Micki McGee

Self-Help, Inc.

Makeover Culture in American Life

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
2005
From *Power! to Personal Power!*

Survivalism and the Inward Turn

To judge from the rather great discrepancy between the recommendations of the most popular self-help books and the behavior of Americans as described in the testimony of observers, the primary function of the self-improvement handbook was not so much to guide behavior as to explain the dynamic changes of American life in terms of badly shaken traditional verities.

—John G. Cawelti

The historian John Cawelti’s observation regarding mid-nineteenth-century advice books might also be applied to more recent self-improvement literature. Late-twentieth-century and contemporary self-help books attempt to explain changing social and economic conditions. At the same time, some of this literature—particularly titles directed toward women—precipitates aspects of these changes by proposing specific new attitudes, behaviors, and strategies for coping.

Perhaps the most prominent shift in the social landscape during the last quarter of the twentieth century has been the large-scale entry of women into the paid labor force. According to the 2003 *Economic Report of the President*, the number of women working outside the home between 1970 and 2001 increased by nearly 16 percent, while the number of men declined by close to 5 percent.¹ Coincidental with this shift, and perhaps at least in part consequent to it, real wages remained stagnant during all but the last three years of this period. Simultaneously, increasing globalization has contributed to the demand for a cheaper and more flexible domestic labor force—flexibility that has been achieved, in part, through the use of contingent or temporary workers.² So-called downsizing has made “the organization man” of William H. Whyte’s day increasingly anomalous, while
the values of the second wave of feminism have offered middle-class women the opportunity to trade-in Betty Friedan’s “problem that has no name” for what Arlie Russell Hochschild has called “the second shift” and, more recently, “the time bind.” In the early 1980s, Hochschild observed that women living with husbands, children, and/or dependent elderly parents were working two shifts—one in their places of employment, and the second when they got home from work only to confront the work of maintaining their families. By the end of the 1990s, she observed that both women and men living with families were confronted with a third shift: struggling to manage the multiple demands on their finite time while trying to compensate for the emotional toll that these time shortages exacted from their families.

But despite the fact that recent advice literature serves to help people coping with changing social and economic conditions, it would be a mistake to suggest that this literature is rich in formal and substantive innovation.® For the most part, an overview of advice literature of the past thirty years presents a story of more continuity than divergence. Indeed, a close analysis of the literature will demonstrate that most advice books—particularly those titles that are directed toward a general audience rather than targeted toward women—draw on figures from previous literatures. Perhaps most important, the unisex or general advice literature reflects an ongoing turn toward interior concerns—an inward turn that, philosophers and social theorists have observed, constitutes a key feature of modernity. Against this backdrop of continuity there are three substantial developments, one in the unisex literature of self-help and the others in the literatures addressed to women. In the literature addressed toward a general audience, a stark survivalism emerges at the beginning of the 1970s, coinciding with the first of the so-called oil shocks and with the beginning of a period of declining wages and increased competition in the labor market. While survivalism, in the form of social Darwinism, had long justified an American belief in the merits of entrepreneurial competition, bald proposals that one ought to “look out for #1” or “win through intimidation” marked a new ruthlessness in the self-help landscape, a terrain that had previously been marked by its scriptural homilies or appeals to winning friends. In the literatures addressed toward women, a pair of ideas emerged: on the one hand women were urged to apply market principles to their intimate lives—to avoid the newly constructed pathology of “co-dependence”—and on the other hand they were invited to imagine their lives as creative adventures, as works of art. This chapter will consider the unisex or general audience advice literature of this period, exploring the new survivalism that emerges against the background of a continuing inward turn, while the next chapter will take up the literature addressed to women, with its more substantial innovations.

To track the continuities and divergences in this literature, this analysis will focus on the metaphors that advice authors use to characterize human life. These metaphors include life imagined as a battle, a game, or a sport; a journey or adventure; or a business enterprise. In these cases, individuals are imagined as combatants, contestants, or players; travelers or explorers; and entrepreneurs, salespersons, or managers. For the combatants, contestants, and players, winning is the goal, while power and wealth are typically the prizes. For the traveler or explorer, rewards tend to be experiential, nonmaterial, and spiritual; the traveler is encouraged to “travel light” or “let go of extra baggage.” For the entrepreneur, salesperson, or manager, as for the combatant, the goals tend to be material or financial. When life is a business, one is constantly selling or managing oneself. This “enterprising self”—to use the term applied by the social theorist Nikolas Rose—maximizes his or her worldly opportunities through charismatic salesmanship, rational management, or a combination of both. The figure of the artist or visionary for whom life is an aesthetic experience to be imagined and created appears more frequently in the literatures addressed to women, though by the mid-1990s, in response to the staggering volatility of employment markets, the figure of the artist appears frequently in career advice directed to women and men alike. Finally, there is a sixth character: that of the servant ministering to the needs of others. Other metaphors—for example, the self as a computer with mind as software directing body as hardware, or the directional, spatial metaphor of success as “climb to the top”—also operate in the literature. Typically, the most successful authors deploy multiple metaphors for life and success in the interest of creating more compelling images for readers.

While this analysis will focus on the metaphorical constructs invoked in this literature, one might also keep in mind that there are a series of categories or ideal types that can be identified in this literature that coincide with categories observed by others.® These types fall roughly along the lines described by Weber: the rational and expressive dimensions. In the rational dimension, one finds a rational-economic man (Homo economicus) and a rational-ethical man (following in the tradition of a Kantian ethical imperative), while in the expressive dimension, one finds an antimodernist, mystical
type and, with increasing frequency, an aesthetic type. For the rational-economic man, one most frequently finds the metaphors of life as a jungle, a war, a competitive sport, and, of course, a business. In these constructs, the self is understood as an animal, a combatant, a competitor, and either a manager or a salesman or both. The rational-ethical self is most often represented by the figure of the traveler or the humble servant. The rational self—whether governed by economic self-interest or abstract ethics—is also imagined as a cybernetic being that can be programmed for the most effective results. The expressive elements, with metaphors of light, liquidity, and "flows," as well as the ideal of life as work of art, are more typically, but not exclusively, found in the literature addressed toward women. Taken together, these types offer complementary but, not infrequently, contradictory directives to guide the conduct of life.

The Jungle, the Poker Game, and the Survival of the Fittest

Among the most dramatic features in the social and cultural landscape of the 1970s was a renewed sense of scarcity. Middle-class Americans, who had grown accustomed to postwar prosperity, were faced with double-digit inflation, growing unemployment rates, and the first of the oil shocks. A thriving counterculture, made possible in part by the economic affluence of the 1960s, had fostered values of communality that rapidly gave way to what some called "a culture of narcissism" or the "me decade." Against this economic and social backdrop, a new social Darwinism gained credibility; it appeared in self-improvement literature as metaphors of life as a game and the world as a jungle. Titles such as Robert J. Ringer's 1973 Winning Through Intimidation and his 1977 Looking Out for Number One, along with Michael Korda's 1975 Power! How to Get It, How to Use It, rose to the New York Times bestseller list. Ringer, for example, a real estate broker turned libertarian author, describes the working world as a place where "reality confronts a man when he goes out into the business-world jungle and gets clawed and kicked." Michael Korda offers a similar view: "in many offices one can see scenes that remind one of the carnage of the jungle—the stifled shrieks of the victim and the triumphant cry of the successful predator." This is a world where, clearly, it's every man for himself, with winners and losers clearly marked, even if the metaphor of the jungle is softened with the metaphor of the game or the contest, a rhetorical strategy Ringer pursues:

I thought of the earth as a giant poker table upon which the game of business is played, with only a fixed number of chips on the table. Each player gets to participate for an unknown period of time, and the name of the game is for him to see how many of the chips he can pile onto his stack.11

Ringer's own three-part typology of human nature includes:

- Type Number 1, people who are out to get "your chips" and let you know it;
- Type Number 2, people who insist that they want you to get what you deserve, but actually have their eye on your chips all along, and
- Type Number 3, people who genuinely want you to get what you want, but wind up swiping your chips anyway.12

In such a world, the self is continuously embattled, though the image of the jungle or the battlefield gives way to the image of the game—in Ringer's case, the image of poker, the quintessential game of opportunity and ruse. Yet, despite the metaphorical structure of the game or contest, where there is necessarily a clear delineation of winners and losers, no one is ever to see himself or herself as a victim: victims are specifically abhorred. Characterizing oneself as a victim—or, worse still, falling into the role of victim—is anathema. In another bestseller from the same period, the psychologist Wayne W. Dyer asserts: "YOU CAN RARELY BE A VICTIM UNLESS YOU ALLOW IT TO HAPPEN."13 Dyer devotes the entire first chapter of his 1978 book Pulling Your Own Strings to instructing the reader in how to become a "non-victim." Similarly, Korda quotes a successful executive as one who has no patience for explanations about downturns, problems, or failures: "What I want to know is not why you're down, it's 'When are you going to be up?' Give me the how, not the why."14 Tellingly, Ringer's "Number One"—his self-portrait—is represented throughout his two books by cartoon images of a determined tortoise racing against the superior speed of the hare in the proverbial image of the probable loser transformed into the winner.15 By deploying this image of life as a journey—albeit a race—any setback can be readily recast as temporary and thus one never falls into that loathed category of "victim."
If identifying oneself as a victim of unfair social circumstances—which had served as a point of departure for collective action throughout the sixties and early seventies—were deemed unacceptable, then involvement in any collective social change would be ridiculed. For example, in *Looking Out for Number One*, Ringer characterizes all collective actions as “crusades” and proceeds to disparage them accordingly:

There are many reasons why group action is irrational from the individual’s standpoint, including the following: 1) The group may never accomplish its intended purpose, in which case the individual might someday feel very bitter over the time and energy wasted—time and energy which could have been supplying fuel needed to better his own life. . . . 2) In many respects, there is weakness in numbers, not strength. . . . 3) Even if the project is “successful,” you have no way of knowing that you’ll live long enough to enjoy the results.16

Ringer goes on to list an array of other “reasons” for avoiding group action and concludes with “the crudest reality of all . . . your participation is unlikely to make any difference. In fact, it probably will retard the cause, since every additional body only adds to the divergence of opinion, the bureaucratic muddling and all the other time-wasting features of group action.”17 In the wake of a decade of social movements for civil rights, and at the outset of the second wave of American feminism, each of these bestselling authors places a premium on isolated individual action on one’s own behalf.

The self of this period is embattled and beleaguered: the world it inhabits is a hostile one not unlike that imagined by philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Life, though a game, is emphatically not a team sport. The successful self is the Winner; the chief criterion for evaluating success is the acquisition of power and wealth. While the metaphors of life as a game or battle and the world as a jungle are time-tested images, an unembellished argument for self-interest, shorn of any moral or ethical pretense, is something new in the literature of success, which had hitherto been bolstered with some moral or spiritual justification or constituted in a religious context. Such individualistic self-interest had been advocated in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European philosophy, where Hobbes had postulated a natural world of constant strife, and Adam Smith advocated the unbridled pursuit of individual self-interest. But even Hobbes saw his contentious natural world regulated by a social contract, while Smith saw individual self-interest guided by “an invisible hand”: for Smith, economic self-interest would miraculously prove more beneficial to each and all than charitable intent.18

Ringer goes one step beyond even Adam Smith, as he has no concern for the interest of others except insofar as the complete disregard for the needs of another may result in a tarnished reputation:

CONSIDERING THE OTHER GUY’S DESIRES IS IN YOUR LONG-TERM BEST INTEREST.

Remember the reality of self-interest. If there’s nothing in it for the other person, you may get in his pockets once, but in the long term you’re going to lose a customer, client or business associate and will inherit a deserved black mark in the financial community.19

The all-but-unmitigated ambition and shameless guile of the Winner as represented in Ringer and Korda suggest that something new is at work in the literature of self-improvement, even if such ideas are not in themselves new to the culture.

By the early 1980s, the reaction to these every-man-for-himself titles emerged with the arrival of two bestsellers focused on the topic of negotiating: *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In and You Can Negotiate Anything.*20 While still focused on the idea that one can win, or prevail, in any situation, these advice books also assumed that there were others worthy of honest negotiation, rather than overt manipulation or intimidation. Roger Fisher and William Ury, the authors of *Getting to Yes*, offer what they call a “principled alternative” to “playing hard or soft ball,” to negotiating out of either adversarial or friendly positions.21 Their negotiation techniques, along with their notion of “principled” resolution of a conflict, would reappear at the close of the decade with Stephen R. Covey’s emphasis on “principle-centered” leadership and “win-win” negotiations.22 Efforts to resolve the tensions between the stark individual self-interest advocated in the survivalist self-help literature of the 1970s and the values of community and equality that had dominated the social landscape in the 1960s would continue to shape the self-improvement literature of the subsequent decades. These efforts emerged in the self-improvement literature in a renewed emphasis on spiritual values recast as a therapeutic theism.
Spiritual Consolation Prizes, or The Road Less Traveled

The existence of the winner implies its opposite, the loser. The loser, like the victim, is an unpopular character that is easily banished with another well-worn metaphorical construct: the idea of life as a quest or journey, with an adventurer or traveler encountering a series of tests or obstacles in the pursuit of some goal or destination. While there are countless examples of self-help literature employing the metaphor of the path or journey, the success of M. Scott Peck’s 1978 bestseller The Road Less Traveled is perhaps the most prominent. Although it took five years for Peck’s spiritual Baedeker to make its way to the New York Times bestseller list, the paperback edition managed to remain there for a record-breaking 694 weeks, and ultimately sold somewhere between 6 and 7 million copies. As of 1997, Simon and Schuster’s publicity department reported that they’d given up keeping track of the sales.

The phenomenal popularity of The Road Less Traveled has been the topic of many journalistic investigations that point to the book’s Christian themes, which made it a strong seller among Bible Belt readers, as well as to the author’s tireless promotion through weekly lectures. Although the book’s sales started slowly, an enthusiastic review by Phyllis Theroux in the Washington Post made the difference, and Peck’s first book climbed the Post’s bestseller list. Peck and an assistant sent photocopies of the Theroux review to three hundred newspapers, and eventually the book appeared on the New York Times paperback bestseller list, where it remained almost continuously for thirteen years. In The Road Less Traveled, Peck, once an agnostic military psychiatrist, recounts his spiritual “journey” from the secular medical realm of psychiatry to a hybrid realm of psychotherapeutic and Christian values. The success of Dr. Peck’s therapeutic theism is a prime example of the fusion of psychotherapeutic values with traditional Protestant values.

Mental health or well-being is recast as “grace,” yet the early Puritan debate about whether grace can be earned through hard work or only freely bestowed by the divine fiat survives throughout Peck’s work.

On the one hand, Peck paints a world in which “life is difficult” but where hard work, honesty, and self-discipline can lead to spiritual growth and mental health, which, for Peck, are their own rewards. Peck’s alternative to unbridled self-interest is a version of Christianity in which evil is recast as laziness. Whereas the New Testament offers the advice that one should “consider the lilies that neither toil nor weep,” Peck describes a world where “original sin does exist; it is our laziness” and where goodness springs from hard work, self-discipline, delayed gratification, and honesty. Growth, spiritual growth, isn’t effortless but forced. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Peck’s book arrived on the New York Times bestseller list in 1983, the year that marked the highest level of unemployment in the postwar period. Life was difficult in the extreme for millions of Americans. Peck’s The Road Less Traveled shared the bestseller list with Richard N. Bolles’s What Color Is Your Parachute?, in which spiritual uplift was augmented with practical job-hunting advice for the millions of unemployed Americans. (I consider the Parachute series in greater detail in chapter 4, where I take up the topic of career advice books.)

On the other hand, despite the fact that work—work on the self—is central to Peck’s journey, Peck struggles to reconcile the relative merits of work and “grace.” Although he insists that grace is something earned, he immediately contradicts himself, asserting that grace is bestowed freely:

Essentially I have been saying that grace is earned. And I know this to be true.

At the same time, however, I know that that’s not the way it is at all. We do not come to grace; grace comes to us. Try as we might to obtain grace, it may yet elude us. We may seek it not, yet it will find us.

Even in the spiritual realm, rewards are uncertain, paralleling the lack of any assurances that hard work will pay off in the material world. Peck’s The Road Less Traveled proposes a spiritual alternative in a world where the likelihood of material success became, for the average American, an increasingly elusive goal. His therapeutic theism served much the same anesthetizing role that had previously been the sole province of religion.

Throughout the period of the 1980s, numerous spiritual consolation books surfaced on the bestseller lists. For example, Robert Schuller’s four buck-up books—Tough Times Never Last, But Tough People Do (1983), Tough-Minded Faith for Tender-Hearted People (1985), The Be (Happy) Attitudes (1985), and Be Happy You Are Loved (1986)—each attempted to ameliorate the painful realities of life in a contracting economy with homespun, scripturally derived homilies and with “possibility thinking.” Schuller’s “possibility thinking” updates the “positive thinking” of his fellow minister in the Reformed Church in America, Norman Vincent Peale. Robert Fulghum’s All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten (1986) and It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It (1988), both of which also enjoyed
long runs on the bestseller lists, announced themselves as offering simple advice in simple language in a profoundly complicated time. And from a somewhat different tradition, Rabbi Harold S. Kushner reflects on the nature of suffering and happiness in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981) and *When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough* (1986). Referencing the isolated individualism that had marked the self-help literature of the prior decade, Kushner offered a chapter entitled “The Loneliness of Looking Out for Number One.” The cultivation of a spiritual life and an orientation toward community provided a counterpoint to the unbridled self-interest of the prior decade.

Spiritual consolation prizes are nothing new in the literature of self-improvement. The use of religious messages to sanction business behaviors and buoy those defeated by market values is a long-established practice in self-improvement manuals. Indeed, the history of American success literature is filled with ministers providing moral justification and spiritual boosterism. The nineteenth and early twentieth century saw ministers such as Henry Ward Beecher, Lyman Abbott, Russell H. Conwell, and Horatio Alger, Jr., bridging the gap between religious and secular self-help literature and developing new techniques for delivering their messages to mass audiences. Bruce Barton, author of the bestselling *The Man Nobody Knows* (1924), which offered the first representation of Jesus as a businessman, also founded an advertising agency, advocating the use of mass-marketing techniques for selling the religious message, and developed a corporate model for churches. Others of that era, for example, Emmet Fox, the pastor of the Church of the Healing Christ in New York City, and Harry Emerson Fosdick, the pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, also reached out well-beyond the confines of their churches. When Fox outgrew his church, he rented the Hippodrome, Carnegie Hall, and the Manhattan Opera House to preach to growing crowds. His 1934 *Sermon on the Mount* reportedly sold in excess of six hundred thousand copies and was widely read by clergymen, while his 1932 *Power Through Constructive Thinking* sold 250,000 copies and packaged New Thought for a new generation facing not prosperity, but the Depression. Similarly, Harry Emerson Fosdick took his message to the airwaves and through his radio broadcasts became one the most widely known Protestant ministers of his day.

Uplifting without requiring a serious commitment of time or resources, self-help literature offers inspiration by, in the words of the sociologist Wendy Simmons, “shrinking God.” Studying readers of self-help literature, another sociologist, Paul Lichterman, observed that self-improvement literature “does not support a deep commitment from readers. Over a period of years, some readers do dive repeatedly into self-help reading, but they discover and rediscover that it is not such a long way from surface to bottom.” Less demanding than traditional religious reading and practices—and promising not only spiritual uplift but also worldly success—much popular self-improvement literature, including the most contemporary examples, interpolates spiritual traditions as “natural laws” or “scientific principles.” This combination of spiritual traditions with a rhetoric of science is most evident in the work of two bestselling authors, Anthony “Tony” Robbins and Stephen R. Covey.

Charismatic Science and Rational Nature: Anthony “Tony” Robbins and Stephen R. Covey

In the second half of the 1980s and throughout the early part of the 1990s, two self-improvement authors with very different approaches found their way onto the *New York Times* bestseller list with the help of the same Dallas-based book agent, Jan Miller. Anthony “Tony” Robbins and Stephen R. Covey represent two distinct traditions of self-improvement culture: the former privileges emotion and the affective dimension while the latter heralds the superiority of reason, planning, and time management. Yet, paradoxically, Robbins engages in a rhetoric of high-tech science, while Covey engages in a discourse of “timeless natural laws.” Robbins fills stadiums, where he puts on charismatic performances of the miracles of mind-power that rival any evangelical revival, while Covey, the president of the FranklinCovey Company, preaches a gospel that is more akin to that of Benjamin Franklin, with whom he shares co-billing in the company’s name. Indeed, Robbins is not unaware of his own relationship to evangelical tendencies in the culture. His infomercial coproducer Greg Renker noted that “The infomercials boomed because the televangelists ran into problems. We are the new televangelists.” The inheritors of the traditions of Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin, respectively, Robbins and Covey represent divergent approaches to the pursuit of success, with the former focusing on the tools of sales and the latter employing the tools of management.

In 1978 (the same year that, across the continent, M. Scott Peck was promoting his *Road Less Traveled*) Anthony Robbins, then a twenty-five-year-old nutritional supplements salesman, began offering a $470 “Mind
Revolution” seminar that featured a “firewalk”—a walk across a twelve-foot-long bed of hot coals—as its graduation promenade. The “firewalk” became a Robbins trademark, and within a few years Robbins was earning enough to purchase a Spanish colonial mansion overlooking the Pacific. Robbins’s approach owes much of its appeal to his pseudoscientific language. He refers to his methods as “technologies,” his business enterprises are organized as a “research institute”—Robbins Research International—and his program relies on a model of a cybernetic self that can be programmed for “maximum personal performance.” The basis of the Robbins approach is classic American self-improvement: the power of mind over matter. Hailing back to Mary Baker Eddy’s establishment of the Christian Science Church and the nineteenth-century preoccupation with mesmerism, mind-power has long been legitimized by fusing a rhetoric of science with scripture and divine revelation. With the emergence of mind-power came the belief that one is completely responsible for one’s own reality: that one creates reality. The belief that Christian Science, rather than medical science, holds the cure to illness ensures that health is increasingly equated with holiness. Thus Robbins’s beginnings, as a nutritional supplements salesman, and his emphasis on a particular diet, is fitting; in the doctrine of mind-power, health is the new religion, and one cannot hope for success without it.

By the early 1960s, mind-power—which had continued in the bestsellers of Norman Vincent Peale and Napoleon Hill—was revitalized and reinforced with credibility by the application of a cybernetic model. Maxell Maltz, a New York plastic surgeon turned self-help author, noticed that even after successful plastic surgery many of his patients remained dissatisfied. To remedy this, he suggested that the mind was akin to a computer that simply needed to be properly programmed. His 1960 Psycho-Cybernetics became, over time, a bestseller; by 1997 the paperback versions had sold 4 million copies. Some estimates put total worldwide sales of the book, including the five English-language editions and the foreign translations, at in excess of 30 million copies. Mind-power was reinvigorated with a new scientific, cybernetic legitimacy.

Robbins struck on this theme, adapting a little-known and unproven psychotherapeutic technique called “neurolinguistic programming” that had been developed by the linguist John Grinder and the Gestalt therapist and computer programmer Richard Bandler. In a blend of Pavlovian behavior modification and cybernetic language, neurolinguistic programming proposes that desired behaviors and feelings can be “installed”: that human emotion and action can be programmed as simply as software is installed in a computer. Imagining that the brain is hardware for which thoughts and feelings are little more than software is an ideology with its roots in the seventeenth-century mechanism of thinkers such as Rene Descartes. Soul or mind is meant to govern body, and one arrives at a theory of mind over matter.

While mind-power was a well-established strain of self-improvement culture, it received an upgrade with the added luster of cybernetic technologies: Our brain processes information much the way a computer does. It takes fantastic amounts of data and organizes them into a configuration that makes sense to that person. A computer can’t do anything without software, which provides the structure to perform specific tasks. Metaprograms operate much the same way in our brain. They provide the structure that governs what we pay attention to, how we make sense of our experiences, and the directions in which they take us. To communicate with a computer, you have to understand its software. To communicate effectively with a person, you have to understand his metaprograms.

The philosopher Charles Taylor comments that the tendency to imagine the human mind as a computer provides a “self-image [that] is enhanced by the sense of power that goes along with a disengaged instrumental grasp of things.” Yet Robbins takes an interesting turn with this metaphor:

I see our neurological activity as more like a jukebox. What really happens is that human beings keep having experiences that are being recorded. We store them in the brain like records in a jukebox. As with the records in a jukebox, our recordings can be played back at any time if the right stimulus in our environment is triggered, if the right button is pushed.

Combining the metaphors of the computer and the jukebox, Robbins fuses what would otherwise be a rational notion of the self—an idea of disengaged reason—with the expressive dimension of music. In this sense, Robbins moves toward a hybrid of the rational and the expressive. Rather than suggesting, as does Stephen Covey, that self-control should govern the self through the ascendancy of mind over body (exercising “character,” or, in Covey’s metaphor for early rising, “mind over mattress”), Robbins imagines each of us as the disc-jockeys and film directors of our own lives,
programming, rather than suppressing, our impulses. In this sense, Robbins leaves behind the Enlightenment notion of the reasonable creature and moves in the direction of a Nietzschean model of “giving style to one’s life.”

Perhaps through his reading of Bandler and others on “neurolinguistic programming,” Robbins adopted some of the ideas put forth by more scholarly linguists such as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who suggest that metaphors, unconscious and otherwise, shape the individual’s worldview. While typically the self-help literature operates with a number of metaphors, Robbins was among the first in the genre to step back and consider the role of metaphors in shaping individual realities.

Given that Robbins uses a rhetoric of science and technology to legitimize his approach, it’s not surprising that he was also one of the first of the self-improvement gurus to avail himself of new technologies for distributing his message. Taking advantage of the 1984 Federal Communications Commission’s ruling that deregulated television advertising and made way for the infomercial, Robbins has produced one of the most successful infomercials in the short history of the form, reportedly selling $120 million worth of audiotapes in his first five years of broadcasting. His annual sales from seminars and audiotapes are reported to be in the neighborhood of $50 million per year. Robbins also pioneered the use of the internet for self-improvement culture. Robbins’s success stems not from anything new or startling in either his message or his understanding of metaphor, but from his effective use of new distribution technologies. Mind-power, a staple of American self-improvement culture, is packaged in handy compact disc and cassette tape format, available today in three easy payments charged to one’s credit card. As with Dale Carnegie before him, whose success has been attributed in part to the advent of the pocket book paperback edition, Robbins capitalized on an emerging marketing technique to launch his mind-power empire. In fact, Robbins’s sales in the traditional book form are considerably more modest than those of other bestselling self-improvement and motivational speakers. His first bestseller, the 1986 Unlimited Power, sold only a quarter of a million copies in its first eight years, and his second, the 1991 Awaken the Giant Within, has sold somewhat more than a million copies. While these are better than respectable sales figures for book publishing in general, they are on the low side for bestselling self-help books, and are a fraction of the sales for his audiotapes. Personal Power II alone is reported to have sold more than 35 million copies. Rather than relying on print media, Robbins has built his empire on the sales of audiotapes and compact discs and the production of charismatic revival-style spectacles.

Capturing a sense of power and wonder, Robbins’s promotional materials are replete with images of nature as a force to be reckoned with: volcanoes, tidal waves, lightning strikes, and other images of natural power that suggest potency and flows. Indeed, Robbins, like the mind-power advocates of the early twentieth century, assures readers that everyone can tap into a universal consciousness or flow:

many prominent scientists and brain researchers, such as physicist David Bohm and biologist Rupert Sheldrake, believe there is a collective consciousness we all can pull from—and that when we align ourselves through belief, through focus, through optimal physiology, we find a way to dip into this collective consciousness.

Our bodies, our brains, and our states are like a tuning fork in harmony with that higher level of existence.

Recall the language of Ralph Waldo Trine from a century earlier:

This is the Spirit of Infinite Plenty, the Power that has brought, that is continually bringing, all things into expression in material form. He who lives in the realization of his oneness with this Infinite Power becomes a magnet to attract to himself a continual supply of whatsoever things he desires.

If one hold himself in the thought of poverty, he will be poor, and the chances are that he will remain in poverty. If he hold himself, whatever present conditions may be, continually in the thought of prosperity, he sets into operation forces that will sooner or later bring him into prosperous conditions.

Mind-power replaced an ascetic, self-disciplined work ethic with a vision of natural ease and plentitude, making way for a consumer culture bolstered by fantasies of boundless abundance. The rise of mind-power at the turn of the nineteenth century provided an explanation for the unprecedented accumulations of wealth created by unregulated industrialization and growing disparities between the wealthy and the poor. As mechanization began replacing human labor power, the link between the production of wealth and human labor was becoming less apparent. In the context of late-twentieth-century America, mind-power offered magical explanations for
the source of wealth when hard work was clearly no longer a reliable means of securing prosperity.

Central to the idea that one’s mind and will control the world is the corollary that failure or misfortune of any kind is due not to external circumstances but to weakness of spirit or to an unconscious desire to fail. In Robbins’s world, everyone gets exactly what he or she wants and deserves. The enduring popularity of the mind-power paradigm—and its problematic premise that each individual is solely responsible for his or her own reality—taps the infantile fantasy of omnipotence in the face of what are increasingly complex and unmanageable social and economic circumstances.

While Robbins’s mind-power blurs the distinction between opposites—thought and reality, private and public—asserting that the former is wholly constitutive of the latter, Stephen R. Covey’s world is a reasoning man’s world, where the emphasis is on planning, hard work, and integrity. Covey distinguishes his work from that of others in the self-help industries by noting his emphasis on the development of “character” rather than the cultivation of “personality.” Covey observed a phenomenon that other, more scholarly, writers have also noted—that at the middle of the twentieth century, an emphasis on personality gained importance, while the value placed on character diminished.61 Covey aptly points out: “The Personality Ethic essentially took two paths: one was human and public relations techniques and the other was positive mental attitude.”62 While Covey sees aspects of the Personality Ethic (positive thinking, communication and marketing skills) as necessary for success, he asserts that the “Character Ethic” (his approach) is central. The Character Ethic is based on “the fundamental idea that there are principles that govern human effectiveness—natural laws in the human dimension that are just as real, just as unchanging and unarguably ‘there’ as laws such as gravity are in the physical dimension.”63 Covey’s self is rational but also ethical, following in the tradition of a Kantian ethical subject who subscribes to abstract moral principles—what Covey calls “universal principles” and “natural laws.” Character, which is increasingly difficult to sustain under the volatile conditions of advanced capitalism, becomes a form of social capital.64

Although Covey deploys a variety of metaphors—for example, the fiscal metaphor of the emotional bank account; the agrarian metaphor of harvesting what one sows; and the computer programming metaphor—the central metaphor is that of life as a path or journey, while his legitimating rhetoric is that of natural laws. Icons—now trademarked—that have become central to the FranklinCovey Company’s enterprise are the imposition of a compass over the image of watch (see, for example, fig. 2.1, a detail of the cover art for First Things First). While one is on a path, one is not to be guided by a static map but rather by a compass that can keep one on one’s way to “true north,” which Covey defines as a reality that is independent of us—abstract moral principles.65 Managing one’s time becomes a way of staying on one’s path, for staying in line with one’s “mission” and with “universal independent principles,” irrespective of the particulars of a given terrain or circumstance.

Developing a personal (as well as a family or organizational) mission statement is central to Covey’s approach. On the basis of one’s mission, one navigates one’s course through the changing landscapes of daily life.

Figure 2.1. Detail excerpted from the cover of First Things First
(New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994). Used with permission of FranklinCovey Company. All rights reserved.
The source of the individual’s mission in Covey’s work is particularly interesting. In an example of the tortured logic that is at the heart of theistic self-improvement literature that attempts to function in a secular context, Covey describes the self as the creator of the self, which he calls “becoming your own first creator,” but also posits an a priori self, a transcendent self.67 One’s mission, though self-created, is also preordained: “to be detected rather than invented.”68 Quickly shifting back to a less theistic stance, Covey reverts to the computer metaphor to describe his first two effectiveness habits: “Habit 1 says ‘you are the programmer’. Habit 2, then says, ‘Write the program.’” Later he’ll add Habit 3: “Run the program,” “Live the program,”69 in which he introduces time management techniques that are based on distinguishing between urgent and important activities, and on articulating a series of roles that one plays and scheduling goals related to these roles into a weekly calendar (a product marketed by the FranklinCovey Company). The metaphor of the journey or adventure retains some element of fate or destiny—as one can encounter unexpected obstacles or shortcuts—while the metaphor of creating a computer program or script implies an unprecedented level of autonomy.

Indeed, the religious and theological roots of Covey’s Seven Habits of Highly Effective People can be readily traced back to Cotton Mather’s 1710 Bonafactus, or An Essay to Do Good. Consider the following two passages, one from Mather and the other from Covey:

On the Lords-Day Evening, we may make this one of our Exercises; To Employ most serious and awful Thoughts on that Question; Should I Dy this Week, what have I left Undone, which I should then wish I had made more speed in the doing of? My Friend, Place thy self in Dying Circumstances; Apprehend and Realize thy Approaching Death. Suppose thy Last Hour come; the Decretory Hour: thy Breath failing, thy Throat rattling, thy Hands with a cold Sweat upon them, only the turn of the Tide expected for thy Expiration. In this Condition; What wouldst thou wish to have done, more than thou has already done, for thy own Soul, for thy Family, or for the People of God? Think; Don’t Forget the Result of thy Thoughts; Don’t Delay to do what thou hast Resolved upon. How much more Agreeable and Profitable, would such an Exercise be on the Lords-Day Evening, than those Vanities whereto that Evening is too commonly Prostituted, and all the Good of the

forgoing Day Defeated? And if such an Exercise were often attended, Oh! How much would it Regulate our Lives; how Watchfully, how Fruitfully would it cause us to Live; What an incredible Number of Good Works would it produce in the World?70

Nearly three centuries later, Covey advises the readers of his Seven Habits “to begin with the end in mind”:

find a place to read these next few pages where you can be alone and uninterrupted. Clear your mind of everything except what you will read and what I will invite you to do. Don’t worry about your schedule, your business, your family, or your friends. Just focus with me and really open your mind.

In your mind’s eye, see yourself going to the funeral of a loved one. Picture yourself driving to the funeral parlor or chapel, parking the car, and getting out. As you walk inside the building, you notice the flowers, the soft organ music. You see the faces of friends and family you pass along the way. You feel the shared sorrow of losing, the joy of having known, that radiates from the hearts of the people there. . . .

As you take a seat and wait for the services to begin, you look at the program in your hand. There are to be four speakers. The first is from your family, immediate and also extended—children, brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents who have come from all over the country to attend. The second speaker is one of your friends, someone who can give a sense of what you were as a person. The third speaker is from your work or profession. And the fourth is from your church or some community organization where you’ve been involved in service.

Now think deeply. What would you like each of these speakers to say about you and your life? What kind of husband, wife, father, or mother would you like their words to reflect? What kind of son or daughter or cousin? What kind of friend? What kind of working associate?71

Death-bed reflection or tombstone inscription exercises ("What would you like your tombstone to say?") are a mainstay of self-improvement literature, but even so, the similarity between these two passages is striking. Mather
asks "What wouldst thou wish to have done, more than thou hast already done, for thy own Soul, for thy Family, or for the People of God?" while Covey asks what family, friends, coworkers, and community members would say about you. Mather and Covey see the self as embedded in the community and refracted through the eyes of others. While Mather calls his congregation to “do good,” Covey offers his readers and seminar participants prescriptions for becoming “effective people” and for developing principle-centered leadership. Mather advises his readers to think of their good deeds as stones cast into a pond, generating concentric circles of goodness, while Covey writes of “Circles of Influence,” where one focuses only on those things that one can specifically affect in one’s immediate sphere, rather than concerning oneself with the wider range of issues beyond one’s immediate concerns.73

Covey instructs readers to begin at “the very center of our Circle of Influence”: in other words, to begin with themselves. But despite the fact that Covey’s self is utterly self-centered, that self is refracted through the prism of social roles. Covey’s self, embedded in a social world—the self-improvement equivalent of sociologist George Herbert Mead’s “I”—rather than his “T”—operates from self-centeredness, but as the self is understood in terms of its social relations, the usual notion of I-centeredness is denounced: there is, Covey argues, “little security, guidance, wisdom or power in the limited center of self.”74 Covey argues for a self-centered life mitigated by “universal principles” and facilitated by a sense of roles or participation in the social world through roles; in short, Covey argues for a moral and ethical self.

When faced with a conflict between personal and professional obligations, Covey’s approach shifts conflict from external circumstances to internal role conflicts. Unlike, for example, Robert J. Ringer, whose “Number One” saw the world as a battleground and everyone in it as adversaries, Covey’s “effective person” is composed of various “roles” competing for the individual’s time and priorities. Take the example of a conflict between a work and family commitment. Covey describes a man who is asked by his employer to work late on the same evening that he’d promised to take his wife to a concert, then outlines the various possible responses to the conflict based on differing “priorities.” For example, if the priority were one’s spouse, the individual would simply decline to work late. If the priority were making money, one would accept the additional assignment. And so on, through a variety of priorities. But Covey concludes that by using “principle-centered” solutions to solve this conflict, “you can communicate to your wife and your boss within the strong networks you’ve created in your interdependent relationship. Because you are independent, you can be effectively interdependent.”75 Covey glides over conflict with a series of diffusing statements that diminish, and ultimately refuse, the possibility of conflict.

Covey’s self is deeply embedded in a social world, always attempting to step outside of the immediate conflict in search of “win-win solutions.” This is a self-improvement version of the sociologist Emile Durkheim’s functionalism: conflict is ultimately incomprehensible because the faithful performance of one’s roles and the execution of one’s responsibilities will always come to a harmonious end. The unconscious, and the possibility of unconscious motives, are utterly absent, as are hierarchies, power, injustice, and irrationality. In Covey’s universe, there is minimal conflict, as all reasonable people are expected to strive for “win-win” solutions, and the clashes between a profit-driven economic system and the public good are always resolved. Any disagreement or discord—even those caused by notoriously adversarial relationships, such as those between labor and management—can be resolved by drawing on one’s “emotional bank account.” Even significant downsizing and plant closings aren’t a problem in Covey’s world. As Covey tells it, mutual trust and teamwork between senior executives and employees transform a plant closing literally into a picnic, “a Kentucky Fried Chicken farewell party.”76

Although some social theorists have described Covey’s conflict-averse system as a sign of a stagnant capitalism that has no purpose other than its own reproduction,77 one might also read his approach as a way of keeping one’s options open. While the disingenuous glad-handler of Dale Carnegie’s time could work his way through a hierarchical corporate economy, today’s worker has to rely on a network of colleagues and coworkers to keep himself employable. When your assistant last year might be the CEO of a startup next year, “character”—being a decent person, irrespective of organizational hierarchies—gains renewed currency. “Managing” one’s life and career requires ongoing business and social relationships, not a backstabbing climb up a corporate ladder. Covey and his colleagues describe a collapse of public and private spheres where “All Public Behavior is Ultimately Private Behavior.”78 Public policy is private morality writ large: “Ultimately there’s no such thing as ‘organizational behavior’; it’s all behavior of the people in the organization.”79

This collapse of public and private, work and leisure, echoes the characteristics of what social theorist John Sabel has called the “open labor market,”
where workers are increasingly required to maintain dense social networks through work and leisure time to ensure their ongoing employability:

Workers under these circumstances must acquire skills, including the ability to cooperate in particular settings in order to be employable, yet cannot rely on long-term relations with any single employer. . . . In order to move from job to job in an economy in which boundaries between firms and between firms and society are blurring, they must join various networks that cross company lines and reach from the economy into social and family life. I will call this situation an open labor market.80

Sabel goes on to observe that work in the restructured economy reduces the employee’s freedom or autonomy because individuals are urged to consider their entire private life as a series of social networks meant to ensure their continuous employability. He notes: “Only those who participate in . . . multiple, loosely connected networks are likely to know when their current jobs are in danger, where new opportunities lie, and what skills are required in order to seize these opportunities.”81 In the process, he observes, it becomes more difficult to say when one is working and when one is at rest. Working on one’s employability becomes an ever expanding task, while distinctions among work, leisure, and family life are blurred. In a world where personal and public are merged, “character,” though increasingly difficult to maintain, regains some of its currency where “personality” might previously have been able to prevail.

New Age Apostles of Amorphous Abundance

While Stephen Covey merges self and other by imagining all conflict as internal—between one’s various roles in life rather than between persons and institutions—and Anthony Robbins dispels the distance between self and other through his “empathetic technology” and the mind-power belief that reality is little more than wishes, the New Age inheritors of New Thought posit a world in which there is ultimately no distinction between self and other, matter and energy, reality and imagination. In such a world, anything one does on one’s own behalf ultimately benefits everyone. This worldview ventures far beyond Adam Smith’s assertion that an invisible hand will guide self-interest toward the highest good of the community. This is a mystical world without need of morality or ethics: since self and other are indistinguishable, self-interest and other’s interests are identical.

Deepak Chopra, a central figure in the promotion of this mystical approach, first found a spot on the New York Times bestseller list in 1993 with his Ageless Body, Timeless Mind, which promised a version of immortality through mind-body medicine. A physician who established himself in Western medicine, rising to the rank of chief of staff at New England Memorial Hospital in Stoneham, Massachusetts, Chopra went on to found centers for Ayurvedic medicine in Lancaster, Massachusetts, and La Jolla, California. By 1995, Chopra was back on the bestseller list with his Seven Spiritual Laws of Success, a rewrite of his earlier Creating Affluence: Wealth Consciousness in the Field of All Possibilities. Creating Affluence had been organized as an alphabetical primer: “‘A’ stands for all possibilities, absolute, affluence, and abundance. . . . ‘B’ stands for better and best,” and so on.82 When the alphabetical schema failed to land the book on the bestseller list, its content was repackaged as Seven Spiritual Laws of Success. Numbers—seven habits, twelve steps, and so on—suggest good fortune, and seemingly provided it for Chopra. Rewritten, restructured, numbered, and repackaged, Seven Laws garnered seventy-one weeks on the New York Times bestseller list.

What is interesting about Chopra’s 1994 success book is that while it annuls the boundaries between self and other, it also insists on the critical importance of discovering one’s special talents or one’s purpose in life:

The Law of Pure Potentiality could also be called the Law of Unity, because underlying the infinite diversity of life is the unity of one all-pervasive spirit. There is no separation between you and this field of energy. The field of pure potentiality is your own Self. And the more you experience your true nature, the closer you are to the field of pure potentiality.83

Like Emerson’s “Over-Soul” and Trine’s “Infinite,” this is another (or an ongoing) theory of abundance without boundaries. But to tap into this abundance, one has to first discover one’s true Self; second, express one’s unique talents; and third, find a way to provide a service for humanity by asking “How can I help?”84 Yet all this is expected to happen without effort, as it is subject to “The Law of Least Effort.” Following the law of least effort requires unconditional acceptance of existing conditions: “This means that I will know that this moment is as it should be, because the whole universe
is as it should be."85 The second component of the law of least effort is “responsibility,” which Chopra defines as “not blaming anyone or anything for your situation, including yourself.”86 This notion of responsibility suspends the literal meaning, ensuring that no one is actually accountable for anything.

Chopra’s mysticism proposes a path of self-discovery and service while representing the path as effortless, a characteristic of his work that I will consider in more detail in chapter 5. In Chopra’s universe, where distinctions between self and other, matter and energy, past and present are blurred, the self at work on the self isn’t really at work on the self; everything is effortless, everything is as it should be, and everything can be just what you want it to be, too. While it is difficult to engage such a worldview in a rational argument, it is easy to see that such a belief system offers an expressive and antimodernist antidote to the rational planning and instrumental thinking that predominates in the self-help literature.

Within the New Age literatures, one finds that concerns about money are deflected with precisely the sort of language used by early twentieth-century New Thought authors. For example, the bestselling New Age author Shakti Gawain writes in her 1986 *Living in the Light*:

> Because the creative energy of the universe in all of us is limitless and readily available, so, potentially, is money. The more willing and able we are to open to the universe, the more money we will have in our lives. A lack of money merely mirrors the energy blocks within ourselves. . . . The stronger and more open your channel is, the more will flow through it.87

She continues, advising readers that when “you learn how to listen to the universe and act on it, then money increasingly comes into your life. It flows in an easy, effortless, and joyful way because there is no sacrifice involved.”88

Similarly, health, well-being, and emotional happiness are attributed to finding one’s place in the “flow.”89 The movement toward a language of liquidity isn’t new; the early twentieth-century New Thought author Ralph Waldo Trine wrote: “the Infinite Spirit that is manifest in the life of each must be identical in quality with that Source, the same as a drop of water taken from the ocean is, in nature, in characteristics, identical with the sea, its source.”90 And Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had, of course, observed that in the nascent industrial capitalism “all that is solid melts into air.”91 This liquefaction continues in what the social theorist Zygmunt Bauman

has called “liquid modernity.” While industrial capitalism had melted away much of the structures of social life (traditional loyalties, customary rights, and obligations), advanced capitalism has, in Bauman’s view, melted any relationship between individual actions and those of political collectivities.92 The language of New Age literature renders this liquefaction as not only harmless but also beneficent.

The Self-Help Menagerie: Sharks, Mice, and a Kinder, Gentler Survivalism

Despite the emergence of a language of flows and infinite possibilities, the brutal social Darwinism that marked the beginning of the 1970s never completely vanished. Rather, it reemerged in a tempered version that included animal villains and heroes from sharks to mice. Harvey B. Mackay’s 1988 *Swim with the Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive* and Spencer Johnson’s 1998 *Who Moved My Cheese?* each made their way to the *New York Times* bestseller list and revived a survivalist mentality that had never quite vanished. Mackay’s story of up-from-under is one of salesmanship and management prowess and illustrates the shift from the “kill the competition” mentality that emerged in the early 1970s to the “serving your customer” rhetoric that came to dominate success literature, while Johnson, who had coauthored the enormously successful *The One Minute Manager* with the management consultant Kenneth Blanchard, prescribes flexibility as the only possibility not only for success but also for survival.

Unlike so many self-improvement authors who made their personal fortunes within the self-improvement industry, Harvey B. Mackay made his fortune in manufacturing. His success story unfolds as follows. At the age of twenty-six he purchased a failing envelope company in the Twin Cities and built it into a $35 million industry leader. He describes himself as the volunteer leader who catalyzed the community effort that culminated in the building of the $75 million Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome in Minneapolis.93 Representing himself as not only a successful businessman but also a businessman-citizen-volunteer, Mackay tempers his individualism with a rhetoric of service. Selling your product is a service to your customers. While one may be swimming with the sharks, one is not oneself a predatory creature. And while other business people may prey on their competition and customers, in Mackay’s world, customers are coddled. Mackay
offers one of his “secrets”: the “Mackay 66”—a sixty-six-question customer profile form that each salesperson in his company was required to complete about any prospect. The form included spaces for extensive personal information, from medical history to hobbies and vacation habits. Much of sales is impression management, and the customer information profile is an important tool in the salesperson’s repertoire. Mackay suggests that keeping the profiles on hand was pivotal to keeping business when particular sales staff left his company. With the profile on hand, one can appear attentive and personally engaged with people one has only just met. The merging of personal and private is entirely part of the game of sales, and Mackay makes no secret of this. Knowing your customer—recast as maintaining your marketing database—is central to success.

Other kinds of seemingly benign guile are encouraged. Mackay recommends that when you don’t have access to a private club where you can entertain your clients, you should “make the best restaurant in town your own private club,” and then offers specifics about how to turn a business lunch or dinner into a display of status. Conversely, he advises readers on how to not be pulled in by such displays. In a chapter called “Never Buy Anything in a Room with a Chandelier,” Mackay advises against being taken in by grand surroundings or glamorous trappings. Status displays matter; just don’t be suckered by them yourself. And social networking is central. “Short notes,” Mackay writes, “yield long results.” Mackay’s advice bridges the world of a Dale Carnegie, where guile is foremost, with the negotiation techniques of Looking Out for Number One. Mackay may be looking out for Number One, but he’s not telling you that’s what he’s doing. Instead, Mackay is simply avoiding being “eaten alive”—for which no one could fault him—while providing a service for customers.

At the end of the 1990s, the decade that witnessed the emergence of the term “downsizing,” Spencer Johnson’s Who Moved My Cheese? compares four characters—two mice and two “little people”—and finds that when it comes to adapting to change, the mice (Sniff and Scurry) far outpace the people. The “little people” of his story (Hem and Haw) find themselves attached to beliefs, expectations, and traditions. Rather than remaining ready to move at a moment’s notice, they built lives, traditions, and communities around their initially bountiful “cheese station.” Instead of swiftly responding to a change in resources, as the rodents did, the humans are dismayed, angry, troubled, and profoundly resistant to change. Rather than operating as nomadic cheese-seekers, the humans suffer when “things change.” Eventually one of the little people, Haw, sets out in search of new cheese, leaving guideposts for his tradition-bound friend Hem, with pointers such as “If you do not change, you can become extinct.” Finally Haw catches up with the rodents, finds “New Cheese,” and enjoys his new abundant life, while remaining ever vigilant about anticipating the next change before he’s left hungry again.

The maze parable is interesting in that the context is not natural, as was the jungle landscape conjured in earlier survivalist self-help. Rather, the maze is manmade—a product of civilization. Although the changes that occur are not natural they are deemed to be inevitable. Invisible masters move the cheese, and mice and men alike are meant to scurry in search of some new means of sustenance. This new survivalism admits that this radical repositioning of life’s rewards is not solely a function of the natural world, but it is no less inevitable for that. One of the signposts reads “Be Ready to Quickly Change Again and Again—They Keep Moving the Cheese.” The invisible and seemingly omnipotent “They” are never discovered or uncovered.

Johnson’s parable is positioned within another story—that of a school reunion where former classmates compare the changes in their lives, and their responses after hearing the “A-Mazing” story of the mice, the men, and the missing cheese, allowing for an ongoing commentary on the conditions the mice and the “little people” face. One of the school reunion characters compares his children with Hem:

My children seem to think that nothing in their lives should ever change. I guess they’re acting like Hem—they’re angry. They’re probably afraid of what the future holds. Maybe I haven’t painted a realistic enough picture of “New Cheese” for them. Probably because I don’t see it myself.

As human beings require a prolonged period of nurturance—especially when compared with rodent litters—the requirement of displacing and uprooting children is obviously at odds with the search for “new cheese.” Indeed, parenting books urge parents to provide a sense of displacing and continuity, and stability for the health of their children, not perpetual motion and relocation. The “little people” of Johnson’s maze aren’t people with families, though “finding Cheese” meant “having a loving family someday” (emphasis added). Instead, they are individuals who can drop their families, backgrounds, traditions, geographical location, habits of thinking, and beliefs in the interest of finding some cheese. Johnson’s parable offers a
defense of what social theorists call "detrivialization"—the tendency of advancing capitalism to disrupt the cultures and traditions that may stand in the way of the accumulation of profit.\(^{103}\) The little people of Johnson's maze are not self-actualizing individuals acting on their beliefs and realizing their dreams in some expressive New Age narrative; rather they are beleaguered individuals scrambling to feed themselves; they are not even stable enough to have families. These characters—deemed less resourceful than mice—are reduced to their animal needs, to hunger and despair, rather than elevated in their human capacities. Survivalism returns, not with the predatory violence of the jungle, but in the faceless violence of a rational capitalism where humans are deemed less able than lab rats.

From *Power*! to *Personal Power*!

As the last quarter of the twentieth century began, the dominant self-improvement literature focused on impression management: manipulating symbols and wielding power in the world. Robert J. Ringer and Michael Korda were not advocating work on the self or improving the self; they were offering advice on the uses of trickery and deception—essentially combat, or poker table strategy—to advance one's position financially or within existing power hierarchies. But just twenty years later, Korda's *Power*! was supplanted by Robbins's *Personal Power*! Robbins offered individuals instructions on mastering their inner experience—what he calls their "state"—as a means of mastering the external environment, while Stephen R. Covey recommended the pursuit of "private victories" as the route to public ones. New Age cosmologies in the work of Deepak Chopra and Shakti Gawain represented the world as amorphous—without significant differentiation between self and other, cause and effect (or anything else, for that matter). Even when survivalist themes reemerged in the literature of self-improvement, they were treated with a more personal emphasis: tempered with calls to service and focused on adjusting one's attitude rather than sharpening one's claws.

With the exception of Harvey B. Mackay, who incorporates some of the impression management techniques of the earlier literature, the top-selling literatures of self-improvement culture had, by the early 1990s, registered a shift toward understanding the external world as internal. This "inward turn" is not in itself something new. The move toward a greater sense of interiority and a focus on the self has been a tendency of modernity, tied to the development of print culture, and linked to the tendency of advancing capitalism to transform and attenuate community ties.\(^{104}\) In the twentieth century, the emergence of a focus on psychology and psychiatry intensified this shift, leading to the concern with a development of what some and others called a hedonistic or narcissistic personality.\(^{105}\) The generic literature of self-help during the last quarter of the twentieth century signaled an intensification of tendencies in American culture that had been evident, in some cases, since the nation's founding. Thus this unisex literature represents, on the whole, the continuity in this genre, with the last quarter of the twentieth century demonstrating a further spiral in the overall inward turn that has marked the development of modernity. We will need to look at the literature of self-improvement directed primarily toward women to observe what appear to be the newer—if not altogether new—cultural developments.