



HOW WE GOT HERE— WHEREVER *HERE* IS

If you're reading it in a book, folks, it ain't *self-help*. It's *help*.

—Comedian George Carlin

As a concept, self-help is no Tony-come-lately.

The term *self-help* was not coined as a synonym for psychobabble. It has a long and rich tradition of usage in connection with far more reputable practices in the realm of law. Legal self-help refers to a raft of situation-specific remedies available to a complainant directly—that is, without involving lawyers or even courts. This facet of American jurisprudence, in marked contrast to the type of self-help this book mostly tackles, has always been about *action*, not words. Remedies of this nature are formal step-by-step procedures designed to bring about lawful satisfaction for the individual. Properly handled, they enjoy full courtroom standing, should they later be challenged by those on the receiving end. Some of America's most familiar legal instruments include self-help provisions. Depending on the state in which you live, your auto loan may contain a clause that stipulates your banker's right to simply come out to your driveway and retrieve your car the minute you fall into arrears on payments.¹ That is legal self-help.

Some of the earliest self-help books were written in this vein. In "300 Years of Self-Help Law Books," a fascinating piece for the Web site of the legal publisher Nolo, Mort Rieber tells us that as early as 1784 the book *Every Man His Own Lawyer* was already in its ninth edition here in America, after original publication in London. *Every Man*,

writes Rieber, was touted as “a complete guide in all matters of law and business negotiations for every State of the Union. With legal forms for drawing the necessary papers, and full instructions for proceeding, without legal assistance, in suits and business transactions of every description.” The book may have been one of the self-help industry’s first best sellers. According to Rieber, *Every Man’s* author, John Wells, states in his introduction that the first edition “was prepared and presented to the public many years ago and was received with great favor, attaining a larger scale, it is believed, than any work published within its time.” So-called layman’s law was a hot publishing genre. Rieber reports that from 1687 to 1788, every law book published in America was intended for use by laypeople, not lawyers.

Even in psychiatric settings, *self-help* didn’t, and doesn’t, always refer to the softer, frothier stuff of Drs. Phil and Laura. Serious-minded clinicians use the term to describe efforts by mentally or emotionally impaired patients to live independent, productive lives. A sizable contingent of the psychiatric industry is engaged in this cause, and legitimate practitioners bristle at the pejorative ring the term *self-help* has acquired in recent decades.

In a sense, the currently popular conception of self-help also dates back to colonial times. It’s not far-fetched to propose that Benjamin Franklin wrote the first American SHAM book—1732’s *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, with its bounty of homespun witticisms. Advice columnists and others offering “tips for better living” have been with us more or less continuously ever since. Two genuinely historic works flowered from the spiritual dust bowl of the Depression, and in the same year, no less: 1937 saw the publication of Napoleon Hill’s *Think and Grow Rich* as well as Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, which many still consider *the* quintessential self-help book. For sheer longevity, it’s hard to argue. On a September day some sixty-six years after its publication, *How to Win Friends* still came in at number ninety-nine in Amazon.com’s sales rankings. Sales haven’t been hurt by the book’s prominence in Dale Carnegie Courses taught by an army of twenty-seven hundred facilitators worldwide. Corporate trainers will tell you that the book is as relevant today as it was in 1937. Another

landmark self-help tract in the Carnegie mold was Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*, published in 1952.

Significantly, though, until the advent of modern self-help, and with the handful of exceptions just noted, writers usually saw themselves as mere conduits of information, not experts in their own right. When she started her column in the 1950s, even the supremely opinionated "Dear Abby," Abigail Van Buren (given name: Pauline Friedman Phillips), would invoke recognized authorities in addressing readers' questions. "Abby's" real-life sister, Ann Landers, also relied on outside experts; Landers "had a Rolodex to kill for," according to Carol Felsenthal, one of her biographers. M. Scott Peck, the psychiatrist whom some rank with Carnegie as a seminal force in modern self-help, felt compelled to source and footnote his signature 1978 work, *The Road Less Traveled*. Peck credited many of his key concepts to such "name" forebears as Jung and Freud, and he bulwarked his opinions with ample excerpts from scholarly journals.

Then, in 1967, came the revolution that Carnegie's book had foreshadowed: the rise of the guru, the transformation from simple advice giver to cultural and motivational soothsayer. That year witnessed the publication of psychiatrist Thomas A. Harris's smash hit *I'm OK—You're OK*, which transformed self-help in three critical respects. First, it answered any remaining questions about the viability of self-help publishing as an ongoing genre. Second, it refocused psychology's lens: Harris sought less to make sense of the individual per se than to make sense of the way that individual functioned in, and was shaped by, relationships—a pursuit that has occupied virtually all of self-help, as well as a good deal of standard psychology, ever since.² Third and most important, although Harris strained for an upbeat tone and always insisted that he intended his book as a blueprint for happier living, the overriding inflection was that most people *aren't* OK. The author explicitly posited that the average person is damaged early in childhood and walks around thereafter in a paranoid, self-pitying state Harris called "I'm *not* OK, you're OK." (Harris's other three basic states of relational being were "I'm not OK, you're not OK"; "I'm OK, you're not OK"; and—hallelujah—"I'm OK, you're OK.")

It would be unfair to hold Harris personally responsible for all that happened in his book's wake. But this much is certain: The melancholic view of people and personality set forth in *I'm OK—You're OK* succinctly captured the sense of Victimization that dominated self-help—and, to no small degree, American culture—for the next quarter century.

A WORLD OF VICTIMS

Victimization.

Some readers, especially recent arrivals to the self-help arena, might be surprised to see that term associated with the movement. The most visible and successful proponents of today's self-help are not out of the Thomas Harris mold. Dr. Phil McGraw, Tony Robbins, and their various imitators spend little time wringing their hands over the childhood traumas that leave one ill equipped for coping with life. They more closely resemble Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale, who, long before it became an army recruiting slogan, were essentially screaming, "Be all that you can be!"

But, in fact, the self-help movement still divides, roughly, into two camps.

There is *Empowerment*—broadly speaking, the idea that you are *fully* responsible for *all* you do, good and bad.

And, in contrast, there is *Victimization*, which sells the idea that you are *not* responsible for what you do (at least not the bad things).

Victimization and Empowerment represent the yin and the yang of the self-help movement. It is likely that this schism will always exist, no matter which guru or message becomes the flavor of the day. Further, it's important to realize that *visibility* is not the same as *influence*; though one or the other side may seem to go underground at any given time, its effects continue to be felt, sometimes in seismic fashion.

While nothing as wide-ranging and multifaceted as SHAM follows a neat time line, clearly after Thomas Harris's success and the rise of self-help publishing, Victimization held sway for more than twenty years, from the late 1960s through the 1980s. The earlier of those two end points, of course, represents more than a date. The 1960s were and are

an *ethos*, a time conjured in words and phrases that remain freighted with personal disillusionment and cultural discord to this day: Vietnam. Integration. The Sexual Revolution. Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out. In a society that seemed to be losing its bearings, the narrative of Victimization, with its backstory writ of excuses and alibis, appealed to growing numbers of Americans.³ Whether the climate of rising social unrest fueled the culture of blame or the culture of blame helped fuel the unrest, the two currencies undoubtedly catalyzed each other, with an explosive effect on the average person's understanding, or misunderstanding, of his relationship to the outside world.

This is not to say that all of the Americans who began flocking to self-help during the late 1960s embraced Victimization. Just a few years after Thomas Harris encouraged people to dwell on their childhood traumas, Werner Erhard touted a regimen known as "est," in which trainers would literally scream obscenities at followers in an effort to bully them past their hang-ups to a higher, more tough-minded plane of "beingness."⁴ But est remained on the fringe. It was too quirky, and its chief architect too flaky, to capture the popular imagination. Besides, like other upstart regimens that sold unabridged Empowerment, it depended on a worldview that was out of sync with what most people could plainly see happening around them. (Arguing for full control of one's destiny was not easy in the era of the draft.) On the contrary, Victimization's success—then as now—was that it appealed to, and indeed legitimized, the human tendency to feel sorry for one's self.

But above all, Victimization thrived because there existed a ready-made template for reaching out to—and inside of—people. It was a template that already enjoyed some respect, one that, the movement's leaders soon realized, could be cloned and applied to almost any problem. It offered not just explanations but also the precious hope of recovery from whatever ailed or troubled you. That template was the twelve-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).

The twelve-step approach spawned an entire submovement—*Recovery*—that has profoundly influenced not just SHAM but society as a whole. The specific twelve steps are generally credited to Bill Wilson (the much-mythologized "Bill W."), a salesman and contemporary of

Dale Carnegie who in 1935 cofounded AA with a proctologist/surgeon, Robert (“Dr. Bob”) Smith. Wilson was an interesting character—among other things, an inveterate spiritualist who fancied Ouija boards and regularly conversed with the dead. After starting AA, Wilson and some of the organization’s early members codified the steps of Recovery in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. With minor variations in nuance as well as some adaptations to fit changing mores, the twelve steps have remained pretty much the same ever since, regardless of the specific problem being “treated.”

All members of Recovery groups have engaged in the following twelve steps:

1. Admitted they were powerless over their addiction—that their lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than themselves could restore them to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn their will and their lives over to the care of God as they understood God.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of themselves.
5. Admitted to God, to themselves, and to another human being the exact nature of their wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked God to remove their shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons they had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when they were wrong promptly admitted it.

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve their conscious contact with God as they understood God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for them and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, they tried to carry this message to other addicts, and to practice these principles in all their affairs.

If you've had little exposure to the twelve steps, you may be surprised at the religiosity of the foregoing. In truth, through the years, while the steps have remained fairly constant, Recovery's "tone" has grown more secular, featuring greater emphasis on a generic "Power" and less overt mention of God per se. This is particularly true of twelve-step programs that originated in the antiestablishment 1960s, as God fell out of fashion and twelve-step impresarios understood that by hewing so closely to the old spiritual line, they risked alienating their target audiences. Some of today's most "progressive" twelve-steps fudge the issue by arguing that the higher power is something that resides in a person's untapped "spiritual consciousness."

But no matter who or what the "Power" is, kneeling before it is integral to the twelve steps. "The overriding message is that your own will is basically what got you into this mess in the first place, which is why you have to surrender it," Steven Wolin, a professor at George Washington University and a practicing psychiatrist, told me. "In a sense, the argument is that in order to salvage yourself, you have to surrender yourself."

Bill W. and his twelve-step program symbolized a revolutionary outlook on a problem—alcoholism—that had long been treated as a character flaw or moral failing. Since a character flaw or moral failing wasn't normally seen as something you'd "recover" from, like chicken pox, AA's twelve-step method represented a landmark moment in America's appraisal of addictions. Despite the twelve steps' discussion of "defects of character," the unmistakable implication was that alcoholics had *a disease*. By the late 1960s, that new way of looking at alcoholism had gained institutional support from both the American

Psychiatric Association and the American Medical Association. At this point, all it took to pave the way for the SHAM juggernaut was someone to expand the validity of those assumptions and treatment concepts beyond alcoholics.

Enter Thomas Harris. Pre-Harris, the tendency to excuse one's own faults or blame them on others was seen as a character flaw in itself. The particular genius of *I'm OK—You're OK* and the books it inspired was that such works broadened the context: Suddenly it wasn't just alcoholics who were dogged by self-destructive tendencies they could not control or even fully explain. Victimization became socially permissible, if not almost fashionable in certain circles. (If you didn't confess to being haunted by the demons of your past, you were "in denial.") If Harris could be believed, almost *all* of us had something we needed to "recover from." Thomas Harris took Victimization mainstream.

Its moorings sunk in notions of Recovery, Victimization theory was embraced by a loose coalition of pop psychologists, social scientists, and academics. Often citing Harris, as well as his mentor, Eric Berne, they sought to explain every human frailty as a function of some hardwired predisposition or inescapable social root: You were basically trapped by your makeup and/or environment and thus had a ready alibi for any and all of your failings. As Wendy Kaminer observes in *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional*, Victimization encouraged people to find fatalistic patterns—and the rationalizations they afforded—everywhere: "Grandfather was an alcoholic, mother is a compulsive rescuer, Uncle Murray weighs 270 pounds. Father is a sex addict, your sister is anorexic . . ." Within the movement, a teapot tempest raged over whether the real culprit was nature or nurture, or what degree of each. But both camps arrived at the same philosophical end point: You were helpless against the forces that made you what you were.

Consequently, Victimization told people to stop beating themselves up: No one wants to make hurtful mistakes, but we're human, and as Alexander Pope told us, humans err. *You gotta let go of all that guilt!* You didn't make yourself this way, so *it's not your fault*. After all, wasn't the very first step out of twelve an admission of *powerlessness*? Victimization

framed guilt as a bad thing, which, by implication if not definition, also framed conscience as a bad thing.

By extension, the message became *Your needs are paramount here. It's all about you*. Recovering a healthy sense of self entailed forsaking your excessive or unhealthy concern for others—for in the twelve-step universe, such excessive concern came to constitute the pitiable emotional quagmire of *codependency*. (As we will see later in the book, by the concept's heyday in the late 1980s, the term would be applied to just about every interpersonal relationship that fell short of sheer bliss.)

In their eagerness to provide additional mechanisms for overcoming guilt and self-loathing, the Victimization movement's spiritual leaders made an important discovery: They could help a constituent better cope with the burden of his failings by *redefining* them. This insight led to clever semantic distinctions that either made the untoward behaviors sound tamer or, following Bill W.'s example, framed those shortcomings as actual medical or psychological conditions. Such artful use of language became a hallmark of the self-help movement and had dramatic repercussions far beyond the world of SHAM. Under this guiding principle, which became known as the "disease model" of bad or unproductive behavior, the roster of newfound conditions naturally mushroomed. Drug abuse, sex addiction, compulsive eating, compulsive lying, compulsive shopping, compulsive gambling—eventually these problems and many others were deemed diseases.

With Victimization's momentum thus established, and new books and gurus debuting as fast as publishers could sign the deals, it hardly seemed to matter that this widespread application of the disease model struck some knowledgeable observers as offhand and implausible. In *PC, M.D.*, Dr. Sally Satel indicts the American Psychiatric Association, factions of the American Medical Association, and allied interests for scrapping hard science in favor of political correctness. "They arbitrarily devised convenient syndromes and talked about them as if they were uncontested medical fact," Satel told me. "It didn't matter whether there was any clinical evidence for it. It fit the behavioral model they had adopted." Further, according to Satel, as the feminist movement

picked up steam, premenstrual syndrome and postpartum depression, once the punch lines of male-chauvinist jokes, became fodder for earnest debate, then viable defenses in homicide trials. It wasn't long, she says, before women as a class were conditioned to think of themselves as slaves to this hormonal governance.

Politicians and their operatives also saw the possibilities here. They stirred the pot, adding to the sense of disenfranchisement among already disgruntled factions while reinforcing their feelings of oppression and entitlement. *The government owes you. Society owes you. They made you this way. Again: It's not your fault.* Inexorably, such notions began to undermine clear-cut judgments about morality, since blame was being shifted from the people who transgressed to the people who (allegedly) *caused* the transgression. Even murderers sometimes ceased to be murderers and instead became *victims* of the conditions that made them murder. After a Jamaican immigrant, Colin Ferguson, shot twenty-five Long Island Railroad commuters, killing six, on December 7, 1993, Ferguson's attorneys broached a novel "black-rage" defense, claiming that years of white oppression had driven him to the edge of insanity. Ferguson ultimately rejected the defense, decided to represent himself, and was convicted—but the case sparked ongoing discussions of black rage and its sociological effects, with the Reverend Al Sharpton and others insisting on the legitimacy of the concept.

THE EMPOWERERS STRIKE BACK

The black-rage defense represented the mentality "Dr. Laura" Schlesinger had in mind when, long before George W. Bush, she ignited controversy by observing, "There is evil in the world, and giving it a different name doesn't make it less evil." Notions of good and evil, right and wrong, have grown steadily more difficult to apply, even define, since SHAM got involved.

Schlessinger emerged as part of the early backlash against Victimization, and surely became its most strident voice. But while members of the nascent Empowerment movement claimed they were promoting a more liberating and responsible view of human nature, they had diffi-

culty getting people to relinquish the moral relief that Victimization afforded. The gospel of Victimization gave its followers easy outs for ugly behavior; it also made questions of guilt or innocence eye-of-the-beholder judgments—and in the end made such judgments largely irrelevant anyway. If individuals were driven by dark circumstances and barely remembered (but irresistible) forces from childhood, how could they be blamed for whatever stupid or immoral acts they committed along the way?

This was an extraordinarily appealing message that critics of Victimization found impossible to overcome with half measures. The Empowerment camp had to create a form of sloganism that was as seductive as Victimization's. "We are a very *doing* society," Dr. Michael Hurd, the author of *Effective Therapy* and one of psychology's canniest observers, told me. "People buy self-help books because they're looking for answers. The extreme views tend to produce books with bullet points and catchy titles that sell. . . . In general, people in our culture don't want to think through complex issues. They want to know, 'What do I *do*?' " And when that's the need you're trying to meet, says Hurd, "There's going to be a tendency to oversimplify."

Thus, Empowerment developed a new message: "You're not powerless—you're omnipotent!" Under the rules of Empowerment, you were the sovereign master of your fate and could defeat any and all obstacles in life.

So were these second-stage gurus knowingly disingenuous? Promising more than they knew they could deliver? Here Hurd treads delicately. "It's possible that some of them have been disingenuous," he told me, "but you don't like to think that it's all about making money." He concedes that the developing self-help industry was "a real test of integrity for the psychiatric profession." Whatever their degree of sincerity, the fathers of Empowerment—soon joined by the keepers of political correctness and by opportunistic (if barely credentialed) SHAM gurus—trotted out their own clever semantics, in this case designed to make people feel unconstrained by anything. The handicapped or disabled became "special" or "differently abled." Homes wracked by divorce and other domestic upsets became "nontraditional households."

The tenor could not have differed more from that of Victimization, but the goal was the same: eradicate the problem by couching it in destigmatizing language.

Far from merely affecting how America spoke, these semantic shifts inevitably determined how America thought and felt about the circumstances they described. David Blankenhorn, founder and president of the Institute for American Values and the author of *Fatherless America*, told me, “There’s no question that one subtle change in terminology—replacing *unwed* with *single* before the word *mother*—altered the way society perceived the condition itself. It made out-of-wedlock pregnancy so much more palatable to a generation of women, and the nation.”

Ultimately, despite its own excesses, Empowerment would not do away with Victimization or even stunt its growth very much. As we’ll see in more detail in chapter 8, even today, if you can’t stop smoking or snorting or stealing or gambling or having sex with people who are wearing a ring you didn’t give them, it’s probably not because you’re weak, venal, or decadent. It’s because you *can’t help yourself*. The stalker who knifed tennis great Monica Seles during a match avoided jail time because the judge was moved by his confession of his obsessive love for Seles’s rival Steffi Graf.

Though the Empowerment camp now gets most of the coverage (and profits), Empowerment and Victimization represent a pair of formidable estuaries flowing from the same river. They exist side by side on bookshelves, and sometimes exist side by side in the same self-help expert. Joseph Jennings, a former gangbanger who has fashioned a thriving speaking career out of his squalid past, tells his inner-city scholastic assemblies “you can be anything you want”—but that if they fail, “it’s the legacy of slavery.”

Two generations after *West Side Story*’s “Gee, Officer Krupke” poked fun at psychiatric cop-outs, that same core principle—what ails you is beyond your control—remains alive and (un)well. But paradoxically, it’s been joined by a second belief: There’s not a *thing* wrong with you, and you can have it all, if you just go for it with gusto!

SHAM LAND

In his brilliant book *Fat Land*, Greg Critser points out that more than a generation's worth of faddish weight-loss programs have served only to produce the fattest generation of Americans on record. (Not insignificantly, weight-loss programs have become, in essence, self-help programs, especially now that both Phil McGraw and John Gray are actively involved.) So, too, almost four decades after *I'm OK—You're OK*, one wonders what happened to all the self-improvement this mountain of help was supposed to bring about.

Certainly SHAM's debut in the 1960s coincided with a period wherein the nation began to make great strides in race relations, the glass ceiling, and other barometers of overall social health. America today "feels like" a more enlightened place in which to live than America in 1960: We conduct ourselves with greater sensitivity to the feelings of those around us. We communicate more openly and productively with our spouses and friends. We're better at raising our children—or, at least, we give a whole lot more thought to it than did our parents and particularly their parents, who raised kids by the seat of their pants, seldom sparing the rod.

But anyone who watches the news knows that not all of the changes in American society have been positive, and that even some of the "positive changes" may have more to do with redefining the bad things than with actually making them better. When you get away from the pleasant-sounding spin, the statistics are far less encouraging.

Divorce in 1960 claimed about a quarter of all marriages. Today it claims about half. Although thankfully that statistic is trending back down, American marriages have the highest known failure rate in the world. It can be argued, and has been by feminists, that increased divorce isn't necessarily a bad thing. People in general, and women in particular, no longer feel compelled to suffer dismal unions in silence. The rising tide of women's rights and opportunities, combined with other societal support factors, has given restless wives the initiative and optimism to leave the kinds of marriages with which their counterparts from prior generations "made do."

But how many Americans walk out the door because they no longer feel compelled to suffer *so-so* marriages in silence? Worse, how many Americans has SHAM conditioned to *think* their marriages are so-so, when in reality they're pretty normal?

Nowadays, young marrieds of both genders may be a tad *too* focused on their own fulfillment, with catastrophic effects for domestic tranquillity. I first interviewed David Blankenhorn for a magazine assignment in 1988, and he told me, "I think people today are less forgiving in relationships, and more inclined to walk at the drop of a hat." He made an interesting point about the famous JFK quote "Ask not what your country can do for you . . ." and its relevance to a wholesale change in society's perspective on the institution of marriage. "In years past," Blankenhorn told me, "getting married was more of a selfless act. You did it in order to build something bigger than you—a family—and to be able to give what you could to the children of that union." That's all changed, he said: "People today go into a marriage expecting to a far greater degree to have their own needs met. Instead of giving *to* the marriage, they want much more *from* the marriage. And often what they want is unrealistic." It's hard to see such mental turnabouts as anything other than a consequence of SHAM-bred "insights." Indeed, it may not be coincidence that the greatest jump in American divorce, postwar, came between 1975 and 1990, a fifteen-year period that roughly corresponds to the most feverish SHAM activity. (At the same time, more and more Americans are turning to SHAM gurus for advice on matters of the heart, which makes relationships one of the largest segments of the self-help movement, as we will see later in the book.)

Whatever the ultimate truth here, there's one group of Americans who don't have the luxury of considering the matter with academic detachment: children. As a direct result of all this coupling and uncoupling, 45 percent of American children today live in "nontraditional households." One child in three is born to an unmarried mother. The figure in 1960 was one child in *twenty*, adding credence to Blankenhorn's observation about the semantics of unwed parenthood. An alarming number of those mothers are teenagers. To understand the larger consequences of divorce and illegitimacy, consider just this one

statistic: According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 72 percent of incarcerated juveniles come from single-parent households.

Standardized test scores tell us that when kids from “nontraditional households” go to school, they do not learn as much as they should—but neither do their peers from intact families. Here, we may be seeing more bitter fruit from another SHAM tree: self-esteem-based education (a topic we’ll explore in detail in chapter 10). For these and related reasons, school discipline is not what it once was, and school violence is a national embarrassment. To be sure, pernicious forces besides SHAM are at work, but events like the Columbine massacre would’ve been “unthinkable” back in the days before schools lost their way, as Christina Hoff Sommers wrote in a 2000 issue of the *American Enterprise*. Before school administrators began worrying about everything except their mission of helping to raise technically competent, morally centered students.

Speaking of attitudes and behaviors that once were unthinkable: In 1960, would a man who got drunk, broke into an electrical substation, and grabbed hold of a transformer that filled him with thirteen thousand volts have even considered suing the power company? That’s exactly what Ed O’Rourke of Tampa, Florida, did in March 2000. O’Rourke also sued the six bars and liquor stores that sold him booze on the fateful night. His lawsuit claimed that he was “unable to control his urge to drink alcoholic beverages.”

O’Rourke’s case was no anomaly. On May 3, 2000, Seong Sil Kim threw herself in front of a speeding Manhattan subway car. She later collected \$9.9 million from the city because the train, instead of killing her, merely amputated her right hand and inflicted assorted other injuries. And, of course, there is the now-infamous McDonald’s coffee spill. While riding in her son’s sports car in February 1992, Stella Liebeck of Albuquerque, New Mexico, spilled the coffee in her lap. She sued the fast-food giant, claiming the coffee was too hot. When a jury initially awarded her \$2.9 million, many commentators pointed to the case as a fitting symbol of wasteful litigation and what one writer called the “death of common sense.” In fact, the case was more complicated than it was sometimes made to appear, and the award was later reduced

to “only” \$640,000. Still, the reasoning of jurors like Betty Farnham is compelling: Explaining why McDonald’s was at fault, Farnham told the *Wall Street Journal*, “They were not taking care of their customers.” As if people aren’t responsible for realizing on their own that hot coffee is hot.

As a highly regarded trial lawyer told me, “These cases would’ve been laughed out of court during the fifties, if anyone even had the balls to bring the suit.” While such lawsuits may be extreme examples, they do indicate that for all the recent talk about “empowerment,” America in 1960 was a more *genuinely* self-reliant place than America today.

Further testimony: In her tell-all book *Spin Sisters*, Myrna Blyth, a former editor of *Ladies’ Home Journal*, admits that far from empowering women, the nominally feminist industry in which she worked has eroded women’s confidence by sending negative message after negative message. Blyth describes her experience of thumbing through women’s magazines of the “June Cleaver” era and being shocked at how “tough and resilient” those magazines assumed women to be. Whatever 1950s American women lacked in education and financial independence, Blyth argues, they more than made up for it in their ability “to cope with whatever hardship they had to face.” Yet today, after decades of nonstop exposure to an editorial mentality that makes them feel fat, out of style, sexually inadequate, and prone to every new psychic malady or invented disease that comes down the pike, women feel far less power over their domains, Blyth argues.

If America of 1960 was a more self-reliant place, it was also, evidence suggests, a safer, more harmonious place. The U.S. homicide rate has declined in very recent years, but at 5.6 murders for every 100,000 members of the population in 2002, it loitered about 10 percent above where it stood throughout the mid-1960s—an era we then lamented as the height of urban unrest. Not just that, but when today’s perpetrators are brought to trial, they’re more likely to be acquitted because of the introduction of evidence that once would have been considered extraneous. Even Alan Dershowitz, a defense lawyer par excellence, conceded in his book *The Best Defense* that “almost all criminal defendants are, in fact, guilty.” Nonetheless, Paul Pfingst, a former prosecutor and San

Diego district attorney, told me, “Guilt often gets obscured nowadays by all sorts of issues about *how* they turned out that way and *why* they did what they did.”

All of which begs two questions:

(1) *If self-help is so effective at what it's supposed to do, then why is there so much evidence that Americans, and the society they inhabit, are so screwed up?*

Some have argued that things would be even *worse* without self-help; no doubt they imagine a nightmarish world in which *every* marriage ends in divorce, and crime sprees claim the lives of *all* teens in any given city on any Friday night. This is not to say that the self-help movement is directly responsible for all the problems around us: Any number of variables have conspired to tear at the social fabric over the past generation. But as we will see in Part Two of this book, SHAM exacerbated some of those variables. And in any case, the self-help movement, if it works, should have been able to make some major areas of human interaction measurably better than they used to be. Wasn't that SHAM's founding covenant with individuals and society? Didn't it promise to make things better? Make America happier? Make life more rewarding and stress-free? That simply hasn't happened. Which leads to the next question:

(2) *What if it's actually SHAM that's screwing people up?*

If SHAM simply induced individuals to waste their money on self-help books and seminars that don't dramatically change their lives for the better, we as a society wouldn't really have that much of a problem. Granted, many SHAM artists bear a closer resemblance to con artists; and worse, sources that millions of Americans trust—think Oprah Winfrey and the *Today* show—lend legitimacy to gurus' self-help programs. But a close investigation of the self-help movement leads to even more troubling questions about its larger consequences. While social trends arise from a complex set of circumstances, SHAM doctrine has so pervaded our culture—from our schools to our offices to our homes and even to our hospitals—that we have to confront the role it has played in what's happened in our society since SHAM took root.

Does it not make sense that a society in which everyone seeks personal fulfillment might have a hard time holding together? That such a

society would lose its sense of community and collective purpose? That the self-centered individuals who compose that society would find it difficult to relate to, let alone make sincere concessions to, other self-centered individuals?

Yet SHAM artists and their apologists refuse to accept responsibility for the collateral damage self-help does to society. That's no surprise, really, given that they refuse to be held accountable even when they harm the very individual consumers whom they lure in with grand promises of transformation, happiness, and success. Invariably, in fact, they project the blame back *on* the individual. For example, Zig Ziglar, a seminarist extraordinaire, will tell his audiences, "There's no immunity to the disease of self-doubt. It's always in there, waiting to flare up again!"

Therein lies the beauty of it all, from the guru's point of view. If SHAM doesn't transform your life, it's not because the program is ineffective. It's because *you're unworthy*. Victimization-based formats make this point unflinchingly, telling participants whose lives remain stagnant that they are slaves to their dysfunctions, that they'll have to invest more effort if they hope to rise above their innate handicaps. And so you go away thinking, *Well, maybe the next book or seminar will do the trick. Or the next after that . . .*

Surprisingly, Empowerment subscribers are no better off in this regard. Empowerment preaches that you can achieve whatever you set out to achieve, that success is a function of desire and/or commitment. But there is an inescapable converse: that failure is a function of a *lack* of desire and/or commitment. In its purest form, Empowerment admits no circumstances that are unresponsive to the human will. Every short-fall in achievement must be accounted for somehow. And if it's not the program's fault, or the guru's fault . . . then whose?

Whether you're plagued by inner demons you can never quite exorcise (as Victimization intones) or by your demonstrated inability to "conquer all" (as Empowerment insists you must), you arrive without fail at the same despairing place: the dismal state of woe-is-me-ism.