

Have we all been self-helped?

Every generation tries to improve itself, and some even try to help the next one. We Americans have always been 'navel-gazers,' and we have, over time, adopted many different ways of searching for meaning in this ever-changing world. Apart from exploring the whys and wherefores of American political life, we've concentrated on things like faith and what influence it has had and should continue to have in our lives. There were times when we lived by the strength of our faith. Our forebears of the first colonies relied on their belief in God to endure hardships and generally didn't question their faith or its relevance in their lives.

The pendulum of introspection is not static; it moves back and forth. It never rests in the middle. We move from self-assuredness to self-doubt as sure as night follows day. One of the things that assures us of who we are as a people is a crisis. Pick one. Any one. The Depression, WWII, 911 - all served to bind us together. There was no need to go on a walkabout to find your 'center.' We stood together, united, as one, in a crisis. After WWII, our parents spoiled us rotten, maybe out of guilt, maybe just because they, themselves, weren't spoiled. Either way, they did. Ask one of them *why* if you're lucky enough to still have a parent living. My generation began its search for the meaning of life in the late fifties/sixties. Those, like me, who never used drugs of any kind, looked to the artists, the writers and musicians among us to point the way. Folk songs by Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and others along with the great authors of American history seemed to help us make a connection with our past and also seemed to point the way forward. In the sixties, everybody was trying to get in touch with their inner selves and grapple with the true meaning of life. We moved from the Marriage Manual and the Kinsey Report to "The Joy of Sex." *Before I forget, I believe the first self-help book was written by a man by the name of Samuel Smiles way back in 1859, so we have a rich history of attempts to 'be all we can be.'* My first encounter was "The power of positive thinking" by Dr. Norman Vincent Peale. It made a big difference in my life. Thanks, doc.

That book was followed by several others like "How to win friends and influence people" by Dale Carnegie and eventually encouraged me to take a psychology course in college. Looking back to the sixties and early seventies, many of us were trying to find the answers to our existence and if we were truly locked into patterns of behavior because of our upbringing (each generation blames its parents). Even the Beatles were making pilgrimages to India to investigate the secrets of the subcontinent's mysticism. California was, of course, the epicenter for the metaphysical, personal growth and fulfillment training sector with EST (Erhard Seminars Training) and many other courses in the Human Potential Movement.

Americans were exploring, something we've always been famous for since pioneer days, but this time the expedition was to the mind, the heart and the soul. Who the heck were we as individuals? As a group? Why was there still a racial divide and a 'hawk vs. dove' split and a gender gap and so much more? We dove into the deep end of the self-help pool to find out. We came up with Wayne Dyer, Tony Robbins, Deepak Chopra, Dr. Laura, Ruth Messenger and an ocean of books and TV shows that delved into our psyches and our relationships. With each book purchase we have added to the growing self-help industry (now estimated to be in the range of \$10-12 billion/year). It encompasses psychiatrists, psychologists and therapists, the clergy and our family and friends (hopefully your family and friends aren't charging for their advice). We're still trying to find our place in this world. Many believe that the answers lie in a book or a course at our community colleges. There is one book, however, that seems to help millions of people get a handle on their humanity. It's the Bible, and it's jam-packed with stories of human frailty, recovery and redemption. I can recommend it to anybody. It is a good read. The truth is that the search for self should never stop, and it should definitely not stop at our local bookstore. It's one of those wonderful road trips that makes living life worthwhile...all the way to the exit ramp.

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