SHAM Scam
The Self-Help and Actualization Movement has become an $8.5-billion-a-year business. Does it work? By MICHAEL SHERMER

According to self-help guru Tony Robbins, walking barefoot across 1,000-degree red-hot coals “is an experience in belief. It teaches people in the most visceral sense that they can change, they can grow, they can stretch themselves, they can do things they never thought possible.”

I’ve done three fire walks myself, without chanting “cool moss” (as Robbins has his clients do) or thinking positive thoughts. I didn’t get burned. Why? Because charcoal is a poor conductor of heat, particularly through the dead calloused skin on the bottom of your feet and especially if you scoot across the bed of coals as quickly as fire walkers are wont to do. Think of a cake in a 400-degree oven—you can touch the cake, a poor conductor, without getting burned, but not the metal cake pan. Physics explains the “how” of fire walking. To understand the “why,” we must turn to psychology.

In 1980 I attended a bicycle industry trade convention whose keynote speaker was Mark Victor Hansen, now well known as the coauthor of the wildly popular Chicken Soup for the Soul book series that includes the Teenage Soul, Prisoner’s Soul and Christian Soul (but no Skeptic’s Soul). I was surprised that Hansen didn’t require a speaker’s fee, until I saw what happened after his talk: people were lined up out the door to purchase his motivational tapes. I was one of them. I listened to those tapes over and over during training rides in preparation for bicycle races.

The “over and over” part is the key to understanding the “why” of what investigative journalist Steve Salerno calls the Self-Help and Actualization Movement (SHAM). In his recent book SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless (Crown Publishing Group, 2005), he explains how the talks and tapes offer a momentary boost of inspiration that fades after a few weeks, turning buyers into repeat customers. While Salerno was a self-help book editor for Rodale Press (whose motto at the time was “to show people how they can use the power of their bodies and minds to make their lives better”), extensive market surveys revealed that “the most likely customer for a book on any given topic was someone who had bought a similar book within the preceding eighteen months.” The irony of “the eighteen-month rule” for this genre, Salerno says, is this: “If what we sold worked, one would expect lives to improve. One would not expect people to need further help from us—at least not in that same problem area, and certainly not time and time again.”

Surrounding SHAM is a bulletproof shield: if your life does not get better, it is your fault—your thoughts were not positive enough. The solution? More of the same self-help—or at least the same message repackaged into new products. Consider the multiple permutations of John Gray’s Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus—Mars and Venus Together Forever, Mars and Venus in the Bedroom, The Mars and Venus Diet and Exercise Solution—not to mention the Mars and Venus board game, Broadway play and Club Med getaway.

SHAM takes advantage by cleverly marketing the dualism of victimization and empowerment. Like a religion that defines people as inherently sinful so that they require forgiveness (provided exclusively by that religion), SHAM gurus insist that we are all victims of our demonic “inner children” who are produced by traumatic pasts that create negative “tapes” that replay over and over in our minds. Redemption comes through empowering yourself with new “life scripts,” supplied by the masters themselves, for prices that range from $500 one-day workshops to Robbins’s $5,995 “Date with Destiny” seminar.

Do these programs work? No one knows. According to Salerno, no scientific evidence indicates that any of the countless SHAM techniques—from fire walking to 12-stepping—works better than doing something else or even doing nothing. The law of large numbers means that given the millions of people who have tried SHAMs, inevitably some will improve. As with alternative-medicine nostrums, the body naturally heals itself and whatever the patient was doing to help gets the credit.

Patient, heal thyself—the true meaning of self-help.

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