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The Secret life of self-help books

Ask. Believe. Receive. Or not...

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This afternoon, at the Toronto Holistic World Expo, a catch-all gathering of wellness, self-affirmation and indefatiguable optimism, a bona-fide phenomenon is set to unspool.

It's called *The Secret* – a title that is rapidly becoming a laughable misnomer – and its message of self-empowerment and visualization, delivered both in slim book form and on DVD, has penetrated mainstream culture in a way that perhaps none of its self-help brethren ever has.

Haven't heard about *The Secret* yet? You soon will. If you have heard, be prepared to hear more. A lot more.

In both Canada and the U.S., it's jockeying for the number one spot with the most recent Harry Potter book. Inside a year, the book has sold 1.75 million copies, and 1.5 million of its companion DVDs.

Oprah Winfrey, a book publisher's best friend, swears by it. After she devoted two full hours of her show to shilling for it last month. Its publisher, Simon and Shuster, last week had to order a 2 million copy reprint, the largest in the venerable company's history. And all this in English only. According to the publisher, it's now in the process of being translated into at least two dozen other languages.

And in mid-April, 5,000 believers will pay between $109 and $199 each to hear some of the self-help gurus from The Secret's dream team of speakers at The Westin downtown, courtesy of a local company called The Power Within.

The Secret's secret? It swears by a simple core rule, "the law of attraction," which states that nothing happens by accident: We attract everything into our lives simply by the energy we put forth – an idea summed up in its simple mantra: "Ask. Believe. Receive."

"It's kind of corny, right?" says Charlene Crews, an effusive social worker who nonetheless admits to being hooked by *The Secret*'s message. "But sometimes we need to re-state the obvious. We get overwhelmed by our world, and we need reminders: `Stay positive. You can do it.' All that stuff."

Crews runs the Girls Night Out Club, an online community for women. Last week, well aware of *The Secret*'s growing profile, she convened a discussion with members at a Danforth Avenue coffee bar.

The evening began with Michele Gangbar, a slim, attractive woman of 49, reading to the group, slowly and deliberately, from a set of multicoloured flashcards.

"Today is the first day of the rest of your life," she says, glancing up to smile at the dozen or so

women who have arranged tables and chairs in an arc in front of her, listening intently.

"The path is up to you," continues Gangbar, her long, dark hair falling to her earth-toned floral blazer. "There are no boundaries in life – only the limitations you put on yourself. What your thoughts give out is what you will attract. You are no longer a spectator. You are a participant."

Composed and relaxed, she concludes by showing the group her "inspiration board," a hot-pink, over-sized greeting card tied with a purple ribbon, which she splays open to reveal what she calls her "whole life": a cardboard plane festooned with pictures of family, her dog, and a litany of positive words and phrases clipped from magazines and newspapers – "Living Life to the Fullest," "Attitude of Abundance," "Gratitude," "Faith," "Trust."

"I look at this every morning," says Gangbar, smiling. "It gives me courage. It gives me strength. It tells me I can achieve anything I want."

The notion is enticing. Who wouldn't want a talisman capable of reconciling all life's barriers in a tidy, semi-portable – and vividly colourful – package?

Truth to tell, as a society, we've been carrying them for millennia, from the sacred – idols or crosses – to the mildly profane – lucky pennies and rabbit's feet. Whatever their origin, they remain articles of faith - objects that defer control of the universe to a higher power, be it chance, God, or any number of deities or forces that have passed in and out of human imagination.

But now, with the arrival of *The Secret*, we've come to embrace a talisman of a different kind.

The slim volume currently dominating North America's best-seller charts was cobbled together by Rhonda Byrne, an Australian TV producer, from a compendium of works by self-help gurus and principals – a sort of self-help greatest hits, past and present. What it puts forth, with breathless insistence, is that anything you want in the world is yours, if you really, really believe. *The Secret* isn't much more than a reminder of the same principles self-help books, movies and motivational speakers have been saying for decades, if not centuries.

Steven Starker, in his 1989 book *Oracle at the Supermarket: The American Preoccupation with Self-Help*, suggested that its roots lie with the Puritans in early colonial America, and their constant quest for self-improvement.

Starker, a U.S.-based clinical psychologist, called self-help "an essential part of American culture," connecting it to American Independence and Thomas Jefferson, who described the fundamental base of the new nation as the "pursuit of happiness," a system where "a man could rise in his station according to his merits and abilities."

In more recent history, books like Napolean Hill's *Think and Grow Rich*, from 1937, or Norman Vincent Peale's 1952 blockbuster, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, helped nudge self-help to its current market dominance. Both books were rapid bestsellers, creating the wealth for its authors that so many of the books' adherents were seeking. Selling self-help continues to make millionaires today, from motivational dynamo Anthony Robbins to Stephen Covey (*The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*) to *Men are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* author John Gray to, of course, Byrne herself.

Between the two sit hundreds, if not thousands, of books, DVDs, tapes, life coaches, seminars, and motivational speakers. Some peg the industry, with all its component parts, as being worth as much as $10 billion annually.

Which seems to suggest something else entirely. "That's the most insidious part of self-help – the first thing you need to do before you cure people is convince them that they're sick," says Steve Salerno, the author of *SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless*.

"We're so conditioned to take the pulse of our happiness from one moment to the next, and it's self-help that's encouraged this. And the reason it does this is to keep us convinced there's

something wrong with us, so they can sell the next book."

In *SHAM*, he tracks the "Self-Help and Actualization Movement" through what he calls its modern cycle.

He pegs its genesis with the 1967 book *I'm OK, You're OK*, which, despite its gentle-seeming title, contained a darker suggestion: That things happen to you in childhood that cause permanent, irreparable damage.

For a nation in the grips of Vietnam, facing massive social upheaval, it was a quenching gulp of solace. "This was the extreme victimization method," he says. "It was trying to console people – `it's not your fault, it's not anybody's fault. We're all just pawns in a hostile universe.' At the time, there was a lot of doom and nihilsm, and this was a very potent message."

Hitting its apex in the 70s, the movement spawned an explosion of gurus and movements such as Werner Erhard's est, or Arthur Janov's primal therapy. Painfully simplistic, the movement also garnered its fair share of derision. Richard Dean Rosen's 1977 book, *Psychobabble*, for example, calls self-help a force that "reduces psychological insight to a collection of standardized observations that provides a frozen lexicon to deal with an infinite variety of problems."

Like "ask, believe, receive," say? We're getting there. But first, more history on self-help's explosive growth.

In the 80s, Salerno said, the victimization method inevitably spawned its apotheosis: The up, up, up, feel-good/feel-great empowerment movement, epitomized by Robbins' rock-star style prosthelytizing to stadium-sized crowds, or the no-nonsense, you've-got-the-power scoldings of Dr. Phil (another Oprah favourite.)

The Secret is the next step in a long evolution, Salerno says. "They are denying all known physical laws in the name of empowerment," he says. "The notion that all you have to do is believe it and it will come to you, is a patently, scientifically, factually absurd notion. But we've finally reached the point in the culture where that message is no longer too absurd."

For Steven Sashen, it all amounts to the same thing. A self-described "recovering guru," Sashen, who studied cognitive psychology, adhered to all the self-help he could glom on to for 30 years, He even taught and ran classes. "It took me that long to get less stupid," he says, laughing.

Based in Boulder, Colo., he runs a web site, http://www.anti-guru.com, where he addresses what he calls "the compulsion we have to believe, and the aversion we have to critical thinking."

He would know. After a lifetime spent looking for the answer, "I had this `oooohhh' moment," he says. "I was looking for ever more subtle notions of what was wrong. And when one didn't work, I would look for whatever the next thing was. And I realized, `Why should I think that the next grand solution to come along will be any more effective than the last?'"

And there is always a next solution. Starker, in Oracle, writes that "(r)eaders become bored or disillusioned with particular self-help works and technologies but seem to be quite forgiving of the genre. Perhaps the next book will provide the answers, the comfort, the cure, the secret being sought."

The "secret" – it's an enticing notion, Sashen says. "It's the carrot on the stick. If someone says, `I know the answer,' you're going to want that. If you tell people that the answer has been there all along, and it's been hidden from you – well, people will beat down the doors to get that."

The Secret dresses itself in ritual, from the parchment-style paper it's printed on, to the crimson seal emblazoned on its cover, to its unwavering suggestion that the secret is an ancient truth.

It's a logical strategy for a self-help product whose basis is the repackaging of the genre's various platitudes. "That's part of its charm – she says it's from the dawn of time," Salerno says. "But the

genius of *The Secret* is that she assembled a cast of contributors who could deliver built-in audiences to her."

Between the covers of *The Secret* is an assemblage of the biggest names in the contemporary self-help business, from *Chicken Soup for the Soul* co-author Jack Canfield to Esther and Jerry Hicks, whose book *The Law of Attraction* forms the central tenet of *The Secret*. (The Hicks have since withdrawn after a falling-out with Byrne).

But whether the message is old or new, the goal seems hardly to be one of enlightenment. "Most of what I read, I already knew," said Sandy Slater, a life coach who was part of the group on the Danforth. "And frankly, what it really is, is `the secret to making money.'"

Indeed, the book wears its fiscal inspiration – taken from Hill and Peale – on its sleeve. But the original source of *Secret* lore can be traced to Wallace D. Wattle's *The Science of Getting Rich*, from 1910. (*The Secret* legend has it that Byrne's daughter gave Wattle's book to her in 2004, during a rough patch, and it showed her The Way). The DVD assembles various gurus amid flickering torches and campily profound music, many of whom speak of achieving goals such as houses, cars and vacations.

But it also adheres to a common self-help assumption: "There is a cultivation of this notion that not having everything you want is a problem. Because of that, people pathologize completely normal situations," Sashen says.

The Secret's message also flies in the face of academic psychological research, says Sonja Lyubomirsky, a psychologist who studies happiness at the University of California. (Academic psychology, noted Dutch scholar As Bergsma, has yet to seriously engage the self-help phenomenon – "a regrettable omission on (its) part," he wrote.)

"We know from research that materialists are less happy, because you adapt to the material possessions. There's an intitial boost, but that fades," said Lyubomirsky. "It's like remodelling your kitchen – you're happy, until you get tired of it. So maybe the latest remodelling is *The Secret*."

In 2002, Janet Polivy and Peter Herman, two psychologists at the University of Toronto, published a paper in *American Psychologist* that outlined something they called "false hope syndrome" – the human tendency to make constant attempts at self-change despite repeated failure.

They concluded it was based on unrealistic expectations of the outcome or timeline – the quick-fix solution so much self-help tries to sell. The flip side of that, Sashen says, is that any program has a built-in excuse.

"Believers will tell you: `If you do this right, eventually you'll get what you want.' And if you don't, `eventually' just hasn't happened yet. That, or you're doing it wrong."

Act, believe, receive. What could be so difficult about that? "It's actually very, very simple. But there's a lot underlying it," says Bob Proctor.

Proctor, based in Toronto, has worked as a motivational speaker for almost 40 years, and travels all over the world with his business, LifeSuccess Productions. It was his book *You Were Born Rich* that prompted Byrne to include him among the many motivational speakers, coaches and gurus that she has brought together under *The Secret*'s umbrella. .

The Secret, he says, is changing the planet. "I think there's a spiritual revolution in the world. People are waking up in large numbers," he says. "It's in harmony with what people want. It just resonates with the higher side of your personality." *The Secret* is no secret, he says, but rather a law of nature. "When we think, we activate brain cells that set off a vibration in our body. We can set off a positive or a negative," he says. "You send energy into the universe, and the universe reacts to it. That's how we attract everything into our lives. There are no accidents."

Proctor allows that it does take time to perfect the technique. "But it's always working, whether

you perfect it or not," he says. "It's like gravity."

Sanjay Burman isn't convinced. "You can't visualize a Ferrari and expect it to turn up the next day. Life doesn't work like that. And I wish they went into that a little more," he said.

Burman, the founder of Toronto-based independent publisher Burman Books, recently signed Marie Diamond and Joe Vitale, two more members of *The Secret*'s extended family. Diamond's book, *The Very Simple Law of Attraction*, has obvious connections.

Burman sees *The Secret*'s success as easily explained. "Basically, human beings are lazy. If you tell them you can get rich just by thinking about it, obviously, they're going to buy it." But he knows a cash cow when he sees one: Riding *The Secret*'s success, he's projecting sales of at least 400,000 for each of Vitale's and Diamond's books. "It used to be, if we sold 20,000 copies of anything, we were lucky," he said.

Burman hosted Diamond at an event at Indigo Books on Bloor last weekend, where she took some questions from a packed audience. "I'm a really big believer in The Secret," said one, a young black woman. "But I also believe that discrimination and racism are real. How can you harmonize those things?"

Diamond, a middle-aged Belgian woman with a welcoming air, nodded knowingly. "You just said you believe in discrimination. You be-*live* it. I'm going to ask you to stop believing it, because if you focus on the negative, you project it yourself."

Another, from a young man. "I really love what you're doing," he says. "But how, for example, was 9/11 attracted to the people in those buildings? That's something I can't understand."

Another thoughtful pause. Diamond, in her madras blazer and jeans, furrows her brow and speaks softly, breathily. "Sometimes, we experience the law of attraction collectively," she says. "The U.S. maybe had a fear of being attacked. Those 3,000 people – they might have put out some kind of fear that attracted this to happen, fear of dying young, fear that something might happen that day. But sometimes, it is collective."

Back on the Danforth, the women in Gangbar's Girls Night Out group spend some time trading stories – one, of how the law of attraction allowed her to become a top entrepreneur in the province; another, how the law drew her up from rock bottom and into home ownership and self-sufficience.

One women, with white hair, stares blankly, having related her own law experience: Willing a seat on the TTC. "You all make me feel so insignificant. You're out making millions, and I'm happy with my seat on the bus," she blurts out.

A comforting chorus erupts – "noooooooooooo!" – and one woman, Chris Mallman, the entrepreneur, takes her hand. "You've started. It's begun for you. You're way ahead of the general population," she says, while the other women applaud.

Here, in practice, not theory, common sense reigns. "If I apply these things and they work, fabulous. If not, no harm," says Novlette Fraser. "It was the money falling from the sky stuff that got under my skin," she said.

"I took offence to that too. It cheapened it," says Crews. "But that's the thing about this stuff – you take what you want, and leave the rest."