

OPINION

In praise of self-help

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In response to a recent BBC Radio 4 *Thinking Allowed* programme by sociologist Laurie Taylor which cast a critical eye on self-help books, this article offers an argument in support of self-help books at their best. Self-help books offer understanding, empathy, encouragement, tools to understand and manage life, and a sense of participation in a network of people in a similar situation. Further, there is a democratization of knowledge such that the psychotherapeutic, psychiatric and medical establishments are sharing wisdom and tools that can be used by individuals, or in peer learning. The effectiveness of integrating professional with self-help is discussed. This is a ‘both/and’ perspective of encouraging people to be aware of the social context that informs their life, but also supporting them in managing and transforming their own attitudes and choices, so that they can chart a course, including a social contribution, that is effective, peaceful and creative.

Keywords: self-help; democratization of knowledge; life tools; social context; social contribution

Having listened with interest to a podcast about self-help books by sociologist and broadcaster Laurie Taylor on his *Thinking Allowed* series (BBC Radio 4, 2014) that turned out to be pretty damning of the genre, I found myself inspired to provide a complementary perspective.

The general gist of the programme, supported by interviews with academics, was that the burgeoning of self-help books puts the onus on the individual to change, without casting a critical eye on the wider social process and one’s social circumstances that may be having a deleterious effect on one’s life. The individual is asked to feel better by becoming more attractive in the social world, often by improving their bodies or their sexual performance. And beyond the books are the television shows with various kinds of makeovers of homes, parenting, fashion, cooking, clothes or bodies, often with middle-class experts showing working-class people how to live. This need to transform oneself becomes part of a consumer culture that seeks to promote dissatisfaction with how things are, and to encourage novelty and change, which will lead to more consumption.

As always with Laurie Taylor, the whole approach was clearly argued, and provided an important critical analysis. My summary paragraph cannot of course do justice to the full richness of the perspective. He also was very transparent in admitting to his own prejudices in the matter, which include his dislike of the Catholic-catechism approach to self-improvement of his childhood, the

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un-Britishness of too much optimism, and the fact that self-help is big business. On this latter point, I must say that like all publishing, self-help is a money-maker only for the very, very few; and even in these cases, so what? If it does any good at all, it is surely better than making money doing something that does no one any good.

Professor Taylor conceded that the books might be okay for people with serious problems, but not for normal, well-functioning people. In fact, it might be the other way around. It is the people with more serious problems who need professional help rather than self-help, at least to start them off, while those who can hold their own in life can also surely learn a thing or two to their advantage.

But more important, there was no attempt to look at the positive aspects of this self-help trend. Nor did Professor Taylor give any indication that he had read any of the books, as opposed to the academic treatises about them. As someone who has written books that go on the self-help shelves of bookshops (Glouberman, 2007, 2010, 2014a), but believes firmly in the importance of the social context, I wonder if I can enlarge this perspective.

Can it be ‘both/and’?

To me, this not-uncommon individual vs social context argument represents unhelpful ‘either/or’ thinking. Can’t we do ‘both/and’?

I would be the first to argue that if we don’t see where we fit in the scheme of things, and particularly in the social and cultural set of assumptions and practices that wound us, we will ‘blame the victim’, namely ourselves, and try to fix ourselves up to become acceptable to that social world. Or we will learn the tools of success, and go for broke without any awareness of what harm we might do in the process. And there is certainly a large range of self-help books, and indeed of therapies and coaching more generally, that urges us to succeed at the social game in a way that may bring us money, power, status and the like, but ignores our deepest truths and our relationship to the world around us. To this extent, I agree that self-help can help support a damaging status quo.

In my own field of working with imagery, much of what is called ‘visualization’ deals with what I consider the surface imagination, that which is guided by the past and by the social world. Visioning at this surface level ends by creating a future picture based on the desires and imperatives that emerge from the old social and family values that we have internalized. It is a powerful tool, and certainly can help us succeed, but it doesn’t take account of the social cost, or even of our own authentic desires. This is the *me-me-me* approach sometimes associated with self-help!

On the other hand, what happens if we do look outward critically at the social realities that are harming us and others, and even seek to go out and change the world, but do not look inward at the beliefs, assumptions, emotions and behaviours that we have internalized, and do not take responsibility for finding new attitudes and practices that will move us in a positive direction? We stand the risk of operating from an angry, powerless and ultimately ineffective position.

If you have been wounded by a spear and don’t stop to heal, you will go out fighting with the spear still stuck in you. You are likely to be weak, enraged, irrational and pretty clumsy – not the best way to start the good fight.

Why turn to a self-help book?

This is where the self-help tradition comes in, to offer not only understanding, empathy and encouragement, but also tools to help people understand their situation, manage their complicated lives, let go of whatever no longer serves them and figure out a better way forward. It makes it possible for readers to take charge of their lives without necessarily getting pills for the depression and the physical illnesses that result, or paying for therapy they can't afford, or feeling deeply ashamed of their weaknesses and failures.

In addition, it need not be a me-me-me approach. Thus, for example, imagery can be used as a tool that opens people up to what I call the 'genius imagination' or the 'holistic imagination', a deeper creative level that tends to be authentic, holistic, interconnected and therefore also socially responsible (Glouberman, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d). At this level, it is possible to connect to that inner will and wisdom that will help people to understand and guide their own lives from the inside out, and do it in a way that includes their relationship to their social world.

Furthermore, self-help books are full of stories about people in similar circumstances, so that readers feel recognized, understood, part of the world, rather than stranded, lonely and frightened. Sometimes this is more important than the tools.

Readers of my books have sometimes told me that the most important thing for them was that they felt accompanied and understood, and could now see that their situation made sense, that they were not alone, they were not failures and there was a way forward. They often felt as if I knew them personally, and was telling their story. One burnt-out man who had felt completely lost and was getting no help from the professionals said, 'I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't found your book'. The power of the story to bring us into the social world again can be tremendous.

All this is very much part of the humanistic tradition of seeing people with difficulties not as ill and needing curing, but as people facing constant challenges and joys on their path of evolution and self-development.

Power sharing

Self-help books also serve another, less overt yet incredibly important function, that of the democratization of knowledge. People can read a book and get to work on improving their lives without having to seek, wait for or pay for expert knowledge. It is the DIY of the therapy world. Naturally, the 'experts' don't always like this dismantling of their mystique.

I said earlier that my books do tend to go on the self-help shelves of bookshops. And yet I don't see them in quite that way myself. Rather, my view is that I am providing a set of concepts and skills in simple language that non-professionals can use to help themselves, that therapists, doctors and psychiatrists can use to help their patients or clients, and that friends and family can use to help their friends and family. I am distilling some basic principles that don't have to stay in the consulting room, and that are safe yet powerful.

Thus, self-help can be in the business of taking absolute power away from the medical, psychiatric and therapeutic establishment. As a therapist, I can share my

power by offering people the tools that I use in the consulting room. This surely is a good thing.

There are, to be sure, certain aspects of therapy that definitely need another person, and preferably a professional. At the centre of many therapies is the therapeutic relationship, which does require working with another human being. Also, the therapist can help with clients' blind spots, support them to face traumatic or difficult issues, offer a clear and loving eye and listening ear, refuse to take things personally, and have the skills and wisdom that all those years of training and experience provide.

But there is a very large swathe of what happens in the consulting room that we can teach people to do themselves. We can also encourage peer-to-peer learning, showing how to work with a friend or with a group of friends to take turns guiding and being guided.

I myself first became interested in developing the approach to imagery I call Imagework (Glouberman, 2007, 2010, 2014a) because I wanted to evolve from therapist to teacher. I wanted to share my skills, and send people off to do their own thing, rather than to be 'the one' who had all the answers. Imagery enhances the depth and effectiveness of learning and problem solving of any kind, from trauma resolution to visioning and achieving goals. While it is a mainstay of therapy, it can also be a powerful part of the tool-kit that non-professionals can use to manage their lives.

We don't need an either/or position with regard to therapy and self-help. It is possible to meet clients more infrequently than is usual in traditional therapy, and to put more onus on the client to do homework, such as imagery or communication or writing exercises, and to reach out to create a supportive environment around themselves.¹ As I tell my clients, this is an awful lot cheaper than coming to see me twice a week.

The therapy sessions then become a way to set someone on their own path, and to help make sure they stay on it, rather than being the only show in the person's life. The approach called 'guided self-help' (see, for example, Camden and Islington Psychological Therapies Service, n.d.) is a popular Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) variant of this 'both/and' position.

I sometimes feel like a General Practitioner whom people can come back to and consult when the going gets rough, while in between, their own self-healing practices, processes and relationships are taking care of them. Then, hopefully, if people want to deal directly with the way that the status quo damages people and to seek change, they will be strong, aligned and clear, and able to do battle in a way that is effective. The spear will have been pulled out, their power and wisdom will be integrated and they will be peaceful warriors.

In praise

My conclusion: let us praise self-help, as long as there is a recognition that the individual is part of a social context. Let us also praise the ability to ask for help from others, including from professionals, when we are beyond the limits of our own resources. And let us praise that in us that seeks to become strong, clear, loving and wise, not just for ourselves, but because this is the best way to be a force for good in the world.

Interestingly enough, one of the academics Laurie Taylor interviewed, Professor Christine Whelan of the University of Wisconsin, talked of how the latest trend in self-help books is a focus on people finding their purpose, and their ability to contribute (Whelan, 2000).

It's not all about me-me-me after all.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note

1. See for example <http://www.dinaglouberman.com/self-help/>.

Notes on contributor



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