the sensation] to disease called cold or consumption. This is set down as a real disease, and so it is, but it is based upon an ignorant superstitious idea. This is one of the errors of this world, judged by this world and approved by the effect on the body” (1921, 221). In keeping with this conception that we were socially conditioned into a belief in disease, Quimby held parents responsible for teaching children to become sick: “children are not exempt, they suffer if they are in the vicinity of the disease, for their *parents’ sins* (sic). Their diseases are *the effect of the community*. These results, from the older inhabitants to embody the superstitions of the world, and they are as tenacious of their beliefs” (1921, 278, emphasis in original).

Depicting a negative, contaminated social world, new thought authors positioned themselves as a positive, countervailing force. They had high hopes that their ideas and popularity signaled better times to come. Trine detected a shifting social world when he referred to “the great spiritual awakening that is so rapidly coming all over the world” (32). While scholars have tended to define the self-help genre as strikingly and damagingly individualistic and simultaneously ignorant of social forces at work in individual lives (Hochschild 1994; Moskowitz 2001), and so it is, historically and today, the genre has a strong secondary concern in the power of society over the individual and a communal hope in an improved (new age) future. This hope was firmly pinned not to

social change, but to the power of the individual. Ralph Waldo Trine denied factors such as social class when he wrote, "Rags, tatters, and dirt are always in the mind before being on the body" (Trine, 33). Outward signs of poverty in this construction evidenced a weak mind. But Trine's contemporaries did not echo his dismissive nod toward social factors. More often, issues like race and class were simply unmentioned, while the influence of the power of thought was defined as central.

### Centrality of the self

"...we find just how man thinks his body into disease. Instead of basing his thought upon what is true in the Absolute of Being, he bases it on conditions as they appear in the formed realm about him and the result is bodily discord in multitudinous shapes. There is a universal thought-substance pervading all Nature that is more sensitive than the photographic record. These records receive and preserve every vibration of sound, but the thought-substance does better than this; it transcribes not only all sounds, but even the slightest vibration of thought. A telephone system of a large city is a good illustration of the manner in which thought works on the organism. The nerves are the wires, and the nerve fluid the electricity. The ganglionic aggregations throughout the body are the sub-stations. The presiding intelligence sends its thought from the head [...] If you think, "you are weak," it is so recorded. If it was, "you are strong, vigorous, fearless spiritual intelligence, life and substance," that message is transcribed and carried into action in due process" (Fillmore 1912, 44-45).

Contrary to both the characterization of God as the linchpin between all individuals and the characterization of society as the source of ill health and negative beliefs, the first psycho-religious self-help books also emphasized the interaction between various aspects of the self, with thoughts operating as the connective tissue, that occurred within a single individual, a sort of intra-communication, as the source of salvation. Often this intra-communication was characterized as an internal struggle between mind and body, or between positive and negative parts of the mind itself. For New Thought

authors, the self existed on multiple planes, with the mind operating as the commanding presence. In the relationship between mind and body, the body was a moral good, incapable of doing wrong except when through the neglect or abuse of the mind (which as argued above was in turn abused by society). Henry Wood wrote, “the body is a superlative example of co-operation; a general partnership where each member holds a unique office. It unceasingly works, not so much for itself as for all others. Each one is an example of altruistic energy and ministry. Every tissue and molecule is on the alert, and its part is promptly and intelligently performed. All are good, for each is divinely perfect, and therefore the various offices of the members are alike honorable” (1893, 32). Or as Ralph Waldo Trine characterized the relationship between mind and body, “It is through the instrumentality of the mind that we are enabled to connect the real soul life with the physical life, and so enable the soul life to manifest and work through the physical” (1897, 39). Having positioned the mind as “sender” and the body as the receiving end of communication, the materiality of the body received the mind’s exerting force. Henry Wood demanded that readers exercise mental control over their bodies when he stated, “Man, as a soul, should affirm his rule and dominion over his body as distinctly as over any other machine he uses. He should gain a positive sense that his physique is not himself, but rather his most obedient servant” (1893, 81). For these authors, the body was only “perverted” by impurities in human consciousness.

Just as the outer world was a manifestation of powerful thoughts, an individual’s body, as physical material, was also constructed by the individual’s thoughts. Quimby articulated this idea as follows: “the body may be compared to a dead weight, as our bodies are the machine to be moved like the locomotive, and our mind is the steam”

(1921, 202). For Henry Wood, the centrality of communication in constructing reality was made clear when he wrote, “Matter is only a form of expression, and has no character or basis of its own....It appears, disappears and reappears only to outwardly articulate different qualities and grades of life....the physical man is merely the outpicturing of his inner and intrinsic counterpart. The body is a grand composite photograph of previous thinking and mental states” (1893, 34). The mind, as it “receive[d] as well as communicate[d]” (Moore 1852, 24), was held responsible for all physical reality. Having established the mind as the “sender” and the “steam,” early self-help book authors drew what must have seemed like a simple, causal argument for illness and unhappiness. If the mind made the body in all its manifestations, then the mind must similarly make the body diseased and dissatisfied.

These books defined human consciousness (or “mind”) itself as multifaceted. Henry Wood wrote, “Just behind the seen and material human organism there is a sensuous mind, the most outer and fleshly of the immaterial part, which pertains especially to the body and acts directly upon it. Next within is the intellectual zone, and still deeper, in the innermost is the spiritual ego, the divine image. This is the Christ-plane, where dwells the perfect humanity” (1912, 33). In *Temple Talks*, Charles Fillmore explained that “the fact is, we live in two states of consciousness. That's why we feel the sense of bondage while perceiving the Truth that we are free. We must give up and willingly abandon the old state of consciousness, and by prayer and meditation make the perception of truth an established state of mind” (1912, 19). Fillmore’s goal for this divided consciousness was to achieve a singular state of consciousness. This was not unlike the psychological goal of bringing suppressed thoughts from the subconscious into



consciousness. For Elizabeth Towne, humans had a “three-strata mind” (1906, 13). Elizabeth Towne’s conscious mind was the “everyday mind,” the mind that functioned in the social world and was liable to be sullied by that interaction. Her “sub-conscious mind” received information from the “conscious mind” and operated according to instinct or habit. Towne’s “super-conscious mind is what we call God, out of which comes all wisdom” (14). While there was little unity among self-help authors on how many domains of mentality were in existence, clearly they were playing with conceptions of consciousness. In keeping with their Christian orientation, frequently at least one of the levels of mind (often called the soul) would connect the individual directly to the divine. Communication within an individual’s mind became flawed when the direction of information flowed the wrong way – from conscious through sub-conscious to super-conscious mind. The communicative, healing task was to reverse this flow to the healthy direction, in which all started with the divine.

Lest the earlier discussion of the social world’s negative influence suggest that the individual was not responsible for his or her own well-being, in the context of self-talk the depiction of the social world became merely an outgrowth of individual ideation. Bluntly placing all responsibility for wellness with the individual, Horatio Dresser wrote, “All disease in origin is an insanity. Its cure is the attainment of sanity” (Dresser, 82). Failing to mentally focus led to unruly thinking, an inherently dangerous, disease-provoking activity according to New Thought practitioners. The weak “shrink from such a searching inward reconstruction” (Wood, 24). “In our mental lives we can either keep hold of the rudder and so determine exactly what course we take, what points we touch,

or we can fail to do this, and failing, we drift, and are blown hither and thither by every passing breeze” (Trine 31).

It is difficult to imagine how the characterizations of the divine, the social world, and the self failed to leave the reader of New Thought’s self-help books without a muddled picture of cause and effect as it related to the power of thought and the manifestations of disease. Did the individual construct the social world, or vice versa? Did all wisdom and its concomitant order flow from God or could an individual change reality with the power of her thoughts? If each individual had the power to change reality, was there one reality or were there as many as there were people on the planet? In answer to each question, self-help books replied, “both,” “yes,” “it is all true.” In such a confusing concoction the only certainty was the power of thought itself.

### **The Power of Thought**

While it was not possible to know whether the individual, God, or society was posited as the origin of ideas, it was absolutely clear that New Thought defined ideas and thoughts as extremely powerful forces. Despite tangled configurations of causality, the individual was defined as having a free and easy choice when it came to ideas. The reader could use ideas to heal himself, as Wood suggested when he wrote, “The individual ideal, as also that of the true healer, is to wash the mind clean all spectres of abnormality, and fill it with pictures of health, beauty, symmetry, strength, purity, and earnest aspiration towards perfection. Like all truth, they will press outwards towards symmetrical embodiment” (1893, 61).

One of the best selling books of the new century's first decade, Frank Haddock's *Power of Will* (1907), was published as part of his Power Book series. The command that preceding New Thought books had attributed to the mind, Haddock assigned to "will," an emotion which either governs or fails to control the mind. He declared, "Will is higher than the Mind," and in doing so Haddock anticipated self-help's transition away from a focus on God. It is not that Haddock explicitly negated the role of religion; just as the texts were devoid of discussion of social issues, Haddock simply failed to mention religion, filling his book instead with exercises for the senses (sight, hearing, touch, etc.) said to fortify the will: "Summon a sense of resolution. Throw Will into the act of standing...Repeat every day indefinitely." Prior, an individual's will or will power was successfully harnessed when serving the will of God. From Haddock's innovations arose the stereotypes of self-help books as devoid of social focus and filled with simplistic exercises. Not yet scaled down to "bullet point" form, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, self-help increasingly emphasized "suggestion" and "affirmation," statements about the self and the self's desires, as the curative vehicles. In his *History*, Dresser bemoaned the disappearance of the more spiritual notions of "influx" and "indwelling" that notions of repetition and "suggestion" replaced. He accused later authors of failing to attend to "the teachings" of Quimby and Evans, "Instead of a new "thought," instead of almost exclusive emphasis on suggestion or affirmation, we might have had a new spiritual philosophy embracing the larger truths of the new age" (Dresser 82).

While many New Thought books provided readers with affirmations designed to change their thinking, Trine acknowledged a difference between speaking (a verbal exercise) vs. believing (a mental exercise). "...it is clear that more can be accomplished

through the process of realization than through the process of affirmation, though for some affirmation may be a help, an aid to realization” (1897, 57). Conversely, Charles Fillmore suggested that outward expression was more powerful than silent thoughts in shaping the material world: “Words and music joined in consciousness really change the structure of the body. It was changed more readily by words and songs than by thoughts. The outer vibrations lay hold on the cells of the body and it quickly responds” (1912, 20). However, to truly affect change, ideas must not simply be spoken but believed; “[beliefs are] built into the mind-structure. Lip-service is naught, for all real homage is in spirit and in truth” (Wood 1893, 90).

In stark contrast to the extraordinary positive power bestowed upon “ideas” was its dual opposite, the destructive power of communication. This destructive power was evidenced by the many stories of communication failure that filled the pages of New Thought self-help books. Annie Payton Call wrote, “So evident are the various, the numberless perversions of our powers in the misuse of the machine [the self], that it seems almost unnecessary to write of them.... for superabundant as they are, thrusting their evil results upon every day in painful ways, still we have eyes and see not, ears and hear not” (Call 1898). New Thought authors suggested that the quality of ideas themselves invested them with positive or negative power. “Study of the power of words reveals that they are constructive or destructive, according to the character of the idea which they convey” (Fillmore 1912, 64). If the individual allowed his ideas to take form based on common, popular conceptions, the result would be communication failure and illness:

**When from ignorance or perversion the human consciousness builds its tabernacle in the outer and inferior planes of its organism, the result is inversion. That which otherwise would be orderly becomes chaotic. This abnormal inward condition finds outward expression in sin, suffering, dis-ease, and all kinds of inharmony (Wood 1893, 33-34).**

**Self-help books purported to offer readers relatively simple and easy mechanisms by which to properly communicate with God, protect themselves from corrupting and negative social beliefs, and use their own minds to perfect their health. At the same time, they suggested that to “focus on the negative,” as we might put it today, only exacerbated the problems readers hoped to cure. Wood articulated this idea as follows: “The more human abnormality is held up and analyzed, the more its various shades, phases, and complications become manifest.... Insanity, insomnia, and nervous degeneration are increasingly prevalent, and even the physical senses more than ever before require artificial aids and props. We are depending upon the Without rather than the Within” (1893, 24). Why did self-help books contain stories about individuals who fail to think properly, who fail to reach that idealized communicative state with God, who remain ill, if according to New Thought logic, merely reading about the negative ideas embedded in these stories of failure could “hurt” the reader? Certainly one interpretation is that stories of failure acted as veiled threats, morality tales, and scare tactics. While the power of thought was the self-help genre’s sole certainty, like magic or an old testament God, when poorly practiced, sinful thoughts escaped into the ether and wreaked destruction. “...practically all disease, with its consequent suffering, has its origins in perverted mental and emotional states and conditions” (Trine 1897, 61).**

## **Conclusion: Mind Cure's Decline, The Self-Help Genre's Continuance**

While self-help rhetoric continued to find numerous popular outlets in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>24</sup> the New Thought movement itself faded from view. One plausible explanation for its decline was the growing secularization of society that typified the period. Despite the fact that communion with God had ceased to be mind-cure's central emphasis, replaced by good physical and emotional health, the movement retained an aura of spirituality in a world increasingly infatuated with science and specifically psychology. The influence of realism and science as explanatory mechanisms, while certainly gaining dominance from the 1880s onward, were more concretely established by the early decades of the twentieth century. Despite the cloaking of self-help ideas in the rhetoric of science, its metaphysical underpinnings could not fundamentally be denied and so were out of step with the dominant, secular belief systems of the day.

New Thought had muscled its way into public view by directly contradicting and challenging the mainstream medical practices and religious beliefs, and creating tensions with these powerful institutions in the process. Also, during this period of New Thought's decline, physicians and ministers began to diagnose and preach mind-cure's ills and remedies, without expressly calling them such. For example, one practitioner

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<sup>24</sup> Historian Eva Moskowitz (2001) charts the use of therapeutic rhetoric, the origins of which she attributes to Phineas Quimby, through the 20<sup>th</sup> century's programs designed to alleviate poverty, negotiate marriage, and heal the mental wounds of war. In keeping with theorists of the therapeutic ethos, Moskowitz sees therapeutic rhetoric, and its unrelenting focus on the individual, as making possible an inadequate government response to social inequities.

who remained successful during this lull period of the 20s and 30s was the French import Emile Coué, called “the Master Mind of Autosuggestion” (1923). He argued that people who imagine themselves ill or unhappy make it so, but Coué, like Anton Mesmer before him, was able to market himself as a scientist, thereby shedding the taint of New Thought religious quackery.<sup>25</sup> Also, in distinction from some New Thought authors, Mary Baker Eddy in particular, “Coué did not attack the medical profession; he merely reminded doctors of the suggestive and placebo effects inherent in their consultative, prognostic and prescriptive roles. Nor did he attack or otherwise alienate mainstream religion” (Starker 1989, 49). Similarly, Dale Carnegie and Napoleon Hill, writing in the 1930s and working within the arena of “success” literature, expounded the New Thought principle that perception led to real world consequence while avoiding a religious tone in favor of a scientific one. The promises that these books held out to readers, devoid of any association with religiosity, were arrived at by the same mechanisms of mind cure. Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, which was quickly followed by Napoleon Hill’s *Think and Grow Rich*, both loudly claimed to offer universal paths to influence and wealth equally available to all whose thoughts reflected the desired consequence.

As New Thought’s messages became less popular overall and continued to shift into more secular form, the changes in the genre reverberated with the larger social change at work. Historians characterized the era during and after World War I as a time of deep social malaise (Novick 1988, 282). In his history of psychology, Cushman put it

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<sup>25</sup> One measure of Coué’s success at defining himself as a man of science is reflected in his book’s call number: RM921. C8 A4. This call number places *Self mastery through conscious auto-suggestion* among medical texts.

thus: “the ennui of the turn of the century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century self, which the therapeutic ethos had tried to cure, receded as the life and death struggles of starvation and war came to the fore” (Cushman 1995, 72). Metaphorically, Einstein’s theory of relativity translated into a social belief in uncertainty, ambiguity, and cultural relativism that resulted in a generalized disillusionment in American society (Novick 1988, 137). This sort of contemplation of the negative, of the uncertain, ran directly counter to the self-help message of positive thinking. Given that New Thought exploded during a prosperous time and sank during political and economic difficulty, one can ask the question whether or not the simple self-help message fell upon receptive ears during social prosperity, but during financial and social free fall, the idea that simply envisioning a better world made it so may have sounded painfully naïve.<sup>26</sup>

The next chapter continues the story of how thought has been defined in the self-help genre. While the alternative religious movements that had gathered a loose set of ideas into a consolidated genre faded, the genre they had established was just getting underway. During the late nineteenth century, books were self-help’s vehicle. In the coming decades, the paperback boom would reinvigorate America’s infatuation with self-help books and the power of thought they endorsed, first with economic success books, and then with psycho-religious books. As increasing numbers of Americans sought involvement with spiritual concepts and practices outside of religious institutions in

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<sup>26</sup> It is also noteworthy that, during the prosperous 1950s and boom time 1980s, the “positive thinking” message again filled the air, and from books sales, also filled the minds of millions of Americans. Within the scientific realm, behaviorism ruled social science between 1920 and 1940. It therefore makes sense that when the genre gained again in popularity, it is with economic, success messages like those typified by *How To Win Friends and Influence People*.



which they had been traditionally housed, the self-help genre was there. The genre was able to cater to both the religious and nonreligious. New Thought books carried the genre from a reliance on Christian rhetoric to one that in addition claimed scientific exactitude. For those who sought sensations of satisfaction and well-being divorced of religious overtones, the genre, in part now disassociated from religious rhetoric, could also attend to them.

Whether following religious leanings or not, the empowerment of the individual brought with it a responsibility for one's own salvation or well-being, a characteristic of selfhood that has remained significant in popular thought since. New Thought literature had firmly planted the concept in the power of "thought," "will," or "suggestion," to manufacture reality. As a concept of tremendous, indeterminate, unknowable power, thought (whether secular or sacred) operated according to faith and was fundamentally a religious principle, as it would remain throughout the genre's history.

This core argument about the power of thought remained self-help's constant, while the associated concepts of self and community would be reinterpreted around this core. New Thought's mechanisms of thought had established a self that needed to be controlled, not liberated, as some self-help of the 1950s would insist. Nor did the inner self contain the mysterious wisdom with which it would be credited in self-help from the 1990s. That "mysterious wisdom," characterized in later self-help as a sort of simultaneously universal and singular authority existent within each individual, was still posited within the divine during the genre's early decades. Communicating with the self was not taken to be tremendously problematic. It required discipline and will, but was considered merely the individual's choice, with no clearly articulated obstacles.

Noticeably absent from early self-help, when compared to the texts to come, was talk of relationships. While society could infect the individual with diseased thoughts, the self best existed largely outside of, independent of social reality, and this included the relationships with family, friends, co-workers and so on that would be acknowledged as central to success and happiness by the next generation of self-help authors.

## **Chapter Four: POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE THINKING, the Middle Period of Self-Help, 1935-1960**

When psycho-religious self-help books gained an even greater popularity after the Second World War it was with a new cast to the central New Thought principle that thought constructs reality. While the seemingly thin air of thought was still held to materialize into the solid ground of physical bodies, material rewards such as health, wealth and happiness now were the central focus. Displaced and diminished (but still frequently to resurface) was the rhetoric of an orchestrating God. Roughly and unconvincingly applied in its place, the more culturally dominant discourse of rational science was now offered as an explication of the mechanistic relationship between thought and materiality. With this emphasis on science, the goals of thought in turn shifted further away from metaphysical to worldly concerns – with affluence and social status added to New Thought’s traditional emphasis on happiness and health. While the outcomes of thought were now altered, on the whole, thought continued to be constructed as holding an ambivalent place in popular discourse of the self, as fundamentally inexplicable and profoundly imperative. This uncertainty stemmed from the conceptual looseness of “thought” as both tremendously powerful and yet beyond clear understanding, as responsible for our well-being and still so frequently the cause of our downfall.

Just as broad economic, social, and technological changes contributed to both the development and decline of the New Thought movement’s self-help literature, the growing popularity of the genre after World War II was in part attributable to the wide,

shifting social currents that roughly characterized the times. The post-WW2 era was a time of economic affluence, social optimism, and cultural conservatism, and the genre struck a receptive chord within the American psyche. Sales soared with the help of magazines that excerpted book after book and profiled author after author.<sup>27</sup> The adoption of the rhetoric of science and psychology, together with changes in the configurations of media and the recasting of religion, put the themes of self-help from the 1890s into resonant, contemporary terms, merging into a commercial success story for the genre. The cultural atmosphere of the 1950s contributed to the renewed receptivity to self-help messages. Having survived two devastating wars and with a solidly rebounding economy, the idea that what we think manifests itself in reality became culturally resonant and appealing, whereas in the midst of depression and war, it had been a hard message to stomach.<sup>28</sup>

In 1958, two University of Chicago investigators, Schneider and Dornbusch, released a book length study of religious self-help entitled *Popular Religion*:

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<sup>27</sup> Of course, brisk business does not suggest universal embrace of the genre. Throughout the genre's development, there has been considerable journalistic discourse as to whether these books indicated a positive or negative social development. In 1955, Smith College professor William Lee Miller claimed that Peale employed the "results ethos" of American culture. Miller said Peale turns faith into a self-help technique for reaching socially defined goals: "God is just a name for a dynamo of energy available for anyone who will think positively" (Miller 1955, 19, quoted in Anker 1999b, 125). Also in 1955, Paul Hutchinson, writing in *Life* magazine, asked "Have We a New Religion?" Hutchinson says Peale "preaches to the largest audience ever gathered by an American cleric" (148), but quotes psychologists who said Peale was misleading and theologians who said he "leaves out of account some of the deepest and most vital elements of classical religion" (147, in Anker p129).

<sup>28</sup> George Gerbner's 1961 article, "Psychology, psychiatry and mental illness in the mass media: a study of trends, 1900-1959," argued that the number of magazine and newspaper articles about psychological themes increased during times of prosperity and decreased during economic recessions. (*Mental Hygiene*, 45, 89-93).

*Inspirational Books in America*, in which they defined self-help literature as a product of mass culture<sup>29</sup> (Anker 1999b; Starker 1989). As such, they argued that if the genre were intended to help readers alleviate their problems, it should be evaluated according to its success in providing comfort. This emphasis on results or material outcomes, and the implied failure of the genre in generating those outcomes, belied their real quarrel with the genre – one which hinged upon definitions of religion. Writing in the era of Dwight Macdonald, Schneider and Dornbusch argued that “mass culture” books like Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking*, the lightning rod for Schneider and Dornbusch’s and most other contemporary criticism, misrepresented “religion,” shedding it of aims beyond simple comfort and happiness. The critique of popular self-help and of Peale in particular, was played out of the magazines of the country’s most widely read magazines, including the *New Republic* and *Redbook* (Anker 1999, 130). In the contemporaneous, popular *The New Shape of American Religion*, Martin E. Marty lambasted positive thinking for catering to readers fears in the “face of anxiety and in the quest for personal success” (1959, 12). Among the foundational religious qualities that positive thinking dismissed, Schneider and Dornbusch named the examination of conscience and awareness of shortcomings and sin, two forms of self-critique many self-help books in the positive thinking tradition strongly urged against. As a further affront to religious traditionalists, Peale and many other self-help authors gave the impression that “what they offer is the very essence of the religious heritage” (Starker 1989, 135-6). According to Schneider and Dornbusch, in an argument in accord with the social

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<sup>29</sup> While they called the genre “inspirational religious literature” the texts in question share much in common with those I’ve analyzed and called “psycho-religious self-help.”

criticism of mass culture, this malnourished concept of religion, spoon-fed by the mass media, failed to fortify individual readers or the society as a whole.

### **A More Worldly Religion<sup>30</sup>**

The multifaceted religious landscape in which New Thought had thrived was one of experimentation born of a discontent with established religious institutions. In a sense, the post-WWII era was similarly experimental, but while in the 1880s, this discontent resulted in the manifestation of numerous alternative sects, during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sociologists argued that people tended to turn away from the church altogether. Rather than face an upsurge of small, countercultural sects that competed for their laity, during the 50s and 60s religious leaders felt that they were losing ground to the immediate appeals of secular, popular culture. Religious leaders were divided about how to respond to the social changes signaled by the departure of their laity and the self-help genre's success (Anker 1999b). Feeling besieged by secular culture, religious leaders advocated religious writings as one way "to resist the challenges of secularism," by equipping individual believers to discern and speak for themselves as well as give moral shape to the culture (Wuthnow 1987). Yet along with increasing education there came more denominational switching, which meant less loyalty to inherited communities of faith. According to religious scholar Robert Wuthnow, many college-educated people

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<sup>30</sup> I am using the term 'religion' much as it is used in self-help books themselves. While vague and purportedly nondenominational and universalist in nature, "religion" as used in self-help draws heavily from Protestant roots. Note though that during the 50s two of the most popular, bestselling self-help books were written by a rabbi and a priest.

became less interested in conventional religion while growing more experimental in their spiritual searches, a trend that would come to typify the 60s and 70s (Wuthnow 1987, 95-96). It was those “experimental, spiritual” searchers to whom self-help, with its ecumenical tone and central focus on the individual’s happiness, appealed. Echoing the New Thought tendency to hold institutional religion responsible for the failings of individuals, Joshua Liebman (1946), a rabbi-turned-best-selling-self-help author, wrote in *Peace of Mind* that “traditional religion had failed in the essential task of teaching people to love and respect themselves, focusing exclusively on self-control, self-denial and altruism.”<sup>31</sup>

True to generic form, there were more traits in common than there were differences between self-help books written in 1895 and 1945. While New Thought self-help books often purported to connect readers to a purpose higher than merely material gains, at times this claim appeared in name only. At the same time, the ecumenical tone set by New Thought books remained clear in books from the 1940s-1960s. Claude Bristol, in *The Magic of Believing*, based his perspective on positive thinking on his experiences “with clergymen and leaders of all sects and denominations, mind-healers, divine healers, Spiritualists, Christian Scientists, New Thought-ers, Unity leaders, sun and idol worshipers, and, yes, even a few infidels and pagans” (1948, 3).<sup>32</sup> Given these

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<sup>31</sup> Liebman defined self-love as the central task of religion. It was this sort of conflation of concerns of the self with religion writ large that made many bristle.

<sup>32</sup> In expressly naming the influence of New Thought, Bristol was somewhat unusual among self-help authors of the time. Many insisted upon having invented an entirely unique system of healing, having stumbled upon “scientific laws of nature,” or of working within established religious practices. Peale denied any influence or affiliation with New Thought or Christian Science, insisting instead on strong institutional ties with Methodism (George, 6).

continuities, the characterization of the self-help of the 1950s as diminishing the role of God may seem questionable, especially in light of the fact that on nearly every page of Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* the words "Bible" or "God" appeared. While the rhetoric of God was abundant, underlying it, the shape, role, and power of that entity called "God" served as merely a foil or reflective surface upon which the desires of individuals were beamed back upon them, as Peale claimed when he wrote, "Personally, I am so enthusiastic about all that the Higher Power can do for people that I am loath to bring this book to a close" (1952, 217). During the 1950s, the self-help genre's God was a generous, giving God, full of sweetness for which one need only ask, a God designed, as critics argued, for the commercial times. This characterization of "God," as it intersected with characterizations of the self and society, seemed to endorse criticism of the Schneider and Dornbusch variety, but in fact spoke less about religion *per se* than about moral uncertainties of the negotiation of the social world.

From the late 1930s onward, the popularity of "success" literature, the sub-genre of self-help that focused largely on material gain, greatly informed psycho-religious self-help at mid-century, when Norman Vincent Peale succeeded in appealing to the burgeoning middle class' sense of unrootedness and their desire for wealth and status. Dale Carnegie had first appealed to this sense and desire after the Depression. Like *How to Win Friends and Influence People* in 1936, in 1952 Peale uncritically encouraged his readers to acknowledge their desires and foster their attainment, and often these desires were not only spiritual or moral, but economic and material (Peale 1952). The protagonists of a good many of Peale's demonstrative narratives are "businessmen" and "executives" and the stories chronicle these men's success in the workplace. Peale's *The*



*Power of Positive Thinking* catapulted mind-cure ideas from their marginal status during the first half of the century into the vast mainstream in the post-WWII era. In doing so, they instituted a new sense of religion that dovetailed with developments in commercial mass media.

Predating Peale's success in the mass market, in 1936 Henry Link published *The Return to Religion*. In it, he defined "religion as an aggressive mode of life, by which the individual becomes the master of his environment, not its complacent victim" (Link 1937, 15-16). Link's religion was no longer a system of belief, but an instrumental tool in the negotiation of the public sphere. Published at a time when sales of religious texts were low compared with both what they had been and what they would become, Link's book sold some 83,000 copies, making it the third best selling book of the year (Hackett and Burke 1977). Link's construction of religion as a means of self-fulfillment stemmed directly from his earlier 1932 publication, *The New Psychology of Selling and Advertising*, in which psychology and advertising worked together "to crystallize the latent wants of consumers into active demand." (1932, xiii). Only four short years later, Link realized that religion, when added along with psychology and advertising, created an even more powerful "demand" among consumers. Link's utilitarian perspective on religion as the key to happiness forecasted the one adopted by Peale. Link defined his objectives thus: "the purpose of this book [...] is to point out the conditions and the course of life which create these problems. How to avoid the unhappiness of a misshapen personality is certainly more important than the belated devices by which it can sometimes be remade" (1936, 32). Surprisingly, in light of critics of the "therapeutic ethos" who claimed that commercial forces directed individuals inward (Lears 1981), for

Link such preventative care depended on “a greater turning outward or extroverting of his energies toward other people generally” (1936, 29). Over and over again, Link’s social message directly echoed Dale Carnegie’s: to succeed we must smoothly interact with others. And for Link, the practice of religion socialized individuals, thereby quelling the individual’s instinctive negative drives:

**By nature, the individual is selfish, and inclined to follow his immediate impulses. The personality tests and the clinical experience of psychologists prove conclusively that this road leads to introversion, to emotional instability and neuroticism, to intellectual futility, to maladjustment, to unhappiness. It requires religion, or something higher than the individual or even a society of individuals, to overcome the selfish impulses of the natural man and to lead him to a more successful and a fuller life.” (1936, 33-34).**

Drawing upon the already close collaboration between psychology and advertising, Henry Link’s accomplishment was to recast religion as the means to positive social ends, a move that from a traditionally religious perspective inverted ends and means. It was just this social orientation that the church establishment, long predicated upon some distance between an unchangingly true religion and disconcertingly untethered society, came to resent in Norman Vincent Peale, a minister who defined religious values in appealing cultural terms.

Mainline Protestants responded defensively to Peale’s message in large part because, while his ideas were those of New Thought, he was a different sort of messenger. New Thought, while it became a popular cultural force, could not move from its peripheral location within the social landscape. Peale, an ordained minister, was an eminent and ordinary preacher from inside the Protestant institution (Anker 1999b, 122; Meyer 1965). One of Peale’s biographers chose to see Peale’s positive thinking as “a bellwether for major cultural realignments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (George 1993, 6). But

how could this assessment be aligned with the fact that Peale's philosophy about the power of communication differed hardly at all from the New Thought philosophy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Peale's popularity, emblematic of a greater general affection of self-help books, signaled revived interest in popular literature that offered messages of connection and unity through communication. Like advertising rhetoric, springing up in the 1920s and firmly rooted by the mid-1940s, Peale gave readers what they wanted, a cultural religion that helped them manage everyday life.<sup>33</sup> Like New Thought rhetoric, popular psycho-religious self-help did away with the distanced stance of religion as related to society, alternatively making religion into a means by which individuals could succeed in society (Anker 1999b). Popular self-help provided hazy ideas of the metaphysical world with which readers were directed to communicate, and they did so without employing a rhetoric that alienated scientific ways of knowing.

### **Embrace of Science as Purveyor of Reality**

Self-help books written roughly between 1940-1960 frequently incorporated and manipulated the rhetoric of science. While books from the New Thought movement (1880-1910) also existed in a social milieu infatuated with science, the self-help books of that time only skimmed the surface of the influential ideas of evolution or of the newly developing "science" of psychology. In fact, it is plausible that the genre's resistance to

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<sup>33</sup> Peale's supporters rebutted the criticism against Peale that he catered to middle-class desires for social status by saying that in fact, his ministry, unlike the mainstream church, "accepted the crises of everyday life" (George, 6). Rather than bow to the claim that he feed individual narcissism, these critics held Peale up as a democratic prophet (Levine, 1988 226).

science, quickly becoming the primary way in which American society interpreted reality, left it increasingly out of step with mainstream beliefs and contributed to the decreasing influence of the New Thought movements. Self-help books stood to benefit greatly in terms of social acceptability if they succeeded in drawing some of science's social standing upon the genre. Since the Enlightenment, science had been framed as a system of knowledge that transparently reflected nature. Scientific language, as a mirror of nature, cast enduring social problems in universal, behavioral biological or physiological terms and constructed our seemingly common sense and transparent views of the individual and society (Good 1994, 5). Yet self-help, a somewhat stalwart and conservative genre, appeared to adopt popular ideas from mainstream culture while consistently offering the same fundamental ideas about the relationship between thought and reality. It was not until Norman Vincent Peale's mid-century predecessor, Harry Emerson Fosdick, began publishing in the 1930s, that the influences of science, which had been profoundly felt in many realms of society, were evidenced on the pages of self-help books.

Self-help authors, who during the New Thought movement had defined themselves in opposition to medicine in particular and science in general, now felt the need to show deference to the powerful institutions of science. In his bestselling *On Being a Real Person*, Henry Emerson Fosdick "gratefully acknowledge[d] the generous cooperation with which neurologists, psychiatrists, and psychological counselors have habitually met all appeals for help" (1943, ix). Fosdick also minimized the role of religion throughout his books, as he did here: "so far as religion is concerned, all the more because I am a minister, I have tried not to be a special pleader. My main purpose in writing this book

has not been to present an argument for religious faith.” Alternatively, he adopted the evolutionary rhetoric of progression within the sciences when he wrote, “In the development of the sciences astronomy came first, and after that geology, biology, sociology, until last of all came psychology” (1943, 26). It is especially noteworthy that Fosdick, a minister, excluded any reference to the church or to God when he defined “three factors to personality: “heredity, environment, and personal response” (1943, 4).<sup>34</sup> The idea of a “personal response” as the only aspect of personality over which the individual could exert substantial control implied that individuals had a responsibility to interact with those around them – a wrinkle in the conceptualization of thought that, like Link’s utilitarian religion, oriented the reader toward the social world to a greater degree than New Thought literature did.

Psychology in particular was ripe for popularization in the 30s and 40s. It was at this time that the profession moved out of the laboratory, became defined as a “helping” profession, and even came to dominate as “a veritable worldview” (Herman 1995, 4).<sup>35</sup> In *The Romance of American Psychology*, Herman accounted for this shift, an intentional one designed to garner greater social influence for psychological professionals, as emanating from “its promise to satisfy the hunger for values and desire for affirmation at the same time that myriad disorienting changes demoted traditional beliefs to

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<sup>34</sup> Although, as will be explored on the follow pages, in books written by ministers and lay people alike, messages about the ultimate healing power of religion quickly followed most mentions of science. Fosdick connects church and science when he notes the “psychological effects of positive faith” (1943, 252).

<sup>35</sup> Herman documents the multiplicity of meanings psychology adopted during post-war years. “Psychology sometimes appeared as a social or natural science, sometimes as a source of moral, cultural, and political values that could address the meaning of human identity and existence, matters that were traditionally the exclusive province of religion or philosophy” (1995, 5).

unsatisfying, even fallacious, platitudes” (1995, 4). Herman’s argument, based on ideas of unsettling social change and the human desire for easy answers, was shared by scholars who accounted for the growing popularity of the therapeutic ethos in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bellah, 1985; Rieff 1966; Lears 1981; Slater, 1997). While psychological ideas, practices, and language reached into culture in general, they were particularly resonant with the long-standing self-help fascination with the power of thought. Psychology’s emphasis on analyzing mental processes, interpersonal relationships, introspection, and behavior as the way of explaining individual and social realities was particularly in keeping with the messages that self-help had long been cultivating and disseminating.

Despite these commonalities, many self-help books resisted psychology’s influence. A large number of books borrowed popular psychological rhetoric while fundamentally subverting its perspective on the relationship between thought and healing. Claude Bristol’s bestselling, *The Magic of Believing*, was a case in point. Bristol’s book centered, in an admittedly repetitious manner (the author wrote: “repetition is an essential part of the technique of this science [psychology]”) upon that omnipresent idea that what we think equates with what we become. Borrowing psychological rhetoric, in his third chapter, “What the Subconscious Is,” Bristol wrote “the best results in life were obtained by close harmony and co-operation between the conscious and subconscious minds” (1948, 55). What did this cooperation entail according to Bristol? The author directed readers who were “trying to solve a difficult problem” to “let it go” to the subconscious, a process that was best accomplished, Bristol suggested, through sleep. “The next morning when you wake up, your conscious mind begins to think again about the problem, when suddenly there appears before your mind’s eyes a mental picture of your problem –

completely solved and with all the necessary directions of appropriate action on your part” (1948, 58). Bristol’s characterization of the relationship between the conscious and subconscious was one in which the conscious self needed to allow the mysterious subconscious to do its work unheeded and unobserved. In popular psychology, however, most often the opposite route to healing was advocated. When a person was able to bring subconscious feelings or thoughts “to the surface” of consciousness, they could then be accepted and accommodated rather than repressed.

Regardless of the degree to which self-help books attempted to wholeheartedly and faithfully adopt psychological rhetoric, by invoking its terms they drew upon a useful, socially sanctioned system of healing: diagnosis and treatment. Patients couched moral and spiritual problems in pseudoscientific terms, principally drawn from psychoanalysis. Authors, like their psychiatrist and psychotherapist colleagues, placed themselves under the influence of the scientific world-view, thereby positioning themselves as morally neutral and their books as based on scientific principles (Kiev, xi).

### **The Self-Help Genre and the Mass Market Paperback**

In 1937, when Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was the best selling book in America, the media environment that contributed to the book’s success was markedly changed from the one that had made Ralph Waldo Trine’s *In Tune with the Infinite* a bestseller 40 years earlier.<sup>36</sup> When a paperback edition of Carnegie’s

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<sup>36</sup> Carnegie’s book sold 729,000 copies in 1937, according to *80 Years of Best Sellers: 1895-1975* by Alice Payne Hackett and James Henry Burke. (New York : R. R. Bowker

book was released, the book sold well into the millions and developed an international following, two achievements that set this book, and the others soon to follow and released as inexpensive paperbacks, apart from the self-help of the 1890s. Carnegie's success suggested that the advent of the cheap paperback proved a boon for the self-help genre.<sup>37</sup>

Mass-market book publishing on the whole was greatly informed by the paperback houses that sprang up in the 1930s and 1940s. The introduction of the paperback led to rapid escalation in the numbers of books bought and sold in the United States, starting in the 1930s (Mott 1966 [1947]). While there were clearly many self-help books available prior to the introduction of the paperback, the availability of inexpensive copies dramatically increased their circulation.

In *Book Business: Publishing Past, Present, and Future* (2001), Jason Epstein, long-time editor at Random House, credited social transformations, such as suburban migration and the "hegemony of the shopping mall," with "radically altering the retail market for books" (94). These larger social transformations impacting book distribution

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Co., 1977.) Book historian Kenneth Davis argued that *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was the most influential paperback of all time (1984, 43). The Pocket Books version of Carnegie's book, released in 1940, "for a time outsold all other Pocket Book titles combined" (Bonn 1982, 128).

<sup>37</sup> What has been often called the "paperback revolution" of the late 1930s was actually just a more recent foray into inexpensive book printing. The publishing industry had succeeded previously (and then failed again) in establishing a profitable paperback business. For instance, John Tebbel credited the "craze for cheap softcover editions that swept the country in the two decades before the Civil War" with creating an army (or two) of readers (1982, 9). Soldiers who had been driven to read to escape "camp life" maintained the habit after the war and passed the passion on to their children. Unlike the middle period, rarely were early (1880-1910) self-help books released in paperback. Their moralistic message of self-control would not have meshed well with the image of paperback publishers at the time as having low editorial, production, and ethical standards (Bonn 1982, 31). When the new wave of inexpensive editions were released in the late 1930s, publishers worked to rid themselves of these associations.



worked in concert with production changes spurred by the paperback already underway within the industry. Gone were the numerous, small, urban bookshops that catered to specific clientele, run by independent booklovers who were willing to stock books that did not turn over quickly. The suburban chains that replaced them needed recognizable products by brand name authors with their “armies of loyal readers” (105).

Poised to acclimate to industry demands, self-help books had long had their celebrity, name-brand authors, both those famous people who then wrote self-help, and those who became famous by writing self-help. Concern with a solid and steady fiction backlist gave way to an emphasis on lifestyle books with short shelf lives that needed constant reproducing and repackaging. It was common for famous self-help authors to basically rewrite their books again and again over the years, providing publishers with recognizable “branded” products that could be re-released often. This meant that self-help – in terms of its generic qualities and its relation to production – quickly responded and benefited from the changes that caused other segments of the book industry to founder. It thereby became a more essential niche for the industry, responsible for a growing percentage of the total market.

It was not by chance, but by hard work, that self-help authors benefited from industry demands. Psycho-religious self-help’s success came about through the savvy use of mass communication. It is no coincidence that among the self-help authors of the time Norman Vincent Peale was both the most popular and the most avid mass mediator. Through broadcast and narrowcast, journalism and advertising, in just about every medium available, Peale built his constituency. A biographer, Carol George, in the aptly titled, *God’s Salesman*, defined Peale as “preacher, author, editor, public personality,

entrepreneur, and religious innovator” (1993, 4).<sup>38</sup> Once established, his radio addresses were said to regularly reach audiences of 5 million listeners (Starker 1989, 106), he quickly embraced television, and over the course of his career, he published numerous newspaper and magazine articles and 41 books (Anker 1999b). And it was books that remained the principle vehicle of the self-help message.

Best-selling books generally have often been considered cheap fodder by elites, a claim that only escalated with the introduction of paperbacks. Exhibiting a disdain for the popular familiar since Le Bon’s fear of “the mob,” P.A. Sorokin, writing in *Social and Cultural Dynamics* at the time of the height of Dale Carnegie’s popularity, stated: “I rarely trouble myself with reading a best seller: its being such is sufficient evidence of its commonplace character” (Sorokin 1937 in Mott 1947, 6). Despite dismissal from those upon high, millions of Americans were reading self-help books that defined thought as key to moral, physical, and mental well-being. What did these increasingly popular books have to say about the role of thought in everyday life?

### **Mid-century Self-Help: Thought as Communication**

The self-help books of this era can be separated into two categories, based upon the ways in which they forged thought into an interactive healing practice. Borrowing from the title of the emblematic text of this time, one type, “positive thinking” books, echoed ideas about communication found in the earlier generation of self-help. These books continued to advocate a direct correlation between positive thoughts and positive

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<sup>38</sup> George deals with the issue of Peale’s critics by dismissing them as high culture, establishment folk, fearful of the invasion of the middle class masses.

consequences, and conversely between negative thoughts and negative consequences (hence, all negative thoughts were to be banished). Thought, as constructed in narratives about positive thinking, functioned universally under all circumstances and was equally applicable to all people. Consequently, the positive thinking model of communication offered a universal message of selfhood. What was deemed “positive” was similarly uniform, with the assumed desires and goals of individuals falling into a narrow, predictable range.

A second type of self-help that arose during the 1930s and 40s borrowed more heavily from psychology, and in so doing strayed from the mind-cure/positive thinking self-help tradition. Rather than identify the source of health and happiness as the “positive thought,” this second strand of book emphasized the identification of a problem’s origin as curative. While these “negative thinking” self-help books allowed individuals to engage in troublesome thoughts, they still conveyed the same fundamental message about the power of communication: what we think corresponds with reality. The difference, however, dwelt in the correlation between “thoughts” and “reality.” For “negative thinking” self-help, the communicative healing mechanism depended upon the individual’s recognition and acceptance of “the block” (usually a lingering fear, repressed desire, or awkward insecurity).<sup>39</sup> Negative thinking provided a seemingly more distinctive notion of selfhood, whereby individuals searched for their own buried problems and unique personal demons. But underlying negative thinking’s suggestion of individuality stood another universal formulation of selfhood. Everyone fundamentally

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<sup>39</sup> Self-help books do not always fall easily into one or the other category, but reflect both (seemingly contradictory) philosophies of the power of thought.

shared the characteristic of owning some deficiency, some problem, and regardless of the stripe of the problem – insecurity or illness – the communicative mechanisms for solving that problem were identical.

Consistently, regardless of whether books more closely aligned themselves with positive or negative thinking, self-help books had a lot to say about thought as the key to the ubiquitous, yet apparently evasive, “health and happiness” that readers were said to lack. Definitions of thought were invested in stories that described self-discovery and facilitate “personal growth” (Crapanzano 1996,108-9).<sup>40</sup> This placed a great emphasis and heavy burden on “thought” and in turn begged the question of how the concept was conceived and further what that conception implied about the nature of therapeutic healing. What sort of thoughts were individuals directed to think? How was the social world implicated in the thought process? How was thought process within the self (the reader) defined? How was the transformative power of thought (which took on communicative dimensions) said to function? These questions mirror those asked of late 19<sup>th</sup> century self-help, but as will become clear, self-help at the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century offered both new and old permutations on the importance of thought. The promise of all self-help ideas was that ideas, thoughts, speech, and writing all had tremendous transformative power. But what did this mean during the 1950s? According to the texts, how did “thought as communication” work? And what was the desired consequence?

The power of thought was perhaps at its most mechanistic in Claude Bristol’s book, in which he equated mindless “doodling” with positive, transformative thought, in his own case with his desire for material wealth: “My “doodling” was in the form of

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dollar signs like these “\$\$\$\$--\$\$\$\$--\$\$\$--\$\$” on every paper that came across my desk [...] I want my readers to have this story, because it suggests that mechanics to be used in applying this magic[...]" (1948, 11). On the other end of the positive-negative thinking trajectory, for Joshua Liebman, the power of thought depended upon “acknowledging and facing antisocial impulses [...] Verbal expression of these deeply repressed impulses actually does lead to a diminution of the urge to action [...] Divested of fear and anxiety, released men and women leave the doctor’s chamber, free to pour their energy into channels of health and creative happiness” (1946, 29). Engaging in these powerful communicative practices was the choice and purview of the individual. “The “I” can choose *this* and not *that* mood as representing the real self; it can identify itself with confidence rather than fear, with thoughtfulness rather than disheartenment, with good will rather than rancor... This and not *that* is my true self; *this* I accept as my own and *that* I disclaim; and with *this* I will identify myself” (Fosdick 1943, 191, emphasis in original).

An influential best seller, *Think and Grow Rich*, published in 1937, was emblematic of the financially oriented texts that gained widespread popularity after the Depression. The text strictly abided by positive thinking philosophy, and would in turn inform the revival of psycho-religious positive thinking self-help in the coming years.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Think and Grow Rich* fell fully into the arena of “success literature” and so somewhat outside the scope of this dissertation. Books that focus on health and happiness, the central texts of this dissertation, remained relatively unpopular for a few more years yet. But Hill’s book, and to an even greater extent, Dale Carnegie’s *How To Win Friends and Influence People*, paved the way and set the tone for the religiously and psychologically oriented texts that would be best sellers in the 40s and 50s. They did so by reorienting the communicative goals away from “harmony with God” toward real world success and by shedding the central ideas of New Thought of their metaphysical language and

In *Think and Grow Rich*, author Napoleon Hill defined his “self-confidence formula” as a set of statements readers were instructed to say aloud repeatedly, such as “I know that I have the ability to achieve the object of my definite purpose in life...I realize the dominating thoughts of my mind will eventually reproduce themselves in outward, physical action, and gradually transform themselves into physical reality” (54). While unattributed to them, Hill’s formula was strikingly similar to the ideas promulgated by New Thought authors a generation or two previously, but while authors like P.P. Quimby or Ralph Waldo Trine attributed the transformative power of communication to Divine intervention, Hill’s only external explanatory mechanism was “a law of nature,” a law that remained unsubstantiated (other than through numerous success stories) according to scientific method.

In contrast to the inward leaning thoughts of New Thought ‘methods,’ Hill asked his readers to outwardly verbalize their thoughts. Foreshadowing Norman Vincent Peale’s message in *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Hill invested vaguely magical and unnamable power in these utterances: “Back of this formula is a law of nature which no man has yet been able to explain...The important fact about it is – it WORKS for the glory and success of mankind, IF it is used constructively. On the other hand, if used destructively, it will destroy just as readily” (1937, 55). Readers were encouraged not to challenge or question the validity of Hill’s talking cure; in fact to do so, he said, would

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dressing them up again in the rhetoric of science and advertising, while still conveying the simple sentiment, “ask and you will receive.” Psycho-religious books in turn were often first embraced by the business community. Many of Peale’s success stories star business men.

make it impotent, or worse, destructive. Fifteen years later, Peale would similarly instruct his readers not to “try too hard” (1952, 214).<sup>42</sup>

New Thought self-help books generally forged an unbreakable link between health and divinity, but books published in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century often occluded that connection, at times obscuring it completely and at others adapting the notion of divinity to suit their purposes. For authors expressly concerned with the acquisition of wealth, the equation was one in which individuals asked and soon received according to a mysterious, universal, scientific law. The order of the desire, from the most mundane and immediate to the most demanding and enduring, was not thought to impact the communicative mechanism or the parties involved. For example, Claude Bristol claimed his desire to consume a certain sort of cheese while aboard an airplane made that cheese manifest itself aboard (1948, 12), while Dale Carnegie and Napoleon Hill believed their desire to amass a substantial fortune in fact led to their wealth. In all these cases, it was not up to the individual to understand the thought process, but only to participate in the magical “science” of it. Similarly, the goal of thought was expressly materialistic, with a notable absence of the goals of health and happiness that so often were echoed in psycho-religious self-help: “Thought is the original source of all wealth, all success, all

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<sup>42</sup> Predating Hill, author Emilie Cady prompted readers not to try too hard to understand the workings of the power of thought. “If you find this subject of mortal mind and universal Mind puzzling to you, do not worry over it, and above all things do not discuss it; but just drop it for a time, and as you go on with the lessons, you will find that someday it will all flash suddenly upon you with perfect clearness” (Cady, 1919, 15). Similarly, she wrote, “If you are one who seeks and expects to get any realizing knowledge of spiritual things through argument or reasoning, no matter how scholarly your attainments or how great you are in worldly wisdom, you are a failure in spiritual understanding. You are attempting to utter impossibility -- that of crowding the Infinite into the quart measure of your own intellectual capacity” (1919, 16).

material gain, all great discoveries and inventions, and of all achievement” (Bristol 1948, 29).

Again returning to an emphasis on divinity and with a purpose contrary to that of Claude Bristol, when French import Lecomte du Noüy wrote *Human Destiny* in 1947, it was with the conviction that the philosophy and tools of science could be used to substantiate the fundamental religiosity of the physical and metaphysical world. As such, Noüy, like his New Thought predecessors, posited a divine entity as the great communicator, the substance through which all thought and meaning flowed. He wrote, “The purpose of this book is to examine critically the scientific capital accumulated by man, and to derive there from logical and rational consequences. We shall see that these consequences lead inevitably to the idea of God” (1947, xvi). Noüy was far from alone in using the language of science to argue the inescapability of divine order. These authors often saw their task as one of convincing the rational reader to recognize that satisfying explanations of their problems were beyond the reach of science, that “we [must] leave the realm of science to penetrate into that of religion” to find fulfillment (Noüy 1947, 9).

Fulton J. Sheen’s *Peace of Soul*, published in 1949, sought to counter Joshua Liebman’s 1946 smashing success, *Peace of Mind*, a “negative thinking” text that drew upon psychological theory. Liebman’s text had endorsed the prevalent injunction to look to the self for answers, that the primary interaction leading to healing occurred within the solitary individual. Upset about the diminished role of God in “negative thinking’s” healing schema, Sheen railed against Freud, against looking inward. He found it absurd that according to “a modern conception of the subjective life, the human appears as a



captive within his own mind and as a victim of forces that he or she cannot recognize” (1949, 4). And yet the problems of alienation that Sheen identified were identical to those named by the authors he lambasted: “Modern man is characterized by three alienations: He is divided from himself, from his fellow human beings, and from his God” (7). Unsurprisingly, rather than psychoanalysis, Sheen’s answer to these alienations was reconnection with the Divine order, so while his diagnosis was the same, his remedy differed from the negative thinking model. Like other positive thinkers, Sheen saw a direct correlation between what occurred inside and outside the self. “A soul with a fight inside itself will soon have a fight outside itself with others” (9). And for Sheen, popular psychology spurred this internal battle, rather than quelled it.

Norman Vincent Peale’s God, while a pivotal character in his stories about constructing individual happiness, easily bent to the will of the individual. For Peale, God’s energy could empower the individual in a way that was reminiscent of the New Thought concept of “influx,” but it is unclear to what degree that power had an independent existence – a distinct will and wisdom – or whether God solely served people’s bidding. Peale wrote for “the reader feeling a sense of need ... [who] can build for himself, with God’s help, the kind of life he deeply desires (1952, xii). Yet, while “God’s help” is invoked, this God, when “spoken to” with positive thoughts always gave the same affirmative answer. Failures could only dwell within the individual. Other entities – the people around us and the multifaceted qualities of our own natures – grew more central in the communicative exchange, in lieu of this vague, amorphous other, be it “laws of nature” or God. Still, faith was required of readers – a new secular faith in the act of communicating itself, a faith that resided in the internal realm of the self and yet

was fundamentally unavailable for self-analysis. The concept of the self's transformative communicative capacity that emerged from self-help books like Hill's was simultaneously naïve and powerful. This type of self-help, most famously exemplified by Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*, closely followed from the mind cure/New Thought tradition. Based upon a simple, direct equation between thoughts and reality, positive thinking allowed for no consideration of those thoughts and feelings deemed sinful, negative, unhealthy, or deviant.

Author Emile Coué, "the Master Mind of Autosuggestion," provided an early distillation of this positive thinking self-help message about communication and self. Coué's term "autosuggestion," reminiscent of the machine age in which the self-help message was first manufactured, implied that the communicative cure occurred *automatically*, and that the powerful, positive results of articulation would come to the reader with ease if only he willingly and uncritically practiced the communicative cure that authors prescribed. Thought, in this construct, worked as mechanically as an assembly line and became a task of going through the motions, a type of communication in which behavior and message became synonymous. The individual's job was to convey (rather than construct) the author's positive message. According to the books, the reader need not deeply comprehend the meaning of the words articulated; to have said them was simply enough to enact thought's power.<sup>43</sup> This was the case for author Claude Bristol when he wrote: "when on that fateful night in the spring of 1918 I told myself that some

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<sup>43</sup> This is not to imply that self-help authors say that readers can believe the opposite of what they say and still receive the healing benefit. Rather they often simply leave the matter of belief out of the conversation. At the same time, tests implied that if we say something (frequently or passionately) enough, we will come to believe what we say over time.

day I would have a lot of money, I did not realize that I was laying the groundwork for a series of causes which would unleash forces that would bring accomplishment” (1948, 9).

### Role of society

While positive thinking books shared much in common with New Thought, they departed in terms of the relevance of the social world and its representation. While wish fulfillment was still the central *modus operandi*, no longer did the self, as textually constructed, express primary concern with the correlation between one’s own thoughts and thoughts of the divine order, while the social world seemed to matter very little. Informed by the hard times of the Depression, these books argued that a smooth negotiation of the social world was crucial to individual fulfillment. No longer was the realm of individual thought divorced from social interaction. To succeed, these books argued, one needed to identify and respond to the needs and desires of others, thereby making the attainment of one’s own needs and desires feasible. This notion was translated on the book’s pages into advice on the mechanics of social interaction.

It was during this period that the standard formulas of the genre, recognizable in contemporary self-help, were solidified. Norman Vincent Peale had written many books prior to *The Power of Positive Thinking*, including the 1948 moderate seller, *A Guide to Confident Living*. But it was his 1952 bestseller that fully repackaged New Thought ideas in a new “ready-to-use” form. The success of this book in particular suggested that the formal, generic developments contributed to the genre’s revival. Borrowing from the formulas of diet, exercise and beauty how-to manuals, Peale had mastered the generic

qualities of self-help (Starker 1989, 108; Huber 1971; Anker 1999b, 115). “Techniques,” specific nuts and bolts steps and lessons for readers, became signature qualities of self-help literature. As Peale wrote in the introduction to *The Power of Positive Thinking*, his book was “simply a practical, direct-action, personal-improvement manual” (xii), but it was also filled with stories that demonstrated and confirmed the “practical” advice. In these self-proclaimed simple terms, Peale’s book put forth the arguments that unhappiness and illness were self-made, that thoughts and spoken incantations could solve all problems and lead to prosperity. Doggedly optimistic, calling on readers to actively participate, to visualize, relax, wish, and positively affirm, Peale, like his New Thought predecessors, located the critical mechanisms of change within the individual to the belittlement of social, economic and political influences. But this message about the power of thought, which was in no way unique, was now simplified into brief pointed statements, surrounded by numerous “engaging” anecdotes. Stories are enlisted as proof, “I [Norman Vincent Peale] cite these experiences to show conclusively that if there is a Power able to deliver a person from alcoholism, this same Power can help any other person to overcome any other form of defeat he may face (1952, 221). These two qualities, skeletal point-by-point advice supported by meaty narrative evidence, came to typify the genre.

Open the first edition of the Fawcett Crest paperback of John Schindler’s *How to Live 365 Days a Year* (1954), and one encounters, before the title page, a quiz reminiscent of magazine quizzes, replete with boxes to check. Readers are asked:

IF YOU CAN ANSWER “YES” TO JUST ONE OF THESE QUESTIONS...

Four questions follow, so general in their characterization of discontent, that it would be the exceptional person who would answer no to all of them. Once having answered in the affirmative, readers are told:

**THEN THIS FAMOUS BEST SELLER WILL SHOW YOU HOW TO START  
LIVING LIFE TO THE FULL!<sup>44</sup>**

Textually, author John Schindler's book represents the generic "innovations" of self-help of the period. These books sought to actively engage readers through the use of questions, quizzes, worksheets, and so on, and to condense and "streamline" their information in quick synopses, brief outlines, and easy-to-follow numbering of concepts. These textual qualities convey ideas about readers as overly extended, busy individuals with little time for the type of philosophical inquiry into human nature that was common in the earlier generation of self-help books. The success of these generic innovations suggested a desire for concrete, simple, direct, and practical advice that would translate into clear social and material advancements. This new automatized model was bolstered by general claims of scientific authority while fundamentally ignoring the development of the science that spoke most clearly to the topics central to self-help: psychology.<sup>45</sup>

On the other hand, negative thinking books attempted to integrate, rather than mention in name only, the messages of popular psychology, and in doing so constructed

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<sup>44</sup> Increasingly commonly, books would borrow the language of previous best selling self-help. In this case, Schindler echoes Dale Carnegie's best seller of ten years prior, *How to Stop Worrying the Start Living* (1944).

<sup>45</sup> Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* is a prime example of a text, like Hill's, that invoked the rhetoric of science in general and psychology in particular without also offering advice that corresponded even vaguely with those ideologies. For example, the first social problem Peale identifies, on page one, is "the malady popularly called the inferiority complex." Peale's cure, couched within the context of a narrative of a young businessman, is incantation of a bible passage that the man is instructed to say three times once in bed and again three times in the morning prior to rising (2).

an alternative mode of therapeutic discourse. Joshua Liebman, the influential Rabbi of Temple Israel in Boston, in his 1946 *Peace of Mind* named the techniques of psychology as “keenest and most revelatory of our inner nature” (10) and claimed that only by marrying the newer scientific ideas with older religious ideas would people find what Liebman, like many others, defined as the principle self-help objective: living “the good life.” Liebman criticized traditional religious practices that induced fear and guilt to control behavior through self-control and self-denial, while failing to convey the essential lessons of love and respect for all beings. With its rhetoric of deeply questioning the subconscious, and looking within, this popularization of Freudian psychology echoed the internal quest that New Thought and positive thinking books endorsed, but with a substantial alteration. Whereas mind-cure and positive thinking books allowed for little or no acknowledgement of the negative, what we might call the “root causes” of personal problems, popular psychology, as woven into self-help texts like Liebman’s, required the individual to acknowledge “drives” and impulses, those urges labeled sinful by society but defined in “negative thinking” self-help as the key to self-change, as the “first step” toward achieving the enduring “good life” goals of health and happiness.

In doing so, this second strand of mid-century self-help constructed an alternative narrative of the power of thought. Unlike Hill’s model (which more closely resembled the New Thought model), those texts informed by popular psychology claimed to reject the simple notion that thought had a straightforward, transformative power. Joshua Liebman rejected positive thinking’s premise of autosuggestion, claiming “no such formula for reassurance exists” (6). While still positing thought as the fundamental linkage between separate aspects of the self, between the self and others, and less overtly

now, between the self and God, these “negative thinking” books argued that a therapeutic communication could not depend solely upon the mechanisms of wish fulfillment, as New Thought/ Positive Thinking books suggested. “Negative thinking” self-help books claimed to provide readers with a more complex, psychological therapeutic communication. But in truth, they did not leave the promise of an automatic “switch-throwing” communication model behind. The reader could still hope for an instantaneous curative communicative moment, but instead of defining that moment as the one in which a positive thought was constructed, negative thinking books defined the moment of healing as the one in which past transgressions were simultaneously remembered and forgiven. Self-acceptance became the new communicative magic bullet.

Self-help books responded to impulses, informed by ideas prevalent in culture, to explore what it meant to live well and be good. Anthropologist and psychologist Richard Shweder pointed to three primary discourses about what is right and good – an ethics of autonomy, an ethics of divinity, and an ethics of community (quoted in Luhmann, 2000, 280). Since the genre’s inception, self-help texts engaged all three “ethical” frameworks, the first through the ever present, and critically maligned, focus on the individual, and the second through the argument that “what is right and good” flowed to and from those who lived in harmony with the divine. Interestingly, the third – self-help literature’s moral message on collective culture –has often been invisible to cultural critics. The social dimension of narratives of communication, which became more prevalent during the 40s and 50s, threw into question the criticism that self-help literature, as artifacts of the “therapeutic ethos,” eroded social bonds. Books that adopted a psychological perspective, negative thinking self-help, acknowledged society as a formative influence

on the individual, as when bestselling author Joshua Liebman defined “our interdependence with others” as “the most encompassing fact of human reality” (Liebman 1946, 61).

The popular psychological rhetoric of self-acceptance, defined by Liebman as “the acceptance of our imperfections as well as our perfections” (1946, 53), brought shifts in self-help literature’s discourse of thought, communication, self, and society.<sup>46</sup> Rather than thinking of an outward desire (and with the power of thought alone realizing that desire), self-help with popular psychological overtones insisted upon thinking of the inward blockages, repressions, sublimations, and so on, that had, up until the moment of their realization and acknowledgement, thwarted the individual’s smooth social functioning and personal fulfillment. Magically, upon recognition (which often appeared synonymous with acceptance), these blockages dissolved.<sup>47</sup>

The therapeutic mechanisms of thought in these self-help books continued, like their New Thought predecessors, to emphasize the “pathway” or “channel” (in the “negative

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<sup>46</sup> Books that echoed Liebman’s psychoanalytic message would later fall under the cultural criticism that they foster selfishness and narcissism. For example, Landon Y. Jones used the term “An orgy of self-gratification” and Daniel Yankelovich coined the term “psychology of entitlement” in *New Rules*, (1981). Mullins and Kopelman (1984) studied bestselling nonfiction from 1950 through 1979. Based upon Lasch’s definition of narcissism, dividing literature into two groups, narcissistic and non-narcissistic, all books concerned with topics such as self-improvement, self-awareness, and personal growth were deemed narcissistic, with the clear connotation of negative self-absorption. “As hypothesized by the authors, the proportion of best-selling books categorized as narcissistic increased significantly, over three decades. That is, average percentages of narcissistic best-sellers rose from 5% in 1950s, to 8% in the 1960s, and to 16% in the 1970s.” (quoted in Starker 1989, 120).

<sup>47</sup> In her book, *Tele-advising* (1992), Mimi White suggests an alternative interpretation. Rather than an immediate cure, it is the process, not its conclusion that matters. She says, “a therapeutic cure is often ultimately less important than the process of therapeutic engagement with it.” Following this logic suggests that engaging in therapeutic behavior is a social demonstration of sorts, an act or performance.



thinking” case, the inwardly directed “self-acceptance”), while leaving vague and unclear just what such self-acceptance meant. This message about the power of thought emphasized “transmission,” in the sense that the primary concern rested solely upon with the channel’s existence, and on the assumption that it remained connected and open, ready for use. While use of this open channel was implied, questions of when, how or to what effect it was actually to be used, and of the meaning of the content conveyed, were largely absent.<sup>48</sup> Further, to call an open channel a conclusive communicative result made successful communication virtually guaranteed. Changing one’s behaviors could prove painful and promised potential failure, but “communication” as defined here, was always feasible – and in its feasibility, by definition successful.

### **Mid-Century Self-help: Construction of Self and Society**

Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century self-help literature’s conflicted characterization of the relationship between society and self simultaneously affirmed and denied David Riesman’s sociological argument made in *The Lonely Crowd*.<sup>49</sup> This 1950 analysis of Weberian

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<sup>48</sup> Here I am indebted to James Carey’s discussion, in *Communication as Culture*, of a “transmission view of communication,” based upon metaphors of geography or transportation, upon terms like “imparting” and “sending.” In this view, “the transmission of signals or messages over distance” is undertaken “for the purpose of control” (15). Carey contrasts the ‘transmission’ model with a ‘therapeutic’ model with the goal of communion. My argument is that in self-help, rather than distinct, these two models are elided (or ‘co-dependent’). Transmission is defined as therapeutic, but in doing so, Carey’s meaning and value of therapeutic communication is occluded.

<sup>49</sup> Riesman was in good company when he argued that individualism, and a resultant conformity, was in a state of crisis. C. Wright Mills (1951), William H Whyte (1956), Herbert Marcuse (1969), made similar claims that individuals were, to a greater degree than in the past, looking outside the self for directions on what to think and do. These arguments are fruitfully contrasted with those of an earlier generation of sociologists of the Chicago School who argued that the distinction between self and society was

ideal types, which would become widely adopted as fact, charted the adaptation of the American character from one “whose conformity is insured by their tendency to acquire early in life an internalized set of goals,” what Riesman and his colleagues called the ‘inner-directed’ type, to one “whose conformity is insured by their tendency to be sensitized to the expectations and preferences of others,” a type Riesman named ‘other-directed’ (1950, 9). The enduring irony of self-help books was that while purportedly directing readers inward, as mass marketed consumer products, they inherently offered ‘other-directed’ idealized character types ready for readers’ adoption. Among the ways Riesman accounted for the changing American character was by noting the 1940s as an “age of consumption,” an age in which outward acquisition trumped inward cultivation as the definitional vehicle of selfhood. Both *The Lonely Crowd*, named as such by Riesman because despite an outward orientation individuals remained fundamentally alone (a classic case of communication failure), and self-help books offered broad, general, universal notions of selfhood. But whereas Riesman attributed society with the power to produce “conformist” individuals, self-help books continued to argue that the self had primary responsibility for its development and maintenance.

In large part, this emphasis on self-sufficiency depended upon the prioritization of work that the books insisted upon. Anne Morrow Lindbergh, in her 1955 *Gifts From the Sea*, was a case in point. While Lindbergh expressed concern with the intimacy and distance between people in relationships, Lindbergh explicitly argued the individual must

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misleading. After posing the question “Can we separate the individual from society?” Cooley, perhaps referencing the transcendentalist’s penchant for the wilderness, argued that however far we travel from the civilization, we always take with us “a mind formed in society.” (1956: 48).

“work on” herself to able to foster strong relationships. She wrote: “When one is a stranger to oneself then one is estranged from others too. If one is out of touch with oneself, then one cannot touch others” (1955, 44). While the intimate touch was the implied goal, rarely it seemed did the individual succeed in escaping the self.<sup>50</sup>

The variable and tenuous connection between individuals and the collective echoed a larger ambivalence about the very notion of society. Raymond Williams wrote that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the term acquired its meaning as the “objective sum of our relationships” and as such made possible the definition of the relationship between the individual and society (1983, 291-295). Prior, it had referred to connections among people in the sense of companionship. Self-help of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had less to say about “society” and its impact on the individual, although a latent negativity and potential for infection can be keenly sensed. But by the 1930s, the sense of “society” as a contributing factor in personal development was pervasive. As a “factor,” the influence of society upon the individual was indeterminate and potentially dangerous.

While criticism held self-help responsible for providing readers with a false sense of ease in the social world, self-help books often constructed individuals within a vast social sea, one with which the relatively insignificant individual came to terms through self-adaptation. As Harry Emerson Fosdick explained in *On Being a Real Person*: “We are not responsible for our heredity, much of our environment we cannot control...but the

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<sup>50</sup> Lindbergh’s communication among individuals need not strive after the goal that so much self-help advocates: that of perfect, harmonious understanding. She quotes Rilke when making this point: “A complete sharing between two people is an impossibility” (1955, 97). But for Lindbergh, this impossibility is a fruitful one, for to realize it would in turn compromise the individual’s autonomy, a concept highly valued in Lindbergh’s model of communication.

**building of personality – the power to face life with an individual rejoinder – we are responsible for that” (1943, 8). The notion of a rejoinder, a communicative response, belied self-help’s concern with the individual as social being who must rely upon his communicative capacities. Social forces can work against us; as when Fosdick wrote that “the goal of the self is integration, but society forces us into “multiple selves,” often “in bitter conflict,” (Fosdick 1943, 29):**

**Death or divorce dissolves the family; economic misfortune destroys the social position; personal trouble, such as illness or disappointed love, makes external props an inadequate reliance, throwing the individual back upon himself [...] We say that such experiences cause the subsequent disintegration, but the truth commonly is that they’ve revealed the disintegration that was already there” (Fosdick, 223).**

**While Fosdick echoed many of his self-help colleagues when he said that while the social world provided challenges, these difficulties did not fundamentally account for the individual. Instead, Fosdick suggested, life events served as litmus tests, illuminating one’s true nature. And it was this idea of a “true” or “real” self that preoccupied the characterization of self in the books of this time. While the individual self in these books was connected to a larger web of interaction, that web was positioned as a secondary outgrowth of the internal communicative interactions that occurred within each individual. The self projected in the texts simultaneously sought change while maintaining balance – a balance reflective of the social need for stability. With their enduring emphasis on the “good life,” self-help books substantiated Charles Taylor’s claim that, “Selfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricable intertwined themes” (1989, 3), for above all the self in these books is not**

static, but is yearning to be better. But as in the past generation of self-help, “to be better” was said to be accomplished solely via processes of thought.

Change comes, Taylor argued, through *articulation* (18). Self-help books define human nature in communicative terms, the individual must be open, willing to take in ideas and messages from without, and in turn to project the self outward through performative demonstration. While the individual constructed in New Thought self-help of the 1880s and 1890s was pivotal, his main responsibility was to be receptive to divine intervention. The self that emerged from mid 20<sup>th</sup> century self-help literature was more active; rather than see the self as New Thought authors had, as a small entity through which the entire workings of God could pass, now the individual herself becomes that central communicative nexus.

For Fosdick, the communicative capacities of the human being differentiated us from other living beings. Many books borrowed from psychological ideas of “blocks” that prevented the person from living and acting in the most positive ways and assumed that readers were not living as their “true” selves, and that in fact much individual and collective suffering stemmed from this lack of “truth” in our behaviors. Fosdick’s first sentence in his book emphasized this point: “the central business of every human being is to be a real person” (1943, 1). Not only did this introduction continue the emphasis on the self that New Thought began, but it also introduced the notion of the true versus the false self. According to Fosdick, “every man’s primary responsibility” is to “organize” his personality (1). Fosdick was quite plain in defining what it meant to be real and in emphasizing the utmost moral importance of the task. Among the traits of “courage, fortitude, dependability” (27), “A real person achieves a high degree of unity within

himself. He does not remain split and scattered but gets himself together into wholeness and coherence (28). Fosdick acknowledged that this unity was often evasive, but its goal could never be put aside. We are stuck with ourselves, all parts of ourselves. "From that inner relationship there is no divorce" and "our beatitude or misery dependent on our response" (4). Fundamentally we have little choice but to accept this "summons," which calls the self into dialogue with its disparate pieces.

The self-help of the next 40 years would tussle with just what it meant to "dialogue with the self's disparate pieces." Self-help of the 1950s had manufactured dual answers to that question in the form of positive and negative thinking. Through the 1960s and 70s, psychological explanations continued to make more sense to readers than did positive thinking ideas, which came to ring as artificially simplistic. But this would prove to be a temporary setback for that idea, beginning with the new thought movements, that the quality of our thoughts form an exact impression upon the quality of our lives. As the genre approached the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, strands of religious vs scientific and positive thinking vs negative thinking would no longer seem as oppositional as they once had. Similarly, distinctions between mind and body no longer seemed as clear, as science moved further into physiological, as opposed to psychological, explanations of the mind.

## **Chapter Five: THE SPIRITUAL SELF, the Late Period of Self-Help, 1960-2000**

In April 1999, the news media became briefly absorbed by research findings, reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, which ascribed healing benefits to self-expression. The findings – labeled powerful and remarkable – offered scientific substantiation for the concept that psycho-religious self-help books had articulated for over 100 years: thought enables healing.<sup>51</sup> But the venue, one of the most prestigious medical journals, is central to charting ideas of positive thinking. Throughout the genre’s history, the correlation between the quality of one’s thoughts and wellness of one’s body and mind had endured, but society’s shifting reliance upon various systems of ordering reality, specifically religious and scientific, prompted the reconceptualization of self-help’s core concepts of thought and self. While there were always exceptions, the self-help books usually attributed the power of thought to either scientific or religious orders. The self-help books of the 1890s had argued that the individual must align himself with a divine order to achieve health and happiness. In the 1950s, the social world and its commercial imperatives became the realm to which individuals should accommodate. By the 1990s, however, individuals were directed to find answers within themselves. While, “the self” had always been the genre’s point of departure, earlier books had argued that the self must set itself in harmonious alignment with something greater or outside itself. By contrast, contemporary self-help told the reader that not only

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<sup>51</sup> Patients with chronic asthma or rheumatoid arthritis who wrote about “the most stressful experience they had ever undergone” showed concrete health improvements when compared to the control group who wrote about neutral experiences. The report was deemed “powerful” by *Newsweek*, April 26, 1999, page 75, and “remarkable” by *The New York Times*, April 18, 1999, WK6.

health and happiness but also one's moral compass were to be directed internally, and one's sense of reality, similarly, sprang from an internal order.

Like the “negative thinking” books of the 1950s, the *JAMA* study posited a causal relationship between communication of “stressful experiences” and “health improvements” in which thinking and writing about a problem's source provided the pathway to health. As mentioned in the previous chapter, self-help books published in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were roughly divided between “negative thinking” books, the strand of self-help that popularized techniques of psychotherapy and advocated exploration of personal distress, and “positive thinking” books, the strand of the genre that continued the New Thought correlation between happy thoughts and happy outcomes.<sup>52</sup> Despite the fact that psychological rhetoric, on its face, seems fundamentally incompatible with positive thinking rhetoric, one of the accomplishments of late 20th century self-help was to create a space in which explorations of the troubled past, as well as the notions of scientific objectivity that were so central to modern sense-making, could dwell comfortably alongside the genre's traditional correlation between positive thinking and positive rewards.

During the 60s and 70s, the books that broke through to best seller status, like Eric Berne's *Games People Play* (1964) and Thomas Harris' *I'm OK- You're OK* (1967) were strongly informed by popular psychology and the rhetoric of scientific inquiry in general.<sup>53</sup> This emphasis on the psychodynamic thrived throughout the 1970s and was

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<sup>52</sup> This delineation between positive thinking and negative thinking self-help books does not imply an accounting of the genre as a whole.

<sup>53</sup> Harris' initial success with *I'm OK—You're OK* occurred without the publishing industry's endorsement. Originally self-published in 1967, Harris marketed his book



broadly and favorably received in many realms of popular culture. By the 1980s, however, while popular psychological concepts were integrated throughout all sorts of self-help, those devoted principally to psychotherapeutic theories had become less popular. In culture more broadly, by the 1990s and through today, talk therapies grew relatively less influential than during the 1960s and 1970s, while biomedical therapies, anti-depressants in particular, came to play an increasingly large part in the treatment of mental illness and discontent (Goode 2002). This ebb and flow in the enlistment of psychological and physiological rhetoric in self-help reflected a broad cultural transition from psychodynamic to biomedical explanations of health and happiness (Luhmann 2000). Books with a 'biomedical' focus, of which the "recovery" movement (including Alcoholics Anonymous, Codependents Anonymous etc.) was the most well known, came to define illnesses of both the physical and social sort as the domain of the body – a distinct deviation from self-help's emphasis on the mental command of thoughts as the curative mechanism. Self-help authors, steadfastly committed to the idea that thoughts (not serotonin) were responsible for health and happiness, cultivated a receptive ground within the genre for this social adoption of biomedical arguments.<sup>54</sup>

Supported by the surrounding discourse of biomedical explanations for illness and unhappiness, in the contemporary period, spiritual explanations of health and healing

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himself and it became a "word of mouth" bestseller before being picked up by Avon in 1973.

<sup>54</sup> Within the scientific realm, this incompatibility was bridged through the enlistment of scientific evidence that demonstrated a "mind-body connection." Citing scientific research, self-help books argued that if one smiles, if one feels good, if one says nice things, then positive bodily changes would be registered and consequently one will be healthier, happier, and wiser.

occupied the self-help genre's core.<sup>55</sup> As the mid-century set of associations of negative or psychological thinking with scientific evidence and positive thinking with religious faith deteriorated, the split between positive and negative thinking itself was reconciled by the concept of spirituality, a notion of tremendous inclusivity. Integrating characteristics that had previously been at odds, books prompted readers both to dig deep into the troubled terrain of the past while clinging to positive thinking's roots – that what we think directly manifests itself in the material world. As a unifying concept in the genre, spirituality moved self-help rhetoric away from concerns of crisis and illness and toward on-going personal maintenance. This shift was also captured by the move away from the categorization “self-help,” which was often replaced by “self-improvement,” a term implying permanent rather than temporary, mainstream rather than fringe, care rather than cure, of the self. Self-help author Thomas Moore, in a marked departure from self-help through the 70s, called the emphasis on “cure” a “salvational fantasy” (1992, xvii).

Popular perceptions of self-help at this time continued to waffle between disdain and acceptance. Robert Schuller, popularly considered Norman Vincent Peale successor of positive thinking rhetoric, was criticized as Peale had been for cultivating a concept of God as a “pal” (Anker 1999, 166). But his electronic church was among the most successful of the 70s and 80s. In attempts to garner large audiences, Schuller and his

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<sup>55</sup> Psychological explanations, less overtly emphasized, remained latent within the genre as a whole in the form of the “pervasive American willingness to accept that the psychological, inner self held the clue to finding meaning in life” (Hale 1971). The notion of spirituality, upon which so much contemporary self-help depended, arguably derived from psychology's historical orientation on inward-dwelling answers to life's mysteries.

cohort were criticized for their “middle of the road” message that catered to middle class desires for status and wealth.

Although the term itself was out of favor, positive thinking remained a dominant discourse. While a Christian God became even more tangential than it had been in the 50s, the qualities of that God were still largely responsible for health and happiness. The spirituality touted in contemporary self-help was an individualistic religion said to reside outside of traditional institutional contexts. But it was also still characterized by a sense of oneness, of harmonious flow between the self and the universe, defined as an “intelligent creative force,” the “field of pure potentiality” (Chopra 1994, 5) from which and to which all life stemmed, or as the author of *Simple Abundance*, Sarah Ban Breathnach, deemed it, “a loving Source – a Sower of Dreams” (Breathnach 1995).

While notions of spirituality and self-improvement bridged previously divided concepts of positive and negative thinking, self-help’s messages about the self continued to portray a dual or multiple and often damagingly fractured self. This self, as will be explored throughout this chapter, was most frequently characterized as consisting of inner and outer dimensions. The outer self, constructed through the interaction of self and society, was said to often act as a barrier inhibiting or masking the truthful, honest, real inner self. The communicative work to which self-help readers were directed was the task of integrating or unifying these dual or multiple selves. For example, for author Brad Gooch, the self is a tripartite entity consisting of the rational self (unnamed in his schema, simply ‘you’) who is charged with connecting and courting the other two: a deep, mystical, all-knowing self (“The Voice”), and lastly, a composite character of who you are now and would like to be in the future, the latent, uncultivated self (“The

Boyfriend Within”). Speaking of the Boyfriend Within, Gooch says “...you can be sure of one thing: He’s also part of you. He’s your chance to become more comfortable with uncharted territory that’s been inside you all along. He’s there to help you rewire yourself” (1999, 60).

This work was to be done individually as well as in one’s most intimate relationships in which it was “safe” for the inner self to express itself. This dual self mirror’s Goffman’s sociological observation of a “tendency in social thought to divide the conduct of the individual into a profane and sacred part.” According to Goffman, the profane part was “exacted” by society and the “obligatory world of social roles.” The sacred self was personal, “what an individual is ‘really’ like underneath it all” (1959). Goffman’s observation also spoke to self-help’s depiction of society, as the realm in which the outer self exists in a state of disquiet. The poignancy, and attendant frustration, of this contemporary inner self stemmed from its simultaneously true and evasive qualities. This mysterious aspect of the self reflected the residual, latent psychological vein, stemming from Freud’s contention that we know little about our unconsciousness (Freud 1960, 252).

In addition to *changes* in the configurations of foundational concepts of self, society, and thought, the diffusion and expansion of those concepts, and the venues in which they appear, characterized the contemporary trajectory of the self-help genre: more books, more media, more elaboration on the nature of the self, more need for self-care through positive thinking. With bestseller lists increasingly populated by celebrity authors, into the late 80s and early 90s, psycho-religious self-help authors like Robert Schuller, Wayne Dyer, and Deepak Chopra repeatedly hit the bestseller lists by becoming

celebrities themselves. The self-help genre was so successful in the last few decades that it played a substantial role, along with other “lifestyle” genres, in keeping the book trade viable in a radically shifting media world. One research firm, Marketdata, reported that “spiritual self-help has become the industry’s real growth segment” (2001). While books remained the primary vehicle of the self-help message, like the media industry more broadly, self-help began to function in a multi-media environment. No longer contained solely within books, its messages proliferated in a variety of media: television, audio, video, internet, accessories such as t-shirts, candles, mugs, and even board games like “Chicken Soup For The Family Soul Game.” *Newsweek* reported that:

[self-help] constitutes a \$563 million-a-year publishing juggernaut. Books are just one avenue to a brand-new you. From seminars to CDs to ‘personal coaching,’ the self-improvement industry rakes in \$2.48 billion a year, according to the research firm Marketdata Enterprises, which predicts double-digit annual growth through 2003 (McGinn 2000).

Additionally from the market perspective, the “branding” of individual authors became a standard industry practice; key people were often “packaged” together by promoters (Marketdata website 2000). Instead of publishing only books marketed toward a general reader, who often read as a default white, middle-class woman (Erhenrich & English 1979; Simonds 1992), many books were now demographically tailored, responding to and in turn generating an interest among readers in hearing from people like themselves.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Gender analysis has been a fruitful line of inquiry into self-help given that the genre has historically been populated by large numbers of women authors and readers. For example, an author writing in 1893 sought to account for the frequent maligning the genre received by the press and concluded that the press expressed an anti-feminist bias: There is also some prejudice because a majority of the exponents and teachers of mental science belong to the so-called “weaker sex.” [...] this is distinctively the

Self-help books have historically been in dialogue with concurrent social discourses – especially social discourses that speak of the personal realm<sup>57</sup>. During the 1960s and 70s, when “getting in touch with one’s inner child,” and “letting it all hang out” were the order of the day, “America’s #1 Bestseller,” in 1971, *How to Be Your Own*

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woman's age, and the world is now beginning to realize the beneficent fruits of her recent development and greater freedom (Wood 1893, 25-6).

Contemporary scholars who focus on gender in self-help argue alternatively that rather than a genre populated by empowered women authors and readers, that self-help books offer restrictive, stereotypical portrayals of women. Additionally, scholars posit that the books are often targeted to women and even many of the gender-neutral volumes appeal to typically female concerns and responsibilities, thereby signaling a female audience (Hochschild 1994; Grodin 1991; Kaminer 1991; Simonds 1992). Lesile Irvine (1999, 40) questions the assumption that a female audience can be assumed through textual analysis. Wendy Simonds' *Women and Self-help Culture* (1992) is perhaps the most extensive gender analysis of self-help books; her book interrogates the texts, as well as authors and readers. Simonds' argues that self-help consumption is a way in which women “learn gender,” or as she puts it, that “it all came back to reinforcing or challenging the way gender plays itself out in our lives and the ways in which we learn to play it” (1992, 215). This has both positive and negative connotations. While the books “confirm the strength women evince in caring; indeed, women-authored self-help may serve as an example of this sort of woman-to-woman (or women-to-women) care,” they may also direct women to care too much (214).

Hochschild employs Weber's theory that Protestant philosophy was co-opted by capitalism in making her argument that feminism has been co-opted by “advice literature” (defined as such because Hochschild notes the misnomer implied by a literature that offers advice from experts to individuals, yet is called self-help). She draws upon Giddens' notion of the waning import of traditional spheres of authority: “...while the counsel of parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, ministers, priests and rabbis holds relatively less weight than it would have a century ago, that of professional therapists, television talk show hosts, radio commentators, video producers, magazine and advice book authors assumes relatively more weight (Hochschild 1994, 2). Given that they are invested with this authority, Hochschild is primarily concerned with what self-help authors do with it. She claims that the literature glorifies detachment, the inner and outer life of the individual becomes paramount, while the connection between the individual and the social is depreciated. Women are encouraged to depend on and need less from anyone else. “The ideal self doesn't need much, and what it does need it can get for itself” (Hochschild 1994, 15).

<sup>57</sup> It is due to the focus on the individual that critics (Bellah, Lears, etc.) argue that the “therapeutic ethos” denies social, external realities. This has been a tremendously persuasive line of criticism in many regards save one, that rhetoric of the individual is itself a social, external force.

*Best Friend*, was penned by married couple and psychologists Mildred Newman and Bernard Berkowitz (Korda 2001). Following close on its heels was Jerry Greenwald's *Be the Person You Were Meant to Be* (1973).<sup>58</sup> By the Reagan era, and the economic boom of the 80s it is said to have spawned, books like *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies* (Peters & Waterman 1982), along with a plethora of diet books, crowded out psychologically or spiritually-oriented texts. Shifting social concerns aside, self-help has consistently been characterized as a shallow, decidedly low-culture genre, and that characterization continued through the 1990s. "It's the Rodney Dangerfield of publishing – it's popular, but it gets no respect" (McGinn 2000). The tone of press articles on the "self-help phenomenon" tended towards disparaging and trivializing. Self-help books held a paradoxical and uneasy position within our society; the ideas they promoted (such as perception shapes reality and the need for self-reliance) were often taken as fact when articulated in other venues, while the books themselves, if not packed with lies, were degraded as overly simplistic appeals to our desire for easy answers.

In answer to the question of why people search out self-help, the gurus of today told the same story that Max Weber invoked to account for the 'disenchantment' of the modern era, and that George Beard told even earlier in *American Nervousness* in the 1880s. Despite seemingly fulfilling lives, many middle class people felt, as *Newsweek* put it, that "something's missing." Gurus and followers alike cited the same forces, those

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<sup>58</sup> Greenwald encouraged his readers to "live a more nourishing, creative and fulfilling life" by viewing change as an internal mandate. Unlike the self-help of Dale Carnegie, according to Greenwald, one did not attempt to control other people or the environment. Happiness stemmed from acceptance of others and the realization that happiness was a "personal choice."

said to necessitate self-help literature since its inception: “The simpler world of yesteryear – lasting marriages, clear-cut career paths and rock-solid religious beliefs – has been replaced by stress, dysfunction, and doubt.” (McGinn 2000, 43-4). This long-repeated explanation for self-help’s popularity, if taken at face value, revealed the genre’s core conservatism as texts designed to quell disquiet.

Despite significant changes, from media industry factors to evolving social ideas of spirituality and biomedical explanations of mental health, the internal mental terrain of the individual remained self-help’s central concern. This chapter tracks the historical development of the power of thought in the self-help genre into the contemporary period. In the last thirty years, religion and psychology grew increasingly interwoven into a hybrid spirituality while scientific, especially biomedical, explanations of reality dwelt alongside psycho-spiritual ones. As in previous generations, the social world, the realm beyond the self, was said to be growing increasingly out of control. Whereas in the past, a steadfast order was sought through connection with the divine or with others, in the contemporary period the internal world of the self became the primary site of struggle and mystery. As the analysis that follows will demonstrate, in the contemporary period the self became self-help’s answer to the quest for truth as well as health and happiness.

### **Reconciling Incompatibility Between Self-Help and Science**

The “negative thinking” self-help books from the 50s – those books that, drawing from popular psychology, encouraged readers to “come to terms with” problems deriving from the past – would continue to gain in popularity through the 60s and 70s. This



popularity paralleled the broad acceptance and multifaceted role of psychology and therapy in culture at the time. Ideas based on Freud – for example, emphasis on early childhood experiences as the source of adult problems or the moment of epiphany when such experiences are remembered – were ubiquitous in the genre. Abraham Maslow’s influential “hierarchy of needs” theory, in which human nature was said to mandate development of the inner self once basic needs were satisfied, scientifically endorsed and encouraged the growing cultural concern with the psyche (Maslow 1971). Carl Rogers called on psychologists to employ a “client-centered” approach to therapy, by providing empathic and nonjudgmental responses to clients; self-help authors readily adopted Roger’s stance as emphatic listeners (Rogers 1959).

While emphasizing concern with the self, psychological theory was not without a social orientation. Health and happiness depended upon communication through self-disclosure, feedback, and sensitive response to the disclosures of others. Misunderstanding and dissatisfaction in relationships were due to a lack of congruence between one’s actions and feelings, poor feedback, and inhibited self-disclosure. The concept of “openness” was central to mending communicative discord. Basing his theory on observation of his patients, psychologist Sidney Jourard said the human being should be open or *transparent*. Jourard (1971) defined growth, a person’s moving toward healthy ways of behaving, as a direct result of openness to the world. The sick person was not willing to experience the world in various ways and was therefore fixed or stagnant. Concepts of openness informed self-help’s depiction of inner and outer selves – the relationship between these two selves frequently being “closed.”

Adapting psychological theory, self-help literature often echoed the popular preoccupation with authoritative institutions of family and state that were said to harmfully stunt or hinder the development of the “true” individual. Whereas guilt was held to be a “useless” emotion when experienced by individuals, blame was readily applied to “guilty” institutions such as the family, business, educational systems, and generally those in power, what Deepak Chopra called the “hypnosis of social conditioning” (1993, 3). Self-help’s interwoven treads of popular psychology were incorporated into the mainstream in such a way as to heighten their appeal, carrying with them associated notions of ease, immediacy, and individuality that differentiated self-help’s “psychology” from that of the practicing psychologist. Popular psychology’s ease and immediacy shared the same allure as positive thinking: perceptual shifts were bestowed with the power to affect real world results quickly and without negative consequences. Often the emphasis during the 60s and since was on human traits defined in psychological terms: insecurity, self-esteem, and lack of confidence, with the primary responsibility for the psyche, despite the guilt and blame leveled at institutional forces, dwelling with the “self-actualizing” individual. The psychoanalyst, like others, could impact the individual, but was not centrally responsible. According to Newman & Berkowitz, “there is so much people have to do for themselves, even with an analyst’s help. One reason analysis sometimes takes so long is the refusal of many people to realize that, at bottom, change is up to them” (Newman and Berkowitz 1971, 79).

Within the scientific realm of sense-making, two predominant approaches to conceptualizing the mental terrain – psychodynamic and biomedical (Luhrmann 2000) – transposed a distinction in psychiatry onto the cultural domain in general and self-help in

particular. As the names suggest, the psychodynamic approach is based on the psychoanalytic tradition of psychology, while the biomedical approach is based on the medical tradition. While psychodynamic models dominated the social discourse during the 60s and 70s, biomedical answers to the questions of what mentally ails us became increasingly prevalent in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the meteoric rise in the prescription of anti-depressants confirmed. As this shift occurred, psychoanalytic methods, which dominated during the mid-century, were lambasted as a school of thought on mental illness that “blames the victim” (Cushman 1995). Within self-help books a tendency grew to belittle the psychodynamic method by defining it as “limited” to “physical reality” (Zukav 1989, 27). For example, *In Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore wrote:

Modern psychologies and therapies often contain an unspoken but clear salvational tone. If you could only learn to be assertive, loving, angry, expressive, contemplative, or thin, they imply, your troubles would be over (Moore 1992, xii).

[...] psychology is a secular science, while care of the soul is a sacred art (Moore 1992, xv).

In *Seat of the Soul* (1989), Gary Zukav distinguished “five-sensory” from “multi-sensory” personalities. In his schema, the “multi-sensory” personality was more evolutionarily advanced, so when Zukav associated psychology with “five sensory” behaviors, he in effect dismissed psychology as a vestigial social practice, no more useful to understanding the human mind than the appendix is to the smooth function of the human body. “Because psychology is based upon the perceptions of the five-sensory personality, it is not able to recognize the soul. It is not able to understand the dynamics that underlie the values and behaviors of the personality (Zukav 1989, 193). This

decrease in the persuasive capacity of psychodynamic arguments did not suggest, however, that the persuasive powers of the scientific sort were absent from self-help books. Instead, biomedical arguments now bolstered positive thinking logic, asserting that physiological change accompanied and was proof of the power of changes in thoughts. As Deepak Chopra wrote, “the line between biology and psychology can’t really be drawn with any certainty.” This is because, “our cells are constantly eavesdropping on our thoughts and being changed by them” (1993, 5).

Both the biomedical and the psychodynamic approaches turned on issues of responsibility and blame: was a person responsible for choices and behaviors or not? When our behaviors stemmed from innate, biological impulses we defined them as beyond our control and therefore not our responsibility, or as Lurhmann put it, “The body is morally innocent” (2000, 8). For people with difficult psychophysiological disorders, defining illness as bodily could liberate the individual from psychiatric guilt and shame, but it can also suggest that they are not in control of their thoughts and actions, those very abilities that define us as human (Lurhmann 2000). A biomedical explanation for personal suffering can prompt a tremendous alleviation of social stigma or self-inflicted blame, or it can mean that the self is biologically substandard and there is nothing to be done about it, rendering the individual powerless. Alternatively, psychodynamic definitions of illness allowed the individual to retain a sense of agency and control, but also carried with them a damning social shame, especially in cases where illness and its attributes remained intractable despite therapy.

This larger debate about the nature and culture of mental illness, which in turn raised questions about treatments, played out in a specific form in self-help books. Self-

help books, while they reflected both psychodynamic and biomedical beliefs about the body and mind, remained overwhelmingly psychoanalytic, with selective enlistment of the biomedical camp's persuasive logic and compelling statistics. According to self-help, control of our lives still remained firmly in the individuals' humanistic mind and the tools needed to enact control were encapsulated in the power of thought. In most cases, the control centered on what was represented as an inescapable, universally applicable truth: responsibility begins and ends with the self; answers are to be found internally, as author Iyanla Vanzant told her readers: "Whether you are in the midst of a divorce, separation, break-up, or a heated argument, the most loving thing you can do for yourself is to avoid the temptation to blame the other person for what you are feeling. It's you! It's you!" (Vanzant, 35). The degree to which some authors would go to deny biomedical explanations while maintaining individual responsibility for health and wellness was put in tragicomic terms by author Louise Hay, "It is my belief that VENEREAL DIS-EASE is almost always sexual guilt. It comes from a feeling, often subconscious. That it is not right to express ourselves sexually" (Hay 1999, 163).

While in the age of managed health care, professional therapeutic treatments of mental health have taken a decidedly biomedical turn, popular therapeutic treatments continued to emphasize psychodynamic approaches that carry with them ideas of the self, rather than drugs or doctors, as the entity with agency. As a consequence of the wider social adoption of biomedical logic in self-literature, that strand of the genre that started with "negative thinking" in the mid-century and blossomed into a wide variety of psychological practices by the 1970s came to occupy a smaller space on the self-help shelf than books that continued to reiterate the positive thinking message.

## **Resolving Positive and Negative Thinking Through “Spirituality”**

Anyone who has paid attention to the news media in recent years will have read or heard that America is one of the planet’s “most religious” nations. And while 62 percent of Americans reported participating in an organized religion, 30 percent without a religious affiliation said they believe in a “Higher Power” (Fuller 2001, 1). The self-help genre, like this 30%, has told an alternative story about beliefs and practices in America by distancing itself from “religion” and embracing “spirituality.”<sup>59</sup>

Self-help’s distance from institutional religion reflected a broad social phenomenon of the last thirty to forty years. Sociological surveys of religious attitudes and behaviors in the U.S. suggested that many Americans felt that the real meaning of religion dwelt not within institutional bounds, but within each individual. Sociologist of religion Wade Clark Roof reported that one survey found over half of the population believe “that churches and synagogues have lost the real spiritual part of religion.” This “real spiritual part” according to one third of the same survey respondents had migrated to the personal realm. They agreed that “people have God within them, so churches aren’t really necessary” (1999, 85). Self-help books attributed moral worth and truth to

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<sup>59</sup> This focus on spirituality was indexed through mechanisms of authorship. While in the 50s authors often emphasized their religious authority as ministers, priests, and rabbis, by the 70s even those authors with an expressly religious message opted instead to emphasize their doctorates (ie. ministers Dr. Robert Schuller and Dr. Wayne Dyer). And while authors of the 1950s, like Fulton Sheen, Joshua Liebman, and Norman Vincent Peale, were mainstream religious men, once spirituality was supposedly divested of traditional religion, authors of all persuasions gained license to write spiritually-focused books. In this way, the transition from religion to spirituality returned self-help to its original roots of authorship, in which lay people comprised the bulk of the authors. Self-help authors of the 80s and 90s now took for granted that readers might not associate with a religious institution.

the inner self. Similarly, concepts of spirituality came to be aligned with the private sphere and the associated moral values of individuality. On the other hand, as Fuller wrote, “the word *religious* came to be connected with the public realm of membership in religious institutions, participation in formal rituals, and adherence to official denominational doctrines” (2001, 5). This trust in the self cultivated an associated willingness to experiment with various practices, a condition that McGuire identified as “particularly apt for late modern societies with their high degrees of pluralism, mobility and temporally limited social ties, communications, and voluntarism” (1997, 7). The shift away from religion was strikingly similar to the one sociologist Peter Berger attributed a generation earlier not to spirituality but to psychology. Noting that transcendental reality, traditionally invested in religion, “[was] now interjected within human consciousness itself. It becomes the other self (the more real, or the healthier, or the more mature self) which is the goal of the psychological quest” (Berger 1965, 40). In an overarching sense, by the 1990s, aspects of psychology and religion had merged into a hybrid concept of spirituality in self-help, increasingly positing transformative power and transcendental wisdom within the inner self. Author Brad Gooch’s notion of “Voice” offered a deeply mystical aspect of the self to which life’s most meaningful questions could be posed, and in response, clear directives were said to be returned. Gooch encouraged the reader to engage in writing activities with the assumption that what would pour forth would be truth. Connection with the “Voice” was accomplished by engaging in the “Procedure,” an exercise in which the reader was directed to sit with paper and two pens (one for the rational self and the other for the oracular Voice). On one side of the paper “you” ask a question and on the other the Voice answers. Gooch

began each of his chapters with one of his questions and his Voice's response, again modeling behavior for readers. Without fail, the mystical missives from the Voice bore out truthfully, lending insight and prompting learning that enhance the rational self, bringing the mystical wisdom of the Voice into the conscious realm. In the process, those past problematic behaviors are reframed, reunderstood, made useful in changing the self.

From the 1880s onward, the self-help genre purportedly reinterpreted the core of Protestantism that each individual can connect with the Divine without the services of a mediating institution to mean that the individual can and should seek happiness, health, and satisfaction on his own terms without communal guidance (Meyer 1965; Braden 1963; Anker 1999b).<sup>60</sup> By the 1990s, the injunction of individuality, of "looking inward for answers," had been fully entrenched in self-help rhetoric for many decades. In some sense, then, the broad social embrace of "spirituality" as the true practice of the inner self avidly affirmed the genre's existing core messages. While the differences between "religion" and "spirituality," as expressed in self-help literature, were various and vague, the clearest distinction seemed, in keeping with the broad sociological trends identified by religious scholars Cimino and Lattin (1998), Fuller (2001), Roof (1999), and Wuthnow (1998), the alignment of religion with institutional power and spirituality with a pan-religious yet simultaneously highly individual and personal practice (which one can learn from reading best-selling books). Despite the adamantly articulated distinctions

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<sup>60</sup> It is noteworthy that the Protestant reformation, rather than truly removing an intervening entity between each individual and the divine, replaced the catholic institution with the bible itself. The *book* then became the means of religious learning and insight, and it is from this tradition that the self-help book stems. (Of course, the books themselves operate as a sort of "communal guidance.")



between spirituality and religiosity, the similarities between the concepts, while rarely explicitly drawn within the pages of self-help books, were plentiful. Both the terms spiritual and religious “connote[d] belief in a Higher Power of some kind. Both also imply a desire to connect, or enter into a more intense relationship, with this Higher Power. And, finally, both connote interest in rituals, practice, and daily moral behaviors that foster such a connection or relationship” (Fuller 2001, 5). Self-help literature, then, curiously dismissed religiosity in favor of spirituality, while in effect endowing the later term with the characteristics of the former.

The ideas of positive thinking as expressed a generation earlier came to be defined as simplistic and mechanistic, but like traditional qualities of “religion,” they worked their way back into the center of the self-help message with rapidity and decisiveness. A good example of this is found in *How to Be Your Own Best Friend* (Newman and Berkowitz 1971). The book was written as a dialogue between the imaginary patient/reader and the therapist/author couple.<sup>61</sup> In response to a statement by

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<sup>61</sup> This dialogic textual device allows the authors to literally put words in the reader’s mouth, something they do quite persuasively by allowing the reader to articulate doubt and to question the validity of the authors’ arguments, to which the authors provide additional persuasive reinforcement. In the next passage, the reader then demonstrates opinion change, adopting the philosophy of the authors. Take the following exchange, for example:

[therapists/authors]: “We diminish ourselves, just in order to push away the chance of choice.” [patient/reader]: “You know, I really find that hard to accept. I mean, feelings are mysterious; they come and go, and most of the time you don’t know why. [...]”

[therapists/authors]: “To feel all that you can feel is to be truly human. But too often people cling to unpleasant feelings; they even court them. Without fully realizing what they are doing, they actually bring them about. They do things that make them feel bad and then they say, ‘I couldn’t help myself.’ What most people mean when they say that is ‘I didn’t help myself.’ But we can all help ourselves.” [patient/reader]: “Can we really? That’s an exciting and lovely

the therapist/authors, the “patient/reader” remarked derogatively, “That sounds like positive thinking, perhaps with a bit of Coué thrown in. ‘Every day I’m getting better and better’: that kind of pep talk [...] has done more harm than good” (1971, 42). The authors acknowledged the reader’s concern by saying that positive thinking “goes too far” and offered that “You do need determination, but good things don’t come out of forcing yourself”(43). But a mere three sentences later, in the same paragraph, they wrote, “Real growth can only come from within. You need to learn to work with yourself, to use your will power on the side of yourself” (43), a statement that sounds like it could easily have come from any number of “positive thinking” texts from the 1950s. Positive thinking, then, while unnamed, remained central to the contemporary self-help message.

Robert Schuller, author of some 20 psycho-religious books with snappy titles like *Peace of Mind through Possibility Thinking* (1977) and *Tough Times Never Last But Tough People Do* (1983) extended the positive thinking message through the 70s and 80s in a way that closely resembled Norman Vincent Peale (Meyer 1965, 370).<sup>62</sup> He

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thought. I would like to hold on to that. How can we do it?” (Newman and Berkowitz 1971, 24-25).

<sup>62</sup> Like Peale, Schuller is a Protestant minister who used mass media and advertising to draw huge crowds and enormous sums of money, which went to building his “Crystal Cathedral” in southern California. His first gathering place was considerably more humble, a drive-in theater which he advertised as using the slogan “come as you are” (<http://www.crystalcathedral.org/about/aboutrhs.html>, Anker2, 148). He began the 70s craze for self-help seminars and in January 1970 began broadcasting one of the longest running televangelism series, *The Hour of Power*, still aired today (Neuendorf & Ableman, 1987: 41-59). On television, Schuller’s traditional self-help ideology was made shiny and new on *The Hour of Power* in the reflected glow of Hollywood stars, executives, religious figures, and politicians who were his “guests.” Again like Peale, during the height of his influence, Schuller garnered much negative media attention. An article by John M. Mulder in the Princeton Theological Seminary’s *Theology Today*

expressed the idea that what we think becomes reality by using the slightly amended term “possibility thinking”.<sup>63</sup> Like traditional positive thinkers, Schuller fixated on the concept of “choice” as the pivot leading either to health and wellness, or illness and self-destruction. In *The Be Happy Attitudes*, Schuller attempted to counter a criticism directed at Peale’s positive thinking message that positive thinking denied social reality. In the 70s and early 80s, Schuller attempted to counter this criticism with his last “be happy attitude:” “I can choose to be happy – anyway!” (196). In this final chapter, Schuller suggested that, like Jesus, possibility thinkers may experience persecution: “You can be happy, too, even if you are the innocent victim of authentic injustice, insult, injury, discrimination, or oppression” (198). In Schuller’s construction, the possibility thinker was not only a self-fulfilling individual, but also a martyr. Any negative response to others to one’s possibility thinking message simply confirmed the message’s truth, in essence making possibility thinking “unfalsifiable”.

Schuller represented an “old school” positive thinker, one who did not shrink from an overtly religious orientation, an “attitude” that placed him in the distinct minority among contemporary psycho-religious authors with a positive thinking message. Representing a more ubiquitous approach, Louise L. Hay, a best selling author of the 1980s who today runs the influential self-help publishing company, Hay House, peddled a positive thinking message under the new and increasingly persuasive rubric of spirituality as opposed to religion. The first sentence of Hay’s *You Can Heal Your Life*

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denied Schuller’s was a religious message, calling it merely “a belief in the efficacy of belief.”

<sup>63</sup> His son, Robert A. Schuller, touted on the website as “Dr. Schuller’s successor at the Cathedral”, has himself started a movement, “possibility living.”

read “What we think about ourselves becomes the truth for us” (13), a sentiment that could have easily been taken from Phineas P. Quimby’s writing of the 1860s. Contemporary spirituality was frequently expressed in terms of an endless cycle of movement and flow, of interconnection among all things, much like the concept of ‘influx’ that pervaded New Thought self-help books. “There is no beginning and no end, only a constant cycling and recycling of substance and experiences. [...] I am one with the very Power that created me, and this Power has given me the power to create my own circumstances” (Hay 1999 [1984], 11). Hay was representative of contemporary self-help in that she surrounded the New Thought/Positive Thinking core of her message with elements drawn from psychology, “negative thinking,” and eastern philosophy. Emphasis on childhood experience represented vestiges of popular psychology in Hay’s texts (Hay 1984, 15). Similarly, her focus on reincarnation (never named as such) pointed to her incorporation of Buddhist beliefs (17). Still, always circling back to that positive thinking foundation, Hay’s spirituality held that “what we think about ourselves becomes the truth for us” (13).

The following extended quotation from *You Can Heal Your Life* demonstrated Hay’s spirituality as it integrated positive and negative thinking in a sort of two pronged process, beginning with the acknowledgement of past hurts (negative thinking) and concluding with a reiteration of the idea that our thoughts produce our reality (positive thinking). In her chapter, “What is the Problem?” Hay described the process she used when first “working with” her patients/clients. Having listed a series of problems – health, relationships, finances – Hay then asked her clients to define all they should do to

improve their lives. This list of “shoulds” was in turn used to identify those psychological strands of the past that were infecting the present. Hay stated:

We often find they [clients] have been berating themselves for years for something they never wanted to do in the first place. Or they have been criticizing themselves for not doing something when it was never their idea to begin with. Often it was just something that someone else said they “should” do. When they can see that [moment of epiphany], they can just drop it from the “should list.” What a relief that is.

[...]

What is there on your “should list” that could be dropped with a sense of relief? By the time we have gone through this short list, they are beginning to look at their life in a new and different way. They notice that many of the things they thought they ‘should’ do are things they never wanted to do, and they were only trying to please other people. So many times it is because they are afraid or feel that are not good enough.

The problem has now begun to shift. I have started the process of releasing the feeling of ‘being wrong’ because they are not fitting someone else’s standards. Next I begin to explain to them my philosophy of life as I did in Chapter 1. I believe life is really very simple. What we give out, we get back. The Universe totally supports every thought we choose to think and to believe. When we are little, we learn how to feel about ourselves and about life by the reactions of the adults around us. Whatever these beliefs are, they will be re-created as experiences as we grow up. However, we are only dealing with thought patterns, and the point of power is always in the present moment. Changes can begin in this moment (1999 [1984], 31).

This passage, ordinary and representative in many ways, revealed Hay’s quintessential repetitiveness and the ways in which readers were invited to envision their life stories by conforming to the model offered in the text. The textual portrayal of thought as both intensely powerful and simultaneously diminished as “only thought patterns” was similarly characteristic. Thoughts, when suppressed or misrepresentative of the “true self’s” desires, had tremendous capacity to thwart health and happiness. Just as readily, when the deep, inner truths of the self were communicated successfully, “relief” was immediate. After accomplishing this release from the past, Hay introduced her readers to “her” philosophy of positive thinking. Blame for past hurts was attributed

to “other people,” an implication that had the clients successfully communicated with the self, rather than having been distracted by the white noise of others, the problems would never have materialized in the first place. Having briefly acknowledged the source of problems, readers were instructed to leave them behind and adopt a positive thinking stance towards reality.

Similarly, author Wayne Dyer’s *Real Magic* was decidedly representative of the rhetorical stance towards divinity and the mechanisms of thought in self-help during the 1990s. The first of Dyer’s “seven beliefs for manifesting real magic” was “there is an invisible but knowable life force within you” (1992, 20). Readers were told to “trust totally” in this force that is given the same powers as “God” was in earlier self-help. Dyer conveyed his ecumenical orientation when he quoted from Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Confucianism and Sufism to illustrate that they share the same “message” (33). As had become requisite, Dyer provided scientific evidence of the relationship between the physical and spiritual worlds by quoting Robert Herman, executive director of American Scientific Affiliation (ASA) (30). Searching the ASA’s website soon revealed their creationist mission ([www.asa3.org/ASA/faithASA.html](http://www.asa3.org/ASA/faithASA.html)).

Given that author Deepak Chopra, a medical doctor, peppered his text with scientific evidence and based his philosophy of health and happiness upon quantum physics, it would be a safe assumption that his contributions to the genre during the 1990s would be discussed under the rubric of the biomedical model of self-help. Chopra’s scientific veneer was not as easily scratched as Dyer’s. In *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind* (1993), a book that ranked fifth after books by Rush Limbaugh, Howard Stern, and Jerry Seinfeld on the best seller list of 1993, Chopra cited study after study and offered detailed

explanations of cellular functions. Still, at heart his message, that “we literally create ourselves out of words” (138), mimicked that of New Thought and Positive Thinking and followed from a fundamentally religious or spiritual tradition. He employed the more socially resonant explanatory mechanism, that of biology and physics, to argue that “words and images function just as well as ‘real’ molecules to trigger the ongoing process of life” (137), but fundamentally all life stemmed from “a universal body,” “a universal mind,” an “intelligence that governs the whole cosmos” (6). The word “God” appeared nowhere in this text, but Chopra’s concept of a universal, positive force with which all creatures are connected bore a strikingly resemblance to “God” as defined in self-help books from the 1890s and 1950s. So too did Chopra’s conception of the individual, as fundamentally responsible for itself, as requiring balance and exercising choice echoed earlier ideas of selfhood.

Like his New Thought and Positive Thinking predecessors, Chopra argued that “the hypnosis of social conditioning [induces a] fiction in which we have collectively agreed to participate” (3). Readers needed to abandon this social fiction, discarding ten assumptions that are arguably the basis of sense-making in the contemporary world. The first of these assumptions, based upon rationality, objectivity, and falsifiability, read:

**There is an objective world independent of the observer, and our bodies are an aspect of this objective world (4).**

Chopra asked readers to replace this “old paradigm” with the following “new” one, “a more complete and expanded version of the truth”:

**The physical world, including our bodies, is a response of the observer. We create our bodies as we create the experience of our world (5).**

Within this construction, in which once again the individual made his reality, the goal implicitly remained one of positive thinking. The all-powerful individual thought reality into being. For Chopra, thought was defined in terms of “unity,” “The highest state of consciousness available to us is unity, which erases the distinction between observer and observed” (325). As in the past, the most vaunted and valued mental state was one in which there was “no jar,” as Phineas Quimby put it in the 1860s.

With the growing focus on spirituality, self-help books more often iterated a conception of the self as soul. For Thomas Moore in *Care of the Soul*, the soul was the link between disparate, unknowing parts of the self, “in the middle, holding together mind and body, ideas and life, spirituality and the world” (1992, xiv). Moore described the work of the 15<sup>th</sup> century priest and his responsibility of “*cura animarum*, the cure of souls.” Today, Moore located that responsibility within each individual: “we can be the curates or curators of our own souls, an idea that implies an inner priesthood and a personal religion” (xv). The soul replaced the divine and the community as the mediator.

As with the shift in the scientific realm from an emphasis on psychodynamic to biomedical arguments, the transition within the religious realm to spiritual arguments allowed the self-help genre to wed previously discordant concepts. Popular psychological explanatory mechanisms no longer were considered oppositional to positive thinking, in which what we think constructs reality. In both the scientific and spiritual spheres, the self, especially its inner dimension, came to be the source of knowledge and healing. Recognizing past hurts while visualizing wellness allowed the previously conflicting ideas of positive and negative thinking to “holistically” coexist. The temporal dimension in this new thought structure was key, with negativity and pain



dwelling in the past and positivity and hope living in the present and future. The body, in responding physically or biomedically to positive thinking, scientifically demonstrated innate knowledge. With the self endowed with such power of thought, institutional forces were said to be less influential in the construction of health and happiness.

Cimino and Lattin projected that this power differential would increase in the years to come. “In the new millennium, there will be a growing gap between personal spirituality and religious institutions” (1998, 11). Left unacknowledged in this characterization of the simultaneous decline of religious institutional power and rise of personal, autonomous spirituality was that media institutions had at least in part replaced religious institutions as sources of knowledge about health and happiness.

### **Bulletpoint Spirituality: Self-Help in the Age of Interactivity, Branding, Segmentation and Targeting**

Along with “convergence,” interactivity was one of the most popular buzzwords associated with “new media” during the 1990s. The term was usually applied to the technological ability of a medium or application to integrate the responses of the user (McQuail 2000, 481). Interactive media – especially on-line chats, cd-roms, and video games – allowed for choice and response by users. In an age of ample hypothesizing about new media, it remained unclear to what degree interactivity might change the way people interacted with media, and it therefore required that media theories be reassessed in light of new technologies. Beyond shopping and banking on-line, interactivity as theoretically developed by communication scholars was hypothesized as more than a technological achievement; the term also implied a human, conversational dimension of

ongoing exchange (Reeves and Nass 1996, 251). Related theories of the audience assumed that an interactive audience was capable of selecting, interpreting and constructing preferred meanings (Fiske 1989; Grodin 1991; Morley 1993; Press 1991).

Self-help, as a product of mass media institutions, responded to both the generic focus on spirituality and self, and to changes and pressures within media institutions, by becoming increasingly “interactive.” The genre had long been conversational in tone, but over time, the texts increasingly engaged readers in activities and “workshop sessions,” often encouraging readers to write within the text itself. Sarah Ban Breathnach’s workbook that accompanied her *Simple Abundance* encouraged readers to write passages much like those found in her text (1995). Opposite the contents page of John Gray’s *Men are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, in bold print, the reader saw: **READ YOUR STORY IN JOHN GRAY’S NEXT BOOK!** Gray invites “his readers to participate by sharing their own stories.” In this way, before fully entering the text, the reader was encouraged to imagine her life stories as interwoven with the stories in text.<sup>64</sup> There was a porousness to this form of storytelling, a sense of never-ending seepage from one story to the next. Readers who preferred older technologies were directed to call 888-MARSVENUS to make purchases or for “telephone coaching.” In addition to suggesting a sort of conversational interactivity, Gray’s multimedia industry represented

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<sup>64</sup> Further breaking down the distinction between passive audience and active participant, readers were encouraged to attend Gray’s lectures and visit his website. On the website, the reader encountered the store, which sold books, cds, cassettes, games, and videos, as well as Gray’s calendar, including lecture schedule, radio and television appearances. In addition to much to read, reader/participants were asked to respond to a series of questions and respond to the comments of others.

**additional signature characteristics of media in the contemporary era, branding and targeting.**

**Branding, targeting, and segmentation were distinct, but often interrelated, marketing practices of self-help books during the 1980s and 90s. In an era of over-supply, as the tremendous plethora of self-help books confirmed, the primary mechanism by which publishers attempted to garner “market share” was through branding. The concept of branding was based upon the assumption that in a huge and bewildering sea of consumer goods, audiences gravitated toward the known and recognizably branded product. By making a product that audiences have come to know and love, marketers expected that an existing audience would respond favorably to a similar product. Within the self-help industry this not only insured that a seemingly infinite number of similar books lined the shelves, but also that a popular author or theme was offered in every available medium: audiotape, videotape, CD-ROM, on-line, etc. Similarly, fragmentation, or the dispersal of the same amount of audience attention over more and more media sources, could be seen as having encouraged self-help producers to place their branded message on multiple sources and channels. Branding in the book trade was marked by memorable titles (like advertising jingles), promotable authors who went on extensive book and lecture tours, and “line extensions,” other books and products that derived from the original (Buzzard 2002, 95). Branding supposedly supplied the consumer with convenience and familiarity. In addition, scholars have argued that consumers derived a sense of self through affiliation with particular products. During the 80s and 90s, how-to guides, like the popular and populous *Dummy* and *Idiot* series,**

mushroomed. In the psycho-religious subgenre, scores of branded authors developed extremely lucrative businesses. The market research firm, Marketdata, reported incomes of over \$80 million annually for both Steven Covey's and Anthony Robbin's companies (2001).

In the late 1990s one of the most successful self-help brands was the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series. Authors Canfield and Hansen published their first book in the series in 1993. By 1998, of the nine trade paperback of the year to sell over one million copies, five were Chicken Soup books (Rotella 1999, 638). A constant stream of cds, toys, games, t-shirts, and calendars accompanied this success. At last count on the series' website ([www.chickensoup.com](http://www.chickensoup.com)), the duo had released 53 books, ranging from *Chicken Soup for the... Baseball Soul* and *Jewish Soul* to *Prisoner's Soul* and *Gardener's Soul*. And the types of selves (or souls) in need of sustenance had far from been depleted. Another 45 titles were listed as upcoming. How were two authors capable of such tremendous productivity? Using the same interactive technique as Gray, they turned their readers into their writers. Website visitors were encouraged to post their stories, conforming to the needs of those upcoming 45 titles. For example, those readers interested in contributing to the impending *Chicken Soup for the Working Woman's Soul* were given the following directives:

From hurdling laundry piles to settling sibling disputes in the midst of important meetings, working women everywhere can relate to the many hats she may be required to wear from day to day. We would love to include some of your inspiring, enlightening and heart-touching stories of women you may know or may be in the workplace.

Chapters include:

1. Balancing Family and Work

2. Working at Home
3. Breaking the Glass Ceiling
4. Making a Difference
5. Friends and Mentors
6. Networking
7. Pioneers and Trailblazers
8. Living Your Dream
9. Special Moments
10. Overcoming Obstacles

Please e-mail submissions directly to:

[chickensoup@cox.net](mailto:chickensoup@cox.net)

► Subject: Working Woman's Soul

We highly recommended that you submit the story as a Microsoft Word™ attachment.

Story submission deadline has been extended to September 30, 2002 Check out the web site for story guidelines and the submission process at: [www.singleparentsoul.com](http://www.singleparentsoul.com).

In effect, the chicken soup series acted as a clearinghouse for stories, picking those that conformed to the series formula. What was striking was that so many of these books became bestsellers, despite their targeted nature. In 2000, eight *Soul* books sold over 500,000, making them by definition bestselling books according to the *Bowker's Annual*, suggesting that not only college students were reading ...*for the College Soul* and not only preteens were reading ...*for the Preteen Soul*.

As the Chicken Soup series demonstrated, in more recent years as the self-help book market boomed, books were targeted to and read by specific demo- and psychographic groups. While these books may be very popular within a targeted population, given the relatively small size of the target audience, they do not reach the astronomical sales of "general" titles such as Gray's *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, or Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Regardless of their targeted nature, demographically tailored texts did not deviate markedly from self-help's core

messages about how thought worked to promote health and happiness. Targeting both responded to and encouraged market segmentation, the notion that audiences diversified as a result of channel multiplication and specialization into smaller and more homogenous groups (Turow 1997a). With the growing acknowledgement in the late 1980s and early 1990s that identity affiliations had great bearing on one's social status, in economic realms, marketers came to see the appeal that targeted products had for many consumers and avidly worked to cultivate an even greater demand for material items that spoke to and through identity.

Iyanla Vanzant, a best-selling Simon and Schuster's author, was one of only a handful (along with Steven King, Jackie Collins and Frank McCourt) touted on the company's web site in 1999. Throughout the 90s, her books landed on the *New York Times* bestseller list repeatedly. In the contemporary media marketplace, dubbed "the undisputed superstar" of inspirational literature by *Ebony* (Starling 1998), Iyanla Vanzant became a "brand" targeted toward African American women, replete with books, audio and video tapes, and a busy lecture and workshop schedule. During the fall of 1999, she appeared biweekly on *Oprah* (Maryles 1999) and subsequently launched her own, albeit short-lived, television talk show, *Iyanla*. Despite the fact that the targeted construction of Vanzant was not explicitly stated, Vanzant titles are likely to be found at the bookstore's "of African-American interest" section. Her books made scant mention of race, but the surrounding discourse did. Take, for example, this quote, the lead paragraph on Simon and Schuster's Vanzant webpage, situated next to her photograph:

Imagine a neglected, over-weight, sexually abused child who is shuttled from one family member to another, from one home to the next. Think of a teenage mother on welfare, living in the projects of a major urban city; or an abused and battered

wife. Lawyer, best-selling author and nationally recognized and successful speaker are probably not the things that come to mind. But Iyanla defies stereotypes.

This passage enlisted the self-help trope of the author who had used her own philosophy to create personal change; the author's life story served as a sort of "living proof" and as a promise that self-help readers could accomplish similar transformations. While Vanzant's race is not explicitly mentioned, the invocation of urban poverty is unfortunately and stereotypically suggestive. In branding and targeting alike, considerable effort was dedicated to the construction of the authors' identities in the surrounding discourse of magazine interviews, reviews, and promotional materials.

The tremendous proliferation of self-help books, the myriad sub-genres of all sorts, might have suggested that the genre's construction of selfhood had become similarly specialized and segmented. And indeed, we did seem to have many more aspects of self, many more specific problems of self, than previous generations. Despite interactivity, segmentation, branding, and targeting, the books, regardless of the authors' identities or those of the suggested readers, had similar fundamental messages about what makes for a meaningful life led by a good person, a finding that makes sense given that the books, cut from the same cloth, share formulaic and generic qualities.

As already discussed, ideas of spirituality in contemporary self-help had evolved to incorporate both psychological and religious ideas. Not only did this new concept unite previously disparate ones, but it also initiated a new narrative form in the genre, one, like interactivity more generally, that attempted to involve the reader as participant while accommodating the reader's divided attentions among myriad media outlets and subsequent desire for "streamlined" information. The "bulletpoint," that style of

presentation that typified the business world of the 1990s and its penchant for “brevity” and “getting to the point”, had proved similarly popular among contemporary self-help authors. “Bulletpoint spirituality,” a marriage of form and content, went beyond the generic conventions of the 1950s, like John Schindler’s in *How to Live 365 Days a Year*, in which he offered chapter summaries “in a nutshell” (1954, 30), or his lists, like the seven qualities of maturity (81). In the 1990s, complex, disparate concepts appeared simple by shrinking them into condensed form. The use of narrative in self-help had long allowed authors to simplify and personalize large and complex issues, a process referred to as metonymy or metonymization. “Metonymy occurs when something complex is reduced to a more manageable sign of the complex thing, as when the complexities of British government are reduced into public figures of the Prime Minister, or of the reigning monarch” (Brummett 158). In the case of “bulletpoint spirituality,” disparate concepts such as negative and positive thinking became compatible. Broadly defined, the concept of “thought” functions metonymically, taking complex and opaque communication processes and rendering them easily stated and understood.

For instance, in the first “awareness exercise” of his book targeted to gay men, author Brad Gooch, asked readers to “Write down a list of your own neurotic patterns.” Beyond the assumption that readers are able to identify their “neuroses,” in case readers had trouble engaging in interactive list-making, Gooch provided a few of his own. For example, “I’m sometimes drawn to people who seem at first capable of making my life easier” (36). Gooch’s imperative that readers construct a similar list suggested that the exercise of writing, a sort of intra-communication, would result in clarity and control of “neurotic patterns.” Intra-communication as modeled in self-help served a social



function. A bulletpoint template “shepherded” the user “toward a staccato, summarizing frame of mind” (Parker 2001, 76), one that might be quite satisfying, applying a formatted structure to the most opaque aspects of the self. Clifford Nass of Stanford University’s communication department argued that the bulletpoint form “gives you the outcome, but it removed the process” (Parker 2001, 87). This is precisely the direction in which self-help’s ideas about the power of thought had been moving since the genre’s inception, with a focus on the “outcome” (health, wealth, happiness, connection with self, others and the divine) without clear explication of the “process” (what is said and done to reach that outcome). This absence, or opacity, that bulletpoint spirituality constructs is made more clear through the analysis of the genre’s definitions of thought which follows.

### **Contemporary Self-Help’s Notions of Thought and Communication**

The previous sections on science, religion and media, as they related to self-help’s depictions of the spiritual model of thought, have already engaged many issues of communication in contemporary self-help texts. In this section, more explicit attention is paid to generic constructions of the self, messages, and effects. Continuing the trajectory set in motion in the 1880s, contemporary psycho-religious self-help books still first and foremost focused on transformative thought. Notions of how to account for transformation, however, as the preceding pages have argued, changed over time. In addition to thinking of communication in self-help as it related to ideas of positive and negative thinking, scientific and religious belief systems, how the self was defined and positioned in the surrounding social environment, with whom the self was

communicating, and how power was said to function in communication were questions that continued to dominate the genre. In the earliest self-help books, the individual who was able to bring her thoughts to mirror those of the divine would be rewarded with health and happiness. Half a century later, health and happiness were not as clearly dependent upon the coherence of the individual and the divine. Rather, the reader of self-help books was encouraged to focus on her desires, repeatedly thinking about their attainment despite the lack of a clear textual portrayal of with whom she was communicating. A belief simply in one's deserving status was posited as sufficient. By thinking actively and positively about qualities of health and wellness themselves, those qualities would be made manifest in the body. Desire for health and happiness, so straightforwardly constructed in the 1950s, became troubled by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Previously, the identification of desires as textually constructed was immediate, requiring no effort, but today, a sense of confusion, deriving from a lack of self-understanding, was posited as the initial problem that the individual needed to address. All along, the genre iterated the injunction: know yourself. Instead of looking to ideas of God for self-knowledge as the books for the 1890s did, or simply leaving that question opaque as the literature of the 50s did, the individual now was told that not only all problems, but also all answers, derived from the personal interior. That interior was shrouded in mystery, unique to each individual, and potentially knowable only to that individual, as John Bradshaw wrote in *Homecoming*, "every person has his own unique map of the world, an inner belief system that is unconscious" (Bradshaw 1990, xiii).<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Importantly, for Bradshaw, as for other authors of the "recovery movement," the most informative aspect of this individualistic worldview is "woundedness." The statement

This uniquely constructed reality was said to provide a particular power, "You are the only person who thinking in your mind! You are the power and authority in your world!" (Hay 1984, 55). However, our inability to communicate with the personal interior, and the ideas that populate that interior, were fundamentally responsible for ill health. The project was a continuous quest to learn the language of this personal interior. For example, Newman and Berkowitz argued that we each develop individual, vague, and unarticulated "theories" by which we make sense of the world, but we "don't even know we have them" (1971, 48). And yet "they deal with the most powerful and problematic forces in human life, like sex and aggression, which most families find *too formidable to discuss*. So we develop complex ideas about the nature of reality, which *we never communicate*, and never examine" (48-49, emphasis added). These unarticulated ideas in a sense refuse to go unheard. According to Newman and Berkowitz, "when we think we're responding to actual people and events, we're merely assigning parts in the inner novel we've been writing all our lives" (49). To correct this perceptual problem, readers were asked to forgive anyone, including themselves, who had hurt them, to make a communicative gesture of reconciliation. Healing "lies in letting go, in giving up your grievances" (Newman & Berkowitz 1971, 52).

Consequently, of those best selling books focused on general health and wellness, the central tasks were said to occur within the self. This self was frequently defined as composed of various, often conflicting, parts in need of reconciliation, with thought posited as the mechanism of reconciliation. Relationships between the self and beyond

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quoted above, "every person has his own unique map of the world, an inner belief system that is unconscious, is followed shortly by, "it is the wounded inner child who forms the core belief system" (1990, xiii).

(either a greater entity no longer defined as God or other people) were similarly said to be in a internal, mental state of disjunction, but this was of secondary concern, as were the problems between the self and others. This greater entity – a universal order, a beneficent power – grew increasingly opaque, while emphasis on and articulation of the individual self became increasingly vivid, multifaceted, and imperative. The genre continued to exhibit its ambiguous orientation toward the influence of the social world on the individual, while fundamentally and resolutely emphasizing the individual as both the primary and conclusive entity with which to commune. Specifically, the mechanistic action of thought as a restorative, healing practice was very rarely explicitly defined. Like other forms of religious belief, faith was required.

The self-help injunction to “know yourself” echoed familiar, commonsense notions, but as comparative anthropology suggested, Western ideas of the self were not universal nor inherently natural.<sup>66</sup> As a starting place, the characterization of the self as a various, multifaceted entity that engaged in intra-communication was particularly powerful in contemporary self-help literature. Most often within the genre, the goal was to bring these disparate pieces of the self into conversation, mutual understanding, and harmonious accord.<sup>67</sup> The work of the self and of connecting with others universally

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<sup>66</sup> See for example, Scheper-Hughes and Lock’s (1987) useful literature review on anthropology of the “self” or Abu-Lughod and Lutz’s (1990) cross-cultural analysis of emotion.

<sup>67</sup> There are numerous examples of various ways in which the self is categorized into pieces. For Brad Gooch, author of *The Boyfriend Within*, a self-help book targeted to gay men, the self is a tripartite entity consisting of 1) an unnamed, rational self who is charged with connecting and courting the other aspects of self, 2) a, deep, mystical, all-knowing self (“The Voice”), and 3), a composite character of who you are now and would like to be in the future, the latent, uncultivated self, “perhaps including those qualities that you would like to find externally manifested in another person” (“The

addressed the need to navigate the social sphere, an activity that often centered on negotiating for control. In contemporary self-help books, the reader was often encouraged to operate under the guise of control by prioritizing communicative work, focusing first on the self, hypothetically the realm over which we maintain most control, before working on relationships with others.

You must also learn to talk to yourself. That's very important. You need to explain things, to reassure yourself. You need to establish an on-going dialogue. It can help you through all kinds of tough situations. When the child in you is up to mischief, you can stop and discuss it first; you can tell him "no." There is usually a moment when it could go either way. If you pay attention, you can take that moment and consider what you really want to do. You have the power to stop yourself; this is a good thing to know. At first it's hard, but it gets easier (Newman & Berkowitz, 86).

While self-help books did not suggest it was possible to have a one dimensional self, they did position the self in conflict, as struggling to bring the unconscious, child-like, recalcitrant, or silent aspects of the self under the control of its conscious, adult, communicating aspects. Echoing Freud's individual at war with himself (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 11), the books offered a normative judgment by which the greater the degree of positive exchanges between the more rational, conscious, ego self and the emotional, irrational, unconscious self, the more healthy, integrated, and unified a person was said to be. This idea of multiple aspects of self, which perhaps were activated under particular environmental conditions, echoed longstanding ideas of self as a composite entity. But rather than domination, the goal of self-help from 1880 through 1950, the goal had become divination. Similar to the theme of integration or unification,

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Boyfriend Within") (1999). Speaking of the Boyfriend Within, Gooch says "...you can be sure of one thing: He's also part of you. He's your chance to become more comfortable with uncharted territory that's been inside you all along. He's there to help you rewire yourself. (60).

notions of balance and equilibrium pervaded contemporary notions of self-help. For example, author Vanzant's concept of "meantime" suggested effort and time spent on reaching equilibrium. Reading her book, *In the Meantime*, was said to be an activity that restored balance. For Dyer, "The lesson of this book is very simple – you are capable of achieving perfect equilibrium of the mind" (Dyer 1992, xv).

An inescapable, universally applicable truth of this emphasis on the self was that responsibility began and ended with the self. Answers were to be found internally. Outward manifestations of well being (a relationship, a good job) flowed from the font of internal well being; they were the material rewards of successful, intra-communication. Conversely, hard times were due solely to a poor thinking and an inadequately unified self:

Whether you are in the midst of a divorce, separation, break-up, or a heated argument, the most loving thing you can do for yourself is to avoid the temptation to blame the other person for what you are feeling. It's you! It's you! (Vanzant 1998, 35).

Like earlier generations of self-help books, contemporary books contained many stories of mental failures, tales of warning to readers. Just as thought was the universal palliative, it was also the sole source of illness. In contemporary self-help, rather than ungodly thoughts, what made one ill was the unsaid. And with this came a contemporary obligation to express the unexpressed. Bestselling author John Bradshaw said, "We are as sick as our secrets" (1988, 204). To relieve ourselves of sickness, according to contemporary self-help philosophy (as it borrows from popular psychology), readers needed to relive and rearticulate the moments during which interactive thought failed.

Reliving those thwarted moments was said to provide readers with the opportunity to speak what had been unspoken, thus allowing healing to take place.

Contemporary self-help offered readers conflicting messages about the formative influence that the social world beyond the self could play in their lives.<sup>68</sup> In keeping with the 1970s rhetoric of “doing your own thing” and “letting it all hang out,” Newman and Berkowitz claimed that the thoughts and actions of the individual had little impact on the world beyond them. “What you achieve doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. Whatever you do, the world will continue to go about its business” (Newman and Berkowitz 1971, 60). But this was not a reciprocal relationship in which the world similarly had little impact on the individual. For “recovery” writers, depending on the social world for guidance was a source of sickness: “In all of the above examples we find people who are dependent on something outside of themselves in order to have an identity. These are examples of the dis-ease of co-dependence” (Bradshaw 1990, 9). For

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<sup>68</sup> In general in this dissertation, the research has not incorporated books specifically about gender relations between men and women, opting instead to glean broad and general self-help ideas about communication and selfhood, but the extraordinary success and pervasiveness of John Gray’s *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, five consecutive years on the bestseller lists, demands attention, especially as it speaks more actively of social interaction and interpersonal communication, those aspects of communication frequently neglected in general psycho-religious self-help. What this diversion into a more targeted and specific book reveals is that “communication” retains the form in which general self-help casts it. “Communication” preserves its dual propensity and power for health and illness. Gray writes that, “only when we do not understand one another is there tension, resentment, or conflict (5), thereby defining the source of the problem as communicative. In turn, he names communication as cure when he says, “with this new awareness of our difference [he and his wife] were able to *improve dramatically our communication* and enjoy each other more (3, emphasis added). Similarly, Gray’s communication, continuing in the positive thinking tradition, is associated with immediacy and ease. Notions of selfhood while divided by gender, are still universal, with all women and all men characterized as fundamentally the same.

authors in the positive thinking tradition, like Deepak Chopra, the ideas of the social, accepted as fact but fundamentally flawed, distracted the individual from what was real, true, and good (1993, 1). “The unseen world is the real world, and when we are willing to explore the unseen levels of your bodies, we can tap in to the immense creative power that lies at our source” (10).

This conception of the social world, and its characterization as misleading, false, and hurtful, returned the self-help author and reader to a reliance on the self. In *Seat of the Soul*, Zukav contrasted “external power” – a fundamental misperception that he says turns individuals outward and away from themselves, putting people in competition, fostering violence – with “authentic power.” “When we align our thoughts, emotions, and actions with the highest part of ourselves, we are filled with enthusiasm, purpose, and meaning” (1989, 26). Authentic power, echoing the imperative to integrate the self, stemmed solely from the individual’s internal realm.

Contemporary self-help, to an unprecedented degree, put the self in the position of responsible authority. Self-help books had long placed responsibility on the self for health and wellness, but they did not suggest that the self also provided the moralistic framework of what it meant to live well. Positive thinking appeared in slightly amended form as ideas of psychology vs. physiology, religion vs. spirituality, in particular religiously vs. personally-defined moral frameworks, brought pressures to bear on it. But on the whole, in the midst of considerable social, economic, and political change, the positive thinking message held true to its course, insisting that to be successful and satisfied, one had to demand that thought of success and satisfaction filled our mental airwaves.



## **Late-Century Self-help's Construction of Thought, Self, and Society**

**An abstract, hidden self is harder to know and define than is a concrete, observable self. Therefore, the belief in a real self that is hidden, that is not directly or clearly contained in one's actions, can be regarded as a critical complication of self-knowledge (Baumeister 1987, 165).**

**In a culture that embraced “the myth of objectivism,” where the quest for truth was very much alive, those who define what we consider to be true and real have substantial power (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 160). While self-help books were typically derided as silly, simplistic fluff, the success of the genre as well as the seepage of its rhetoric into other popular cultural domains signaled that the genre's definitions of the power of thought and the self (including the absences within those definitions) were widely adopted as fact. The mass mediated nature of the message was obscured within the text, serving as an example of what Stuart Hall has called the reality effect, in which mass mediated messages obscured themselves, appearing natural and spontaneous, acting as “social cement” (1977). In this way, as religious authority was said to decrease within the genre and society at large, there was little acknowledgement of the increasing authority invested in media sources as moral guides to good living. Self-help's stories illustrated effects from either successfully or unsuccessfully thinking and connecting with the various levels of the self. Like enlisting one's past in the narrative undertaking of the present, moralistic stories of right and wrong nudged readers towards particular choices.**

**As this discussion has argued, in constructing ideas about spiritual thinking that integrated positive vs. negative thinking, self-help books provided readers with compelling portrayals of the players – to whom the self communicates, to whom one looks for answers. The results or fruits of communication were well illuminated in the**

texts, which offered numerous stories of successful thought, in which people felt happy and well, and of failed thought, in which people, failing to heed to an author's advice, felt ill and isolated. In sum, then, self-help books constructed multiple pieces of the therapeutic endeavor: 1) the people involved (the self, the divine, the society); 2) the process (acknowledge one's problems briefly, but then "start anew" by quickly beginning to think positively); and finally, 3) the result (health and happiness, if advice is followed, or continuing sickness and sadness, if advice is not followed). What was notably absent was a concept of "content" and of "exchange."

## **Chapter Six: CONCLUSION**

The self-help genre provides a valuable written record of how the powers of thought have been constructed into a discourse with undeniable effect on both the individual and the collective. Studying the genre over time reveals an unerring commitment to the equation of thought and material, mind and matter. The literature of self-help movements, when read broadly over time, provides an extensive cultural discourse that attests to the self-determining power of thought. While changing characterizations of religion, science, health, personhood, and community complicate this core self-help concept, constructing evolving standards of thought as communication, what remains constant is the notion that it is possible to repair the world – our place in it, our relations with others, our health and happiness – without interacting with other people. Self-help authors do not set themselves the task of offering explicit, coherent moral frameworks or philosophies of thought as communication. However, their choice of action when faced with dilemmas in need of repair -- emphasizing choice, freedom, self-determination, and the like as a way of achieving more satisfying relations; telling stories in which the communicative practices of individuals have positive and negative consequences; discussing personalized emotions and goals and ideal behaviors as a means of repairing links with other people – inevitably are legitimated by a firm belief in the impact of their thoughts on themselves and others. Storytelling in self-help constructs moral standards as the author “not only recounts but justifies” (Bruner 1990, 121), and in

doing so, self-help offers a now popular rhetoric that each individual's life is impacted irretrievably by the thoughts of that individual.

What, however, are the consequences of the genre's insistence on thought as communication? While the genre has put forth and maintained a persuasive claim that an individual's mental processes are capable of the very ameliorative, therapeutic, and connecting qualities typically associated with interaction among people, there is need to question what happens when millions of people read that they can get what they want, feel the way they want to feel, have the sorts of relationships with other people that they desire, if only they think positively. Certainly responsibility for failures to reach those desired states of being fall on each individual. In addition, when communication is not conceptualized as social work, but as individual work, people may be less likely to engage in social interaction, making each individual more deeply entrenched in isolation. Self-help rhetoric attempts to eradicate the formative impact of the past and of others when it dismisses that "who we are at any given moment is a matter of our being with others – our families, friends, acquaintances, genders, races, nationalities – both now and in our pasts" (Nothstine, Blair, Copeland 1994, 4). In an age where we are continually beset by concerns about isolation and atomization, we need to think further about what the popularity of such a genre may suggest about the health and soundness of the collective fiber and the positioning of the individual within that collective.

At the same time, other questions arise concerning the implications of the belief in the power of thought for our notions of how communication works. A lengthy train of communication theorists have long maintained that some degree of interactivity, of

connection with others, is a necessary ingredient of the communicative act (Cooley, Gerbner). Self-help's insistence, however, that what we think manifests in reality, makes such interactivity unnecessary. To what extent, then, can we assume that the social is an integral part of communication? Self-help appears to tell us that it is possible to realize the functions of the social even when the social is marginalized or downright absent. There is need to consider the impact of such a notion on our longstanding understanding of the workings of communication, in all of its forms.

### **Synthesizing Self-Help's "Thought as Communication"**

The story of *The Wizard of Oz* has been with me throughout this project. In the film, Dorothy and the others place a tremendous faith in the Wizard, believing him capable of creation and destruction. But like the self-help genre's concept of "thought," the Wizard is both bestowed with and bereft of power simultaneously. When the little dog, Toto, pulls back the curtain, we behold something small and ineffectual, an ordinary man attempting to be all things to all people. Similarly, self-help authors endow "thought" with wizardly power, but when unveiled, we find a hard-working, burdened concept with simply too many jobs to do. In its great breadth of meaning and responsibility, the concept is inescapably vague. In defining a way out of this predicament, the self-help genre again echoes the film: Dorothy always had the power to help herself; she just had to believe. As argued throughout this dissertation, self-help, invoking an ambiguously powerful notion of thought, continually returns to a reliance on individual responsibility for success or failure. Within the self-help world, people are said to be governed by their thoughts, not by the social environment that surrounds them.

**This construction inherently places a great emphasis on the self – a determining factor much more influential than God, fate, society, or, importantly, self-help books and their arguments about the power of thought.**

**Bestowed with the power to generate and devastate lives, “thought” takes on a religious power and so unsurprisingly holds a tremendous charge that remains inscrutable – an awesome power defined in religious terms is often also a vague concept (Durkheim 1915). Just what occurs when thought “works,” or does not, often remains metaphysical and unspoken. In fact, to ask how “thought” works suggests a failure of faith. Beyond the sense of mysterious wonder that surrounds the genre’s collective notions of “thought,” it is impossible to cull a clear notion of the concept’s mechanisms. Its power exists in its impenetrability. The result is a partial portrayal of “thought” shrouded in magical power. While the genre does not pull back the “curtain” that surrounds the rhetorical construction of thought, it does detail types of selves, types of others, and types of effects that occur when one thinks well or poorly. In the pages that follow, I offer a brief holistic look at the self-help genre’s ideas of thought by synthesizing core historical themes. In outlining their resonance, I will also consider some of the broader intersections through which this literature resonates in other areas of popular culture. Recognizing the notion that what we think manifests itself in reality may offer a useful index for thinking about the tenor of connectivity and interactivity in circumstances that require its more muted form.**

## **The thinking self's others**

**For authors from self-help's early period, the central characters were God and the individual. The core problem, ill health, was defined as the manifestation of a discordant relationship between God and the individual. As an alternative to disharmony and illness, self-help books written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constructed an ideal image of the relationship between the divine and the self. This relationship was characterized by utter harmony, in the sense of oneness, or of no distance between God's thoughts and those of the individual. The greater the degree to which one's thoughts mimicked God's was directly correlated with one's health and happiness. In this way, self-help's central messages were about a communicative correspondence. In thinking God's thoughts, happiness was a reward, but not the principle goal, of attaining a proper dialogue. Early self-help books started with the premise that the potentially perfect harmony between the reader and God was interrupted or silenced by the surrounding distracting society and the "wrong thinking" of the individual.**

**Unlike the books that preceded them, self-help books of the middle period did not posit a straightforward answer to the question of whom we were to think or with whom we were to communicate. The influence of psychology upon self-help advice was considerable during the 1950s. This influence led to the development, within the sub-genre of psycho-religious self-help, of two broad types of books – "positive thinking" books that continued to advocate a direct correlation between positive thoughts and positive consequences, and "negative thinking" books that emphasized the identification of a problem's origin as curative. These two types cultivated differing answers to the**

question of with whom one should communicate. Thought, as constructed in narratives about positive thinking, functioned universally under all circumstances and was equally applicable to all people. Often God was invoked, but the more central task for the positive thinker was to focus upon his desires, to repeatedly name his goals. By articulating one's wishes, one could make them occur, but it was unclear who was affirmatively answering the individual's pleas. Alternatively, negative thinking books required the individual to acknowledge drives along with deeply buried memories and their concomitant emotions. Identifying hidden hurts became negative thinking's key to self-change. For negative thinking books, the reader was given the task of repairing thought within the self. Negative thinking, then, directed the individual to commune with the self, a communicative orientation that would continue to dominate in the genre through today.

In self-help's late period, the central communicative interactions were said to occur within the self. This self was frequently defined as composed of various, conflicting parts in need of communicative reconciliation. Relationships between the self and others were similarly said to be in a state of disjunction, but this was of secondary concern according to the logic that outward manifestations of well being – the material rewards of successful, intra-communication – stemmed from internal well being.

### **Influence of the social world**

Throughout psycho-religious self-help's history, the social world has been characterized as quite influential and simultaneously superfluous. In the early period, social influences had the power to "infect" the individual, but fundamentally could do no



harm if the individual exercised control over his thought. Authors argued that if we stopped believing in disease, then disease would literally disappear. Society's firm conviction in illness was seen to infect each individual. During the middle period, the social world was not defined as negatively as it had been previously. Other entities – the people around us and the multifaceted qualities of our own natures – grew more central as notions of God grew opaque. While positive thinking books shared much in common with New Thought, they more willingly acknowledged the relevance of the social world. The smooth negotiation of the social world was crucial to individual fulfillment and no longer was the realm of individual thought divorced from social interaction. As books that adopted a psychological perspective, negative thinking self-help acknowledged society as a formative influence on the individual, not one easily dismissed by an individual's change in beliefs. The genre continued to exhibit its ambiguous orientation toward the influence of the social world on the individual into self-help's later period. While fundamentally and resolutely emphasizing the individual as both the primary and conclusive entity with which to commune, contemporary self-help offered readers conflicting messages about the formative influence that the social world beyond the self could play in their lives. The social world could have a profound, most often, harmful impact on the individual and looking to the social world for guidance almost invariably resulted in further pain and suffering. Yet at the same time, the influence of the social world was minimized in that individuals, through the sole power of thought, could easily nullify any impact that social beliefs might have upon them.

## Centrality of the self

Given this marred social world, the self has remained self-help's central communicative nexus, with intra-communication posited as the pathway to salvation. Often this intra-communication is characterized as a struggle between conflicting aspects of the self. For early self-help, mind and body were often in disagreement, with the body manifesting the neglect or abuse of the mind. Looking beyond the mind-body dichotomy, early self-help books defined the mind itself as multifaceted. The goal was to bring these multiple planes of mind to a singular state of consciousness. During self-help's middle period, while the books acknowledged the formative influence of the social world to a greater extent than did early self-help, the focus remained on the self and its power to manufacture its desires. In the case of negative thinking, self-help with popular psychological overtones insisted upon thinking of the inward blockages that had stalled the individual's smooth social functioning and personal fulfillment. In self-help books of the 1990s, instead of looking to God as the books from the 1890s did, or simply leaving the question of the "communicative other" opaque as the literature of the 1950s did, the individual now became not only the source of all problems but also the repository of all answers. But that oracular place of deep knowing within the self, the place to which one was directed to turn for answers, was simultaneously inscrutable. That interior was shrouded in mystery, unique to each individual. Our inability to communicate with the personal interior, and the ideas that populated that interior, were fundamentally responsible for ill health.

In sum, then, the characterization of the self as a multifaceted entity that needed to engage in intra-communication to achieve health and happiness was particularly

prevalent in contemporary self-help literature. In scholarly communicative jargon, the self functioned as a kind of simultaneous communicator and audience, sending relays to oneself as a means of intra-communicative repair. The communicative goal was to bring disparate pieces of the self into conversation, mutual understanding, and harmonious accord, but this goal was now seen as more elusive than it had been in the 1950s. It involved uniting concepts deemed disparate in the 1950s into a hybrid “spirituality,” in which one acknowledged the “negativity” of the past while affirming the “positivity” of the future.

### **Self-help’s “Thought” as Diffuse, Collective Rhetoric**

The rhetoric of self-help suggests a form of communication, a sense of the linkage between self and community, that upsets longstanding popular and scholarly notions about the relationship between self, the collective, and the communicative relays between them. And yet, self-help rhetoric reaches far beyond the texts themselves and into popular usage, where they forge an even more powerful and far-reaching shared language about the self, thought, and the collective.

Reading a self-help book, on its face, seems like a solitary activity, but it becomes communal behavior when “everybody is doing it.” As self-help’s narratives about thought as communication without social interaction are increasingly found throughout the popular mass media, offering a prevalent social norm to endorse contemplative, therapeutic care of the self, they come to suggest a social belief and behavior as well as an individual one.

This has both emancipatory and constraining influences. On the one hand, thinking into reality is empowering and appears to separate the individual from the censure of surrounding collective values and mores. In that regard, many self-help texts encourage us to think of our utterances as spontaneous, free, and entirely our own. On the other hand, such texts are in fact constrained by the community's linguistic and cultural traditions. While self-help books direct readers to look inward for answers, to find the authenticity of one's own voice, in the end, the goal is not to keep that voice to ourselves, but to use it to communicate with others.

It is in such a regard that the connotations of "thought" as constructed in self-help correspond and meld with popular connotations of the term "communication." Technological changes – the Internet and email in particular – have contributed new associations – ease, simplicity, immediacy, speed – to "communication." The tremendous volume and speed with which information is batted about is deemed a democratic achievement, no longer solely an individual triumph but a collective one. Like self-help's therapeutic communication, this "hi-tech" or more popularized usage of "communication" displays a similar degree of ambiguity and internal contradiction.

Like self-help, popular notions of "communication" also connote ease and power, while leaving substance and clarity out of the communication equation. In a fashion eerily similar to the self-help formula described in this dissertation, we see ample evidence today of a popular, quasi-religious belief in the ability of "thought as communication" to solve not only individual problems, but social ones. Examples abound, stretching across the varied domains of the financial world, sports, and political reactions to acts of terror. For instance, one recent large, front-page headline on the cover

of the June 20, 2002 *USA Today* read: “If You Believe...,” while in smaller font, the headline continued, “USA vs. Germany, 7:30 a.m. ET Friday.” The success of America’s soccer team was said to be intertwined with the thoughts of the newspaper reader, just as a belief in acquiring wealth and beating disease has long been the responsibility of the self-help book reader. As the stock market tumbles, questions of “consumer confidence” arise, implying that our faith in global capitalism can buoy the market, while an absence of faith will just as surely sink it. The lifestyle magazine, *Real Simple*, advises readers to make “to do” lists not of grocery shopping and house cleaning, but of the heart’s deepest desires, for [“to do” lists] the magazine proclaims are “essential to our well-being” and “making lists helps not only with life’s mundane tasks but also with its most magical ones” (Barry 2002, 107). Here again, the individual is responsible for fulfilling her needs by thinking of them as met. Unmet needs suggest a communication failure. In each case, communication is essentialized into belief.

It has not been the goal of this dissertation to deny that what we communicate has a profound impact on our life course. There is a potent truth here, however inexplicable. But it has been my goal to question how this truth is used also to obscure life’s difficulties and to make light of the social interaction that is required for connection, exchange and change. Communication, not as thought, but as interactive engagement, might be all the more powerful if it carried the connotations of being difficult, slow, and uncertain, instead of easy, immediate, and assured. It is possible that people might then approach it with patience and commitment, and its successes would be conceptualized as hard won rewards.

But to define communication as social interaction is not a fully adequate solution. Throughout the popularity of the self-help genre, social critics and self-help authors have agreed that the books are necessary because they respond to a specific social need, a conflict between individuals and society. In the 1880s, George Beard diagnosed Americans as nervous due to the tumultuous changes spurred by the industrial revolution. In the 1940s Joshua Liebman defined the times as an “age of fierce turmoil,” and stated his conviction “that social peace can never be permanently achieved so long as individuals engage in civil war with themselves” (1946, xi). In the 1990s Deepak Chopra bemoaned the detrimental impact of “the hyponosis of social conditioning” (1993, 3). In today’s terms, such a circumstance is called stress. It is no surprise that just as the circumstance has not disappeared, neither has the need for self-help, as one way of responding to the dissonance it introduces.

As argued throughout this dissertation, articulating a definitive causality – does society infect the individual or does the individual infect society – has not been the self-help author’s aim. But what does become clear is that despite the incessant focus on the self, self-control, and self-liberation (arguably, a form of control), self-help books are particularly concerned with social dynamics and in maintaining social harmony. In this way, they participate in a pervasive, collective notion about communication as cure-all – a notion that includes simplistic ideas about social interaction. *The New York Times*, on August 14, 2002, chronicled the work of two average citizens who traverse the city, setting up shop on various street corners with their sign that reads simply “Talk to me” (Kelley 2002, B1). The two, Liz Barry and Bill Wetzal, say “we’re doing it because we believe in talking.” In offering to speak with passersby about whatever crosses their

minds, Barry and Wetzel invoke the notion of communication as a healing force, regardless of what is communicated and how.

“Communication” as popularly conceived is a belief – a belief that the act of communicating feels good, relieves pressure and stress, and unites previously estranged ideas and individuals, thereby generating a less fractious, more peaceful world. But our communal belief in communication, while often powerfully healing, may also contribute to the very social ills it is supposed to cure. This occurs precisely because of what is obscured by its definition: content, clarity, and methods, the very tools by which we practice communication. At the very least, such a revelation should give pause to the power we are willing to invest in our notions, however incomplete and faulty they may be, about our communicative selves.

## **Appendix 1: METHOD**

This dissertation is premised on the argument that psycho-religious self-help books have throughout their existence been fundamentally concerned with the power of thought to construct reality. Having identified an enduring focus on thought as communication and its correlation with reality in self-help books across the decades, I first turned to Glaser and Strauss's grounded theory for a set of guiding principles that could fruitfully inform a sociological investigation of text as evidence (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1997). Their strategy entails identifying potential themes, categories, and concepts that emerge from the text and connecting these with theoretical interpretations. By adding more data, exploring it for continuities and discontinuities with existing data, I was able to develop notions and models of "thought as communication" as extrapolated from self-help books (Ryan and Bernard 2000, 783). Glaser and Strauss advise that once a point of redundancy has been reached, an adequate number of cases have been incorporated. Employing the method of "theoretical saturation" entailed adding cases until I had uncovered the full range of what there was to observe, as specifically related to my area of research. This made the actual number of cases less important than the sense of having fully covered or saturated the topic of study (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

### **Sampling**

I constructed what is often called a nonprobability intentional, purposive, or judgment sample. In this discussion of sampling I will first explain the textual



characteristics required and then detail the means by which specific texts were identified using best-seller lists. This dissertation is based on a sample comprised of best selling self-help books of the psycho-religious sort, as well as associated discourse such as popular and academic secondary sources on self-help, popular religion, and popular psychology. The vast majority of self-help books do not contain what could be called a “pure” positive thinking message, in the sense that they exclude discussion of other sorts of communication. While books on the power of thought constituted the core of each book included in the sample, I by necessity included self-help books that contained messages about social interaction embedded within them. Generally excluded were those books with a principle focus on social interaction, and specifically on repairing relationships, such as Deborah Tannen’s work, but books that incorporated a “thought as communication” within a rubric advocating social interaction, such as Stephen Covey’s *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989) and Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1937) were included in the analysis. While I explored a wide historical period, I focused on three sub-periods in which self-help books were particularly popular: 1) the New Thought or mind-cure movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; 2) the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during which time Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking* was tremendously influential; 3) and the contemporary scene, in which self-help has diversified, becoming a diffuse, wide-ranging and tremendously prosperous multimedia industry.

Despite the fact that the ideas of thought as communication are prevalent in books that address these topics, in an attempt to cull a meaningful and bounded set of texts, I excluded books on etiquette, appearance, diet, exercise, sex, interpersonal relationships,

specific physical or mental health concerns, and specific age, gender, race, ethnicity or sexuality (exceptions on these criteria detailed below). Rather, I selected books of a more general nature concerned with general wellness, which most often meant health and happiness, books I have called as a group, “psych-religious self-help.” Books that *do* engage the social interactive nature of communication, for example Deborah Tannen’s books such as *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, have been intentionally excluded for the obvious reason that they offer an argument about the power of communication that runs counter to the one under analysis here. In a few cases, books on relationships that also convey a “thought as communication” message have been included in the sample. Also excluded from study were how-to books that shared little in common with self-help; those designed to help individuals learn the basics of wallpaper hanging or tax filing were not defined as psycho-religious self-help in this context. Even those how-to books which suggested the psychological benefits of do-it-yourself (get your taxes done while simultaneously increasing your self-esteem, etc.), while moving closer to the literature under study here, were beyond the boundaries of this study because they do not focus upon a philosophical or moral orientation to “thought as communication” itself. The self-help literature I analyzed all dealt in some manner with coping with difficulty and attempting to live a more fulfilling life by adopting the tenets of the book in question; in other words, they had an expressly therapeutic intention.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> An exception to the focus on general best selling books was made for books in the late period (1960-2000), according to the following logic. In more recent years, as the self-help book market boomed, books have been targeted to and read by specific social groups: teenagers, Jews, African-Americans, gay men and lesbians, for example. While these books may be very popular, given the smaller size of the target audience, they do not reach the astronomical sales of “general” titles such as *Gray’s Men Are from Mars*,

I identified relevant texts using bestseller lists. I constructed a sample using three reference books: *80 years of best sellers, 1895-1975* by Alice Payne Hackett and James Henry Burke (1977), *Bestseller index: all books, by author, on the lists of Publishers weekly and the New York Times through 1990* by Keith L. Justice (1998) and *Bowker's Annual: Library and Book Trade Almanac* (issued yearly by various authors).<sup>70</sup> These references compiled data from *Publishers Weekly* and *The New York Times Best Seller* list to draw up "master lists" that included top-ten or top-fifteen lists, as well as lists of books that sold over a given number of copies in a single year (i.e. all books that sold over a million or 500,000 books were listed as a class). However, because indices of

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*Women Are from Venus*, or Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, both from the early 1990s. In the interest of exploring these demographically targeted books, I incorporated additional texts addressed to gay men and women, African-Americans, and women (in which race and ethnicity were not clearly signaled). These texts, like their non-targeted counterparts, had as their central thesis the negotiation of self, both intra and interpersonally. By constructing a comparative framework, I aimed to explore questions of selfhood across identity groups, yet I found that the construction of selfhood, but for some notable exceptions, remained relatively consistent from text to text. Outward signs that signaled that a given text was designed for a particular audience, remained largely that, outward, suggesting that who conveyed the message was as important as what was said. Considerable textual effort was dedicated to the construction of the authors' identities in the surrounding discourse of magazine interviews, reviews and promotional materials. Interestingly though, the books, regardless of the authors' identities or those of the suggested readers, had similar fundamental messages about what makes for a meaningful life led by a good person, a finding that made sense given that the textual content that dwells between the covers obliterate the social dimension of identity construction and shares formulaic and generic qualities.

<sup>70</sup> Best selling books are determined by those who construct the lists (The Bookman was the first publication to do so in 1895) by surveying booksellers from around the nation and querying them about which books have sold most briskly. Scholars have been quick to point out that there are many methodological questions and inconsistencies built into the construction of best seller lists (Hart 1976, 184-185). Given that the publishing industry has been loath to release accurate statistics, best seller lists remain the primary measure of book sales.

these sorts used slightly different criteria to define what “best seller” meant that I consulted a number of digests and indexes, looking for overlap among them.

Some of the self-help texts in this study exploded in popularity for only a short time, while others sold moderately for years on end and cumulatively reached incredibly high sales records. I incorporated best sellers of both sorts in my sample. In each of the three time periods covered by the dissertation, I started with annual lists of best sellers, consulting the lists for each year. In fact, it was the lists themselves that first altered me to the ebb and flow of the genre’s popularity over time and informed the construction of the three sub-periods of the dissertation. From these lists I purposively identified self-help books and consulted them to determine if they met the defined requirements. My intention to track broad currents within self-help across time dovetailed with my approach of culling books from bestseller lists. Books with general themes, as opposed to those addressing specific life events or types of people, populated the lists. I included all texts from the annual “top 10” or “top 15” lists in my sample. I also included texts that sold extremely well (according to the publishing industry’s notions at the time) over three or more years. This entailed reading through lists of best selling books that sold over a given number of copies annually, for example, over 250,000 copies from 1940-1960 and over 500,000 copies from 1980-2000, until a point of theoretical saturation was met. The sample comprised 19 books from each of self-helps early and middle periods and 24 books from the late period, for a total of 62 books (please see appendix 2 for a listing of books analyzed). A significant exception to this sampling method was necessary for books published prior to 1912, when the first nonfiction best seller lists began (Korda 2001). Given that psycho-religious self-help had been very successful for

some years prior to 1912, I consulted histories of the New Thought/mind cure movements to identify additional texts for study. These secondary sources included: Anker's (1999a) *Self-Help and Popular Religion in Early American Culture*, Braden's (1963) *Spirits in Rebellion*, Cawelti's (1965) *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*, Ruth Miller Elson's (1985) *Myths and Mores in American Best Sellers, 1865-1965*, and Meyer's (1965) *The Positive Thinkers*.

### Textual Analysis

Identifying models of textual representation make analytic comparison possible and patterns of interrelated concepts observable. Not all self-help books follow the models and themes identified in this dissertation, nor is there one single book from each historical era that precisely mirrors the models of self, communication, and community that I posit. The models do not represent a particular author or text, but attempt to forge general patterns discernable across many authors and texts.

The study of self-help books has been an exercise in recognizing and interpreting themes and patterns emergent in the texts. Textual and rhetorical methodologies consider how messages may affect audiences.<sup>71</sup> Historically, rhetorical inquiry focuses specifically on persuasion, but in some senses that focus has broadened considerably. Put simply by Roderick Hart (1990), rhetorical criticism is a method for inspecting texts in

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<sup>71</sup> In "Figuring Audiences and Readers," a chapter in *The Audience and Its Landscape*, eds. James Hay, Lawrence Grossberg, and Ellen Wartella, Tony Bennett writes of the conceptual problems surrounding the use of the word 'audience.' I acknowledge it as a troubled term with the academy, one that reflects artificially constructed concepts of groups and research approaches which reflect those concepts.

order to gain insights about people that might lie within the message. The rhetorical critic says “I see a bit of ‘X’ here and am willing to bet there is more ‘X’ to be found in society at large” (Farrell 1980, cited by Hart 1990, 34). Textual analysis involves asking questions of the text such as what a text is doing. How texts urge meanings on people has a lot to do with the subject positions it encourages readers to adopt. The study of textual narratives involves identifying syntagmatic structure (horizontal, a story moving across time and space) and paradigmatic structure (vertical, comparing and contrasting a given sign to other signs that are like it), thereby identifying generic features (Brummer 1994).

As suggested, the goal is not only to shed light on the texts themselves, but also to use these texts to understand society. Among the insights typically revealed in textual analysis are: revelations about historical trends, social circumstances, power relations, dominant ideologies, and the priorities of writers and readers as well as the relationship between the two. Allan Bell articulates four reasons why the textual study of mediate discourse is important: 1) media are a rich source of readily accessible data for research and teaching; 2) media usage influences and represents people’s use of and attitudes towards language in a speech community; 3) media use can tell us a great deal about social meanings and stereotypes projected through language and communication; and 4) the media reflect and influence the formation and expression of culture, politics and social life (Bell and Garrett 1998).

Analyzing and interpreting self-help corresponded with the dissertation’s focus on communication, as I attempted to identify and interpret the ways texts defined processes of communication, action, assumptions about communication and its consequences. For

each self-help book, I noted how the author constructed the text. This included observing what types of stories began and ended the texts, how authors justified their text's existence, and how they portrayed notions of self, communication, and surrounding influences (society, science, religion, etc.) as follows:

#### **THE SELF:**

- Author's self
- Reader's self
- Generalized self
- Mind and body
- Interior and exterior
- Character, morality
- Transforming self

#### **COMMUNICATION:**

- Types of modes (thought, verbalization, image, written)
- With whom (intra-self, with close others, distant others, divine, society)
- For what purpose
- With what result
- Communication produces material reality
- Mechanisms, vehicles, processes, transmission
- Content, messages, substance, therapeutic
- Positive and negative effects
- Interpersonal and mass

#### **COMMUNITY/SOCIETY**

#### **DIVINITY/ RELIGION**

#### **SCIENCE**

In each of these categories I collected passages of text, or "thematic units" (Krippendorff 1980, 62). I stored these files by book and by topic. Within the topic files, I arranged the thematic units in historical, chronological order. I preferred this method to using a content analysis software that could count word frequencies, since these would not capture subtleties of meaning, themes, omissions of content, contradiction,

rationalizations and the like. As I analyzed within a singular text, and comparatively from text to text, I refined my list of categories to reflect emergent patterns. As these patterns were substantiated by further primary data, I consulted secondary texts, histories in particular, to seek contextualization. For instance, as I read it became apparent that the shifting reliance on religious and scientific explanations of reality was exercising a significant impact on self-help in the early years, an impact that continued throughout the genre's history. Books on religious history and histories of science therefore provided ways of making sense of my textual evidence. I also incorporated contemporary responses to self-help books, book reviews and criticism as available to gain a sense of how the texts were received at the time of publication. These provided insight to the at times defensive statements made by authors. Tacking back and forth between a close textual analysis of this literature and a consideration of patterns in light of broader, contextual, historical themes proved a productive mode of analysis.



## **Appendix Two: BOOKS ANALYZED**

### **Ch3 Turn of the century, 1900 New Thought/mind-cure titles**

Beard, George. 1881. *American nervousness: Its causes and consequences*. New York: Putnam.

Cady, H. Emilie. 1919. *Lessons in truth , a course of twelve lessons in practical Christianity*. Kansas City, Mo: Unity school of Christianity.

Call, Annie Payson. 1898. *Power through repose*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Choate, Clara Elizabeth. 1905. "Committing Sickness," in *Nautilus* 8, December.

Choate, Clara Elizabeth. 1898. The potency of good thinking. *Journal of Practical Metaphysics*, November, 43.

Eddy, Mary Baker. 1890 [1875]. *Science and health with key to the scriptures*. Boston: Allison V Stewart.

Evans, Rev. Warren Felt. 1887 [1869]. *The mental cure, illustrating the influence of the mind on the body, both in health and disease, and the psychological method of treatment*. Boston: Colby and Rich, Publishers.

Fillmore, Charles. 1912. *The science of being and Christian healing: Twelve lessons*. Kansas City, Missouri: Unity Tract Society.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1912. *Temple talks, being extracts from addresses delivered before the unity society of practical Christianity*. Kansas City, Missouri: The Unity Society of Practical Christianity.

Haddock, Frank C. 1907 [1918]. *Power of will*. Meriden, CT: The Pelton Publishing Company.

Patterson, Charles Brodie. 1909. *A new heaven and a new earth or the way to life eternal*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co.

Quimby, Phineas P. 1921 [1860-1870]. In *The Quimby manuscripts showing the discovery of spiritual healing and the origin of Christian Science*. Horatio Dresser, ed. New York: Crowell.

Smiles, Samuel. 1866 [1859]. *Self-help*. New York: A.L. Burt Company, Publishers.

Towne, Elizabeth. 1904. *Practical methods for self-development*. Holyoke, MA: E. Towne.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1906. *Life Power*. Holyoke, MA: E. Towne.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1915. *How to use new thought in home life*. Holyoke, MA: Elizabeth Towne Co.

Trine, Ralph Waldo. 1897. *In tune with the infinite*. New York: Dodge Publishing Company.

Wagner, Charles. 1902. *The simple life*. Translated by Mary Louise Hendee (from the French). New York: McClure, Phillips & Co.

Wood, Henry. 1893. *Ideal suggestion through mental photography: A restorative system for home and private use*. Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers.

#### **Ch4: Mid-century, positive and negative thinking**

Bristol, Claude M. 1951 [1948]. *The magic of believing*. New York: Prentice-Hall.

Coué, Emile. 1967 [1923]. *Self mastery through conscious auto-suggestion*. London: Allen & Unwin.

Carnegie, Dale. 1936. *How to win friends and influence people*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1944. *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Fox, Emmet. 1934. *The Sermon on the Mount; a general introduction to scientific Christianity in the form of a spiritual key to Matthew V, VI, and VII*. New York, Church of the Hearing Christ.

Nouy, Pierre Lecomte du. 1947. *Human destiny*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co.

Fosdick, Harry Emerson. 1943. *On being a real person*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Hill, Napoleon. 1937. *Think and grow rich*. New York: Ballantine Books.

- Liebman, Joshua Loth. 1946. *Peace of mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Lindbergh, Anne Morrow. 1955. *Gift from the sea*. New York: Random House.
- Link, Henry C. 1932. *The new psychology of selling and advertising*. New York: The MacMillan Co.
- Link, Henry C. 1936. *The return to religion*. New York: The Macmillan company.
- Peale, Norman Vincent. 1938. *You can win*. New York: Abingdon Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1948. *A guide to confident living*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1952. *The power of positive thinking*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Schindler, John A. 1954. *How to live 365 days a year*. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Crest.
- Sheen, Fulton J. 1949. *Peace of Soul*. Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph.
- Sheen, Fulton J. 1953. *Life Is Worth Living*. Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph.
- MISSING: *Abundant Living*, by E. Stanley Jones. 1942

#### **Ch5: Transitional Texts (60s, 70s), Contemporary Spirituality (80s, 90s)**

- Beattie, Melody. 1987. *Codependent no more*. New York: Harper/Hazelden.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1990. *Codependents' Guide to the Twelve Steps*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Berne, Eric. 1964. *Games people play, the psychology of human relations*. New York: Grove Press.
- Bradshaw, John. 1990. *Homecoming: Reclaiming and championing your inner child*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Breathnach, Sarah Ban. 1995. *Simple abundance: A daybook of comfort and joy*. New York: Warner Books.

- Chopra, Deepak. 1993. *Ageless body, timeless mind: the quantum alternative to growing older*. New York: Harmony Books.
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- Covey, Stephen R. 1989. *The seven habits of highly effective people*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Dyer, Wayne. 1992. *Real magic: creating miracles in everyday life*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Gray, John. 1992. *Men are from Mars, women are from Venus*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Harris, Thomas A. 1973 [1967]. *I'm okay -- you're okay*. New York: Avon Books.
- Hay, Louise L. 1999. [1985]. *You can heal your life*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House.
- Kubler-Ross, Elizabeth. 1969. *On Death and Dying*. New York: MacMillian.
- Moore, Thomas. 1992. *Care of the Soul*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Newman, Mildred and Bernard Berkowitz. 1971. *How to be your own best friend*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Peck, M. Scott. 1998. *The road less traveled: A new psychology of love, traditional values and spiritual growth*. New York: Simon & Schuster. Original edition, 1978.
- Ringer, Robert. 1973. *Winning through intimidation*. New York: Fawcett Crest.
- Schuller, Robert. 1985. *The be (happy) attitudes*. New York: Random House.
- Scott, Steven K. 1998. *Simple steps to impossible dreams*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Vanzant, Iyanla. 1998. *In the meantime: Finding yourself and the love you want*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Williamson, Marianne. 1992. *A return to love*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Zukav, Gary. 1989. *The Seat of the Soul*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

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