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At Work on the Self

The Making of the Belabored Self

What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?

—Michel Foucault

When philosopher Michel Foucault proposed an aesthetics of everyday life, he traced this ideal to the ancient Greeks, for whom the cultivation of the self was a responsibility and privilege of the citizen. Just as participation in the polis—the political life of the city—was reserved for citizens who did not engage in productive labor, so the cultivation of the self was a value reserved for propertied men who did not have to engage in the labors of daily life. Women and enslaved persons were not expected to cultivate themselves. Indeed, to extend the ideal of self-mastery to persons who were so obviously subject to the will of their husbands and masters would have been preposterous.

Arguably, the contemporary extension of the ideal of an aesthetic life to each and all could be a democratic move: each person would occupy the role of citizen-artist, governing, cultivating, and enhancing his or her own existence. The advice that one work on oneself to produce one's life as a work of art offers what might seem an appealing alternative to other metaphors. Certainly the aesthetic ideal seems less abrasive than the image of life as a game of survival, or of life as a business proposition where all relationships are reduced to a cost-benefit analysis. But extending the notion
of "self-creation" to each and all has not been without its own paradoxes and contradictions, particularly when the vast majority of people are subjects of a capricious and increasingly competitive labor market. The trouble arises when these citizen-artists are also working people, persons who rely on their own labor power to sustain themselves and their families. While working people are not subject to the demands of a particular husband/head of household or individual master, they are subject to the whims of the labor market and the demands and expectations of employers competing in a globalized economy. While the Greeks realized that the idea of a slave or wife as master of his or her own life was absurd, contemporary self-improvement literature proposes that each and every individual, wage-slave or not, pursue self-mastery.

Part of the problem arises from our culture’s conflation of the terms labor and work. The philosopher Hannah Arendt offered a distinction between labor and work that may illuminate the problems in the ideal of life as a work of art. Arendt points out that the words work and labor, though they are used almost interchangeably in our culture, are actually quite etymologically distinct and retain distinctive usage, despite the modern tendency to blur them. Classical Greek distinguishes between ponein and ergasesthai, Latin between laborare and facere or fabricari, French between travailler and œuvrer, and German between arbeiten and werken. The word labor, Arendt points out, when used as a noun, never designates the finished product, the result of the laboring, and in most European languages is associated with the physical exertion of childbirth. Quite the opposite is the case for the word work. Work is used to describe both the process of producing something and the product produced. And, Arendt notes, “it is also interesting that the nouns "work," œuvre, Werk, show an increasing tendency to be used for works of art in all three languages.”

For Arendt, the work-labor distinction rests on whether the products of the activity will be rapidly consumed and incorporated into the flow of life—whether the labor involved is used merely to meet the survival needs of human beings—and whether the product of the work will become more permanent, a part of our fabricated existence. Labor is the work that sustains and reproduces the body and is readily absorbed into the flow of life without leaving much of a trace (except insofar as the species continues). Labor, Arendt argues, reduces man to his animal nature, or animal laborans. Work, on the other hand, is the product of Homo faber, man the fabricator, and leaves with it a sense of purpose, permanence, and something outside of ourselves, something that lasts beyond the lifespan of our bodies. Labor is tied to life, to the continuation of life, while work is tied to fabrication and the creation of something more permanent than transitory human lives. However, Arendt points out, even work that might leave its mark was denigrated when it was pursued under the necessity of sustaining one’s life:

all ancient estimates of human activities . . . rest on the conviction that the labor of our body which is necessitated by its needs is slavish. Hence occupations which did not consist in laboring, yet were undertaken not for their own sake but in order to provide for the necessities of life, were assimilated to the status of labor.”

To insulate one’s activities from this degraded status, ancient physicians, navigators, and architects (among others) would engage in an “art of earning money” (technē mistharmētikē) as a practice separate and distinct from the pursuit of their professional work. Arendt notes that, “This additional art is by no means understood as the element of labor in the otherwise free arts, but on the contrary, the one art through which the ‘artist,’ the professional worker, as we would say, keeps himself free from the necessity to labor.” The very fact of human necessity—the fact of human bodily needs—provided the basis for the debase category of “labor.”

In our own historical period, labor is, according to Arendt, erroneously equated with work. This conflation has its genesis in the work of the Western philosophers John Locke, Adam Smith, and Karl Marx, who described labor variously as the source of all property and all wealth and, in the case of Marx, as the source of all productivity and the very expression of man’s humanity. Yet Marx, as with many of his elaborators, maintains a contradictory view of labor. While labor is the source of man’s very humanity, the revolution, for Marx, would not simply amount to emancipating the laboring classes but would also emancipate man from labor itself. Only when labor is abolished can the “realm of freedom” supplant the “realm of necessity.” While many contemporary theorists follow the Western tendency to eschew any distinctions between work and labor, Arendt’s distinction between work and labor should be kept in mind as I consider the various ways in which contemporary readers of self-improvement literature are urged to work on themselves.
Work without End and No Work at All

In describing the nature of work on the self, the literatures of self-improvement offer two distinct options: the path of endless effort and the path of absolute effortlessness. These correspond to the modernist/animodernist, rational/expressive pairs encountered before. Those experts who are committed to rational self-mastery (for example, Stephen R. Covey, Anthony Robbins, Helen Gurley Brown) propose the effortful life, while those who focus on the expressive dimension (for example, Deepak Chopra, Julia Cameron, Richard Carlson, and Eckhart Tolle) emphasize self-acceptance through a mystical oneness. Despite their apparent opposition, both approaches represent an effort to come to terms with the problem of contingency and vulnerability in both the labor force and life itself.

For the rationalists, one of the cardinal characteristics of the work that the individual is instructed to perform on himself or herself is that it is unending. With the exception of the terminus of death, work on the self is work without end. In this respect, this work on the self is consistent with Arendt’s notion that labor is in fact not more nor less than life itself, what Marx calls “man’s metabolism with nature.” In the rationalist self-help literature, continuous and never-ending work on the self is offered as a road not only to success but also to a kind of secular salvation. The pain of feeling alienated from one’s self in the present is offered as a sacrifice for the vision of what may come in the future. Consider Anthony Robbins’s recommendation that everyone commit themselves to what he calls CANI!

When you set a goal, you’ve committed to CANI! You’ve acknowledged the need that all human beings have for constant, never-ending improvement. There is power in the pressure of dissatisfaction, in the tension of temporary discomfort. This is the kind of pain you want in your life, the kind of pain that you immediately transform into positive new actions.

Indeed, Robbins is so committed to this notion that he has trademarked the phrase “Constant And Never-ending Improvement.” While Robbins acknowledges the discomfort of focusing on goals—those things that one has yet to attain, those characteristics or experiences that one lacks—he asserts that this is a necessary part of the process of attaining what one desires.

Similarly, Stephen R. Covey and his coauthors, A. Roger Merrill and Rebecca R. Merrill, advocate for constant improvement in their bestselling book First Things First. In order to gain someone’s trust, Covey and company argue that it is not enough to be good and honest; one also has to stay current in one’s profession. They tell of a CEO who can’t figure out why he doesn’t trust an honest vendor until it dawns on him: “I realize now it’s because they’re not competent. They haven’t stayed current in their profession. They’re obsolete. . . . They don’t have the spirit of continuous improvement.” Endless mindfulness is also proposed by M. Scott Peck in his spiritual roadmap:

The third thing that a life of total dedication to the truth means, therefore, is a life of total honesty. It means a continuous and never-ending process of self-monitoring to assure that our communications—not only the words that we say but also the way we say them—inevitably reflect as accurately as humanly possible the truth or reality as we know it. . . . Such honesty does not come painlessly.

The ideal of constant improvement and renewal is inscribed in Covey’s Seven Habits as habit number 7, which he calls “Sharpening the Saw”—renewing one’s resources on an ongoing basis. Instead of describing this renewal as rest or relaxation, Covey represents this as effortful exercise that will “preserve and enhance our capacity to work and adapt and enjoy.” This work on the self is characterized as an “investment”: “This is the single most powerful investment we can ever make in life—investment in ourselves, in the only instrument we have with which to deal with life and to contribute.”

Similarly, Helen Gurley Brown admonishes her readers:

You want it all and you are “willing to pay the price.” You want material blessings as well as deep emotional satisfaction. You want life to be rich and thick rather than thin and watery, but—and this separates you from the dreamers and rationalizers—you simply do not kid yourself that what you want is “inexpensive,” let alone free. You know the price for the kind of life you want is work—hard work!

The notable exceptions to the admonitions to pursue painful “work without end” can be found in the New Age or metaphysical self-improvement literatures, which suggest that attaining one’s goals can be accomplished with
a minimum of effort—that the realization of the self is “natural.” Deepak Chopra suggests that an individual’s success is supposed to take place subject to the “Law of Least Effort”:

Nature’s intelligence functions effortlessly, frictionlessly, spontaneously. It is nonlinear; it is intuitive, holistic, and nourishing. And when you are in harmony with nature, when you are established in the knowledge of your true Self, you can make use of the Law of Least Effort.13

To arrive at this effortless state, one is instructed to “make a commitment to follow the path of least effort,” which requires that one follow a series of three steps: practicing “acceptance,” “responsibility,” and “defenselessness.”14 And immediately after mastering these steps, one is instructed in the mastery of the “Law of Intention and Desire,” for which Chopra advises readers to make lists of their desires and then “release [them] . . . trusting that when things don’t seem to go my way, there is a reason, and that the cosmic plan has designs for me much grander than even those that I have conceived.”15 Similarly, in his 1997 book Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff, and It’s All Small Stuff, Richard Carlson advises readers to “Remind Yourself That When You Die Your In-Basket Won’t Be Empty.” Carlson continues:

we convince ourselves that our obsession with our “to do” list is only temporary—that once we get through the list, we’ll be calm, relaxed, and happy. But in reality this rarely happens. As items are checked off, new ones simply replace them.

The nature of your “in basket” is that it’s meant to have items to be completed in it—it’s not meant to be empty. There will always be phone calls that need to be made, projects to complete, work to be done.16

A focus on the present moment to the exclusion of all else is offered as the path to peace of mind:

To a large degree, the measure of our peace of mind is determined by how much we are able to live in the present moment. Irrespective of what happened yesterday or last year, and what may or may not happen tomorrow, the present moment is where you are—always.17

Similarly, Eckhart Tolle’s 1999 bestselling spiritual guide, The Power of Now, suggests that one focus so intently on the present that the past and future are moot:

Have you ever experienced, done, thought, or felt anything outside the Now? Do you think you ever will? Is it possible for anything to happen or be outside the Now? The answer is obvious, is it not?

Nothing ever happened in the past; it happened in the Now.

Nothing will ever happen in the future; it will happen in the Now.20

The key, writes Tolle, is to:

End the delusion of time. Time and mind are inseparable. Remove time from the mind and it stops—unless you choose to use it.

To be identified with your mind is to be trapped in time: the compulsion to live almost exclusively through memory and anticipation . . .

Time isn’t precious at all, because it is an illusion. What you perceive as precious is not time but the one point that is out of time: the Now. That is precious indeed. The more you are focused on time—past and future—the more you miss the Now, the most precious thing there is.21

The seeming futility and effortfulness of endlessly repetitive labor is eliminated when time is imagined as illusory. By focusing on the present, by suspending one’s belief in temporality, one is absolved of the endless labor of living and the necessity of leaving a legacy through a “life’s work.” As in other mystical traditions (for example, in the writings of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, Tolle’s namesake), embracing this metaphysical present serves to absent the reader from the ceaselessness and futility of laboring.

While the rhetoric of effortless realization offers a respite from the relentless pursuit of perfection, it is not itself so effortless as it claims to be. Even as these authors advocate effortlessness, they propose a series of activities (meditations, creative visualization exercises, and other practices) to achieve this state. This metaphysical literature, with its obliteration of any distinction between self and other, cause and effect, and any and all terms
of discrimination, offers effortless effort, passive activity, and endless work imagined as effortless, exertion.

The Gratitude Antidote

If the prescription of endless work requires an antidote in the form of effortless effort, the discomfort of continual dissatisfaction with the present—what Robbins calls a “temporary discomfort . . . the kind of pain that you immediately transform into positive new actions”—requires its own remedy. The promise of the literature of self-improvement—that one can imagine one’s self anew and then invent the life one imagines, that one can act on “the before” to create “the after”—demands the sacrifice of the present moment. In such a construction, “the present” is displaced, at worst, and desolate at best. To mitigate the pain of forsaking the lived present for the imagined future, or of living in a present that is utterly lacking, many self-improvement authors, especially those who operate in the expressive tradition, offer prescriptions for cultivating gratitude. Thinking about what one appreciates provides a momentary relief from the relentless pursuit of a distant perfection.

Robbins, for example, suggests that people following his program use a series of “morning questions” to focus their power, including “What am I happy about in my life now? What am I grateful about in my life now? What am I enjoying most in my life right now?” In her 1979 book Creative Visualization, Shakti Gawain advises readers to keep an appreciation list: “Make a list of everything that you can think of that you are extremely thankful for, or that you especially appreciate having in your life. . . . It increases your realization of prosperity and abundance on every level, and thus your ability to manifest.” Mark Bryan and his coauthors of The Artist’s Way at Work, are astute enough to focus the reader’s sense of gratitude back on their book itself, turning the goodwill of this self-help practice back toward themselves: “List the many things you are grateful for about this work. What did you learn? What were the most important ah-ha’s? . . . Please write this in your notebook and keep the answers to these exercises to excavate in about twenty-four months.” And perhaps most far-reaching in its effects is Sarah Ban Breathnach’s development of the idea of keeping a “gratitude journal” as an integral part of her readers’ paths to “simple abundance.” In her daybook entry for January 14, she interpolates a quotation from the codependency popularizer Melody Beattie, and argues that this practice is the key to “simple abundance”:

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Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.

—Melody Beattie

There are several tools that I’m going to suggest you use as you begin your inner exploration. While all of them will help you become happier and more content and will nurture your creativity, this first tool could change the quality of your life beyond belief: it’s what I call a daily gratitude journal. I have a beautiful blank book and each night before I go to bed, I write down five things that I can be grateful for about that day. . . .

The gratitude journal has to be the first step on the Simple Abundance path or it just won’t work for you. Simplicity, order, harmony, beauty, and joy—all the other principles that can transform your life will not blossom and flourish without gratitude. If you want to travel this journey with me, the gratitude journal is not an option [sic].

Although Breathnach no doubt meant to write “the gratitude journal is not optional,” her point is clear: victims, critics, grinners, whiners, and complainers need not apply. Oprah Winfrey, among the most powerful promoters of contemporary self-culture, has taken on the cause of the gratitude journal, urging her viewers to engage in this practice and featuring some of them on her program, sharing from their gratitude journals. With the huge success of her magazine O, The Oprah Magazine, she devoted an issue to “The Gratitude Attitude.” A pullout section in the November 2000 issue reads:

When you dwell on all the reasons you have to be grateful, you open yourself to receiving even more good—and more good comes to you. As you begin to feel abundant, you’ll be willing and able to
pass positive things on to others. Find a quiet spot to sit and consider the ideas below, then use the space to write down your thoughts.

1. Ask yourself: What are the good things in my life that I’m overlooking?
2. Each day for a month, write down one reason you’re thankful for your mate or closest friend. At the end of the month, give him or her the list.27

Winfrey writes, in a related article in the same issue, “I keep a gratitude journal, as Sarah Ban Breathnach suggests in Simple Abundance, listing at least five things that I’m grateful for.”28 Gratitude sutures the gap between what one has and what one desires, a gap that would otherwise be ever widened by goal-oriented, instrumentalist self-improvement literatures.

Embracing Your Inner Corpse

Gratitude provides one way of escaping the constant striving and seeking in self-improvement culture. Death provides the other. The activist and satirist Andrew Boyd urges readers of his self-help sendup to embrace their “inner corpse” rather than their inner child.29 And indeed, much of the literature of self-improvement does direct one to the contemplation of death. The imperative that one “be all one can be,” an invocation of boundless opportunity driven by the specter of death, animates contemporary self-improvement literature. Death—and the threat of meaninglessness in the face of death—is the point of reference for nearly all self-improvement treatises. While the death threats take different forms, conjuring the possibility of imminent death is key for self-improvement authors. For example, Robert J. Ringer warns his readers:

In a matter of pages, the ball will be in your court. I wish I could be the bearer of good tidings and tell you that you have unlimited time to stare at the ball and decide what you’re going to do with it. Alas, my friend, it isn’t so. Like all games, this one, too, will end. And the clock is running as you read this sentence.

How much time? No one knows for sure, but I like to use age sixty-five as a nice round figure and look at anything beyond that as a bonus. That means if you’re thirty-five years old and you theoretically could freeze time long enough to do some calculating, you have precisely 10,950 days left in your game; or 262,800 hours; or 15,768,000 minutes; or 946,080,000 seconds. Choose the time unit that makes you most comfortable, but do acknowledge the reality that the clock is running.30

Irene C. Kassorla’s Go For It! (1984), which is aimed at a young female audience, suggests that readers should consider what they’d do if they had five hundred years to live—and then reminds her readers that they don’t:

Do you have five hundred years to live? Are you one of those immortals who has almost unlimited time? If so, the first hundred years on this planet you could afford to spend your time according to your parents’ needs and desires . . . you can “do it” for them. The second hundred, however, I think you ought to “do it” for your neighbors; they’re nice people, find out what they would like you to be . . . When you are mortal, you don’t have unlimited time and you can’t sacrifice your dreams and ideals for others, or you will hate yourself . . . and them.31

Or consider Wayne W. Dyer’s comments in his 1976 book Your Erroneous Zones:

Look over your shoulder. You will notice a constant companion. For want of a better name, call him Your Own-Death. You can fear this visitor or use him for your own personal gain. The choice is up to you.32

Dyer’s “over the shoulder” figure of death, in keeping with the self-help tradition of direct appropriation, echoes an image from a bestselling book of the period, Carlos Castañeda’s 1972 Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan: “Death is our eternal companion . . . The thing to do when you’re impatient is to turn to your left and ask advice from your death . . . Death is the only wise adviser we have.”33

Generally the death threat—designed to instill a sense of urgency and immediacy, some would say to conjure the notion of a transcendent self—occurs fairly early in the self-improvement text, though occasionally it emerges midvolume. As was noted earlier, Stephen R. Covey deploys a funeral scene reminiscent of Cotton Mather’s death-rattle sermon, and
Richard Nelson Bolles included a tombstone meditation until he shifted to a more upbeat tone. Julia Cameron counsels individuals to write their ideal "epitaph"; presumably she means "epitaph." Even Helen Gurley Brown, who insists she has no fear of death—only a fear of losing her desirability to male sexual partners—raises the issue of death when she touts the age-defying effects of exercise. After launching into a confession about how she'd rather die fucking—her word—than die undesirable, she abruptly stops and employs that rhetorical technique of drawing attention to a topic by denying its importance: "Heavens, I'd better get back to you, little friend. You aren't aging yet or thinking of dying. Let me try to tell you what else I know about exercise." With the exception of New Age spiritual self-help literature, where death, like work, is denied because all binary categories (matter/energy, self/other, animate/inanimate) are negated, the invocations-of-mortality exercises are a staple of self-improvement culture. In the absence of a belief in an afterlife and a divine cosmic plan, the secular individual is subject to both the ravages of time and the vagaries of chance. The creation of a life, the notion of life as a work of art, offers some sense of meaning in the face of what might otherwise seem to be meaningless mortality. Wrestling some control over one's life, including the forces of time and chance, is the background raison d'être of the self-improvement literature's admonitions to relentlessly work on the self, even if consolidating one's human capital is one of the material outcomes. Like the Protestant's tireless work that served to alleviate the meaninglessness of activity in the face of a doctrine of predestination, the contemporary imperative to invent one's life mitigates meaninglessness in the face of death.

The Maudlin Exemplar and the Doctrine of Self-Mastery

If the character of death—featured as a ticking clock, a shadowy figure behind you, or the members of the funerary party—figures prominently in much of the literature of self-improvement, another character, whom I call the Maudlin Exemplar, is never far from sight. Typically the Maudlin Exemplar appears in the form of a person with a catastrophic physical impairment: quadriplegics are ideal subjects. Like the specter of death, the specter of physical vulnerability encapsulated in the idea of a chance disability ("when bad things happen to good people") typically appears early in a text. Both Anthony Robbins and Robert H. Schuller introduce their accident-victims-turned-heroic-survivors in their second chapters. Robbins introduces a quadriplegic character in the first paragraph of chapter 2 of Unlimited Power, with the story of a man massively injured and disfigured in a motorcycle accident who goes on to become a millionaire and mounts a campaign to run for Congress. Schuller's character is a quadriplegic character is an avid runner who works as a roofer and suffers a workplace fall that leaves him paralyzed with a family to support. When a story of paralysis isn't invoked, blindness serves a similar function. At a promotional lecture for her 1994 book Take This Job and Love It: A Personal Guide to Career Empowerment, Diane Tracy recounted the story of an administrative assistant at the Pentagon who was, according to her supervisors, "the best administrative assistant" they'd ever had. When Tracy's client met the assistant she was amazed to learn that the woman was blind but fulfilled her job functions "better than most assistants who have their sight." The story followed of how the woman had lost her sight, sunk into a depression, thought of killing herself, and finally transformed herself into the vision of productivity. The intended effects of stories of the Maudlin Exemplar are twofold. First, the image of this kind of triumph over adversity can be read as an injunction: "You think you've got problems? What have you got to complain about?" Second, the role of the Maudlin Exemplar is to assure readers that whatever the exigencies of fate and whatever their physical vulnerabilities, they are each individually still in charge of their own lives, demonstrating self-mastery in the face of unexpected events. The fact that there are forces beyond one's own control is acknowledged and then dismissed with the message that it's not what life hands you, it's how you handle it.

The Maudlin Exemplar manages the notion of misfortune and suggests that self-mastery is the fundamental prerequisite for success. For Anthony Robbins, self-mastery consists of what he calls "managing one's state." According to Robbins, the only thing that actually matters for one's quality of life is the capacity to manage one's internal responses to events or circumstances. For Robbins, one's emotional state is to be brought completely under one's conscious control so that external events have no impact. Paradoxically, Robbins's own success has depended on his ability to alter others' states of mind with his charismatic revival-style stadium performances.

While Robbins speaks about controlling one's "state," Covey's emphasis is on managing one's actions or responses. He remarks on the difference between humans and other animals (though he omits the "other," since he is squarely in the camp of those who place humans above animals, and above
human beings' own animal nature): “Between stimulus and response man has the freedom to choose.” Freedom, for Covey, is the capacity to respond independently to external circumstances. Rather than making a direct appeal in a Maudlin Exemplar story, Covey notes, with his characteristically cool, rational approach: “We have all known individuals with very difficult circumstances, perhaps with a terminal illness or a severe handicap, who maintain magnificent emotional strength. How inspired we are by their integrity.” Instead of invoking a Maudlin Exemplar in the story of injured individuals, Covey concentrates on the renowned heroics of imprisoned individuals and world leaders such as Victor Frankl, Anwar Sadat, and Mohandas K. Gandhi. Leaving aside for a moment the politics of choosing these examples over, say, Nelson Mandela or Malcolm X, the imprisoned hero offers the finest example of oppressive external circumstances and “private victory.” Mastery of the self in the face of profoundly asymmetrical power relations becomes the mark of the hero. But what is missing in the literature of self-improvement is the recognition that the achievements of a Gandhi or a Sadat occur within the context of larger social movements and forces. Individual praxis or action is meaningful in the context of larger social forces—in what Arendt would call the “space of appearance”—not in isolation from them. But for Covey what matters most is the inviolability of a core self: “It’s not what happens to us, but our response to what happens to us that hurts us. Of course, things can hurt us physically or economically and can cause sorrow. But our character, our basic identity, does not have to be hurt at all.”

Interestingly, when Foucault recounts the progression of concern with self-mastery among the Greeks, he notes a move from the kinds of nonreciprocal mastery that Robbins enacts in his charismatic performances to the rational self-mastery of Covey’s characters:

to be master of oneself meant, first, taking into account only oneself and not the other, because to be master of oneself meant that you were able to rule others. So the mastery of oneself was directly related to a dissymmetrical relation to others. You should be master of yourself in a sense of activity, dissymmetry, and nonreciprocity. Later on... mastery of oneself is something which is not primarily related to power over others... you have to be master of yourself not only in order to rule others, as in Alcibiades or Nicoles, but you have to be master of yourself because you are a rational being. And

in this mastery of yourself, you are related to other people, who are also masters of themselves. And this new kind of relation to the other is much less nonreciprocal than before.

While self-mastery was necessary in the formation of oligarchic leaders, it was also necessary in the formation of rational democratic subjects. In Covey’s examples, self-mastery is offered as the only possible response to asymmetrical power and constitutes the rational democratic subject, while in the case of Robbins, self-mastery offers the capacity for mastery over others, as control of one’s self allows one to control others who are less able to control themselves. As Robbins notes: “If you don’t have a plan for your life, someone else does.” In this sense, Robbins brings an almost Nietzschean übermensch to the self-help discourse. Unless one “awakens the giant within,” one is destined to join the herd.

Ordinary Self-Mastery: Watching the Clock, Watching the Scale

In the context of daily life, the heroic mastery of the self is reduced to the rational management of the self prescribed in the use of calendars and the adherence to diets and fitness regimens. One’s body and time are one’s limited “human capital.” Covey’s Seven Habits revolves around the time management system that he developed and markets through the Franklin Covey Company. For example, Covey provides detailed instructions on how to schedule one’s time according to one’s specific roles and values (see fig. 5.1). Echoing Benjamin Franklin’s daybook and book of virtues, in which he organized his days around cultivating various virtues, Covey’s time management system updates the old-fashioned notion of “virtues” with the more modern idea of “priorities.” Anthony Robbins suggests his morning and evening rituals of responding to various questions and prescribes a very specific diet regimen where “water-rich” foods are emphasized. Helen Gurley Brown devotes three chapters of Having It All (more than a third of her total text) to her fitness and diet advice. “Effective” management of one’s time and one’s body enjoys the status of a moral imperative. Being thin is required for happiness as a “single girl”:

You don’t have to do anything brassy or show-offy or against your nature. Your most prodigious work will be on you—at home. When I got married, I moved in with six-pound dumbbells, slant board, an
in my chains!" The relentlessness of labor of work on the self informs every aspect of daily life. Brown writes, referencing *How to Be Your Own Best Friend*, another bestseller of the period:

**DON'T BE YOUR OWN BEST FRIEND**

I think unconditional love is what a mother feels for her baby, and not what you should feel for yourself. Author Margaret Halsey said in a *Newsweek* editorial: "the [false] idea is that inside every human being, however unprepossessing, there is a glorious, talented, and overwhelmingly attractive personality. Nonsense. Inside each of us is a mess or unruly, primitive impulses, and these can sometimes, under the strenuous self-discipline and dedication of art, result in noble creativity."

I couldn't agree more. If we're too approving of ourselves too early, we may never be motivated to move onward. Yes, of course, you should feel pleased at the day's job well done, the face and body exercised and well-groomed, but heavy self-love must be earned.

Baby fat and unconditional love are to be left in the nursery. Children, especially vulnerable infants, are the other, the antithesis, of the self-mastering autonomous self. Competent, capable, and rational adults shape their bodies and themselves—they whip themselves into shape—carefully warding off infantile incapacity and vulnerability in a vision of autonomous self-making. Mind is master, body is slave. Covey, Robbins, and Brown (and a host of others in bestselling diet and exercise manuals) offer an image of mind over matter, where the body is controlled by willpower or self-hypnosis.

**Authoring and Authorizing One's Self: Literacy as Legitimacy**

Developing one's life as a work of art requires not only self-mastery but also authority. While the authority of the self-improvement expert is constructed both formally and informally—by drawing on either one's professional expertise as a psychologist, psychiatrist, or educated specialist of one kind or another or on oneself as an example of a "before"-to-"after" story—the authority of the individual reader is established through a series of activities of self-reflection, and most frequently through writing. Writing exercises,
including lists, sentence completion exercises, inventories of skills or shortcomings, mission statements, “morning pages,” deathbed reflections, fictional autobiographies, and fantasy ideal days, are the mainstays of self-improvement culture. Self-knowledge gleaned through these exercises is used to inform goal-setting and life-planning exercises. For example, Covey declares: “Writing is another powerful mental way to sharpen the mental saw. Keeping a journal of our thoughts, experiences, insights, and learnings [sic] promotes mental clarity, exactness, and context.” A written mission statement is a central component of Covey’s approach, out of which one’s life goals and weekly plans and schedules are to be drawn up. Drawing on the language of a popular psychology practice of the prior decade, transactive analysis, Covey suggests that one should develop new “scripts” for one’s life choices.

The daybooks that proliferated in the last two decades of the twentieth century, from Franklin Planners to Filofax, are reminiscent of the hypomnemata (literally, hypo, “under,” and mnmata, “memory,” therefore “under memory,” or a support to memory) that were employed by the literate ancient Greek population. As Foucault noted regarding the ancient Greeks:

the hypomnemata could be account books, public registers, individual notebooks serving as memoranda. Their use as books of life, guides for conduct, seems to have become a current thing amongst a whole cultivated public. Into them one entered quotations, fragments of works, examples, and actions to which one had been witness or of which one had read the account, reflections or reasonings which one had heard or which had come to mind. They constitute a material memory of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering these to an accumulated treasure for rereading and later meditation. They also formed a raw material for the writing of more systematic treatises in which were given arguments and means by which to struggle against some defect (such as anger, envy, gossip, flattery) or to overcome some difficult circumstance (a mourning, an exile, downfall, disgrace).

Writing became, for the ancient Greeks, a critical part of the work of creating one’s life as work of art:

No technique, no professional skill can be acquired without exercise; neither can one learn the art of living, the techne tou biou, without an askesis which must be taken as a training of oneself by oneself. . . . Amongst all the forms this training took (and which included abstinences, memorizations, examinations of conscience, meditations, silence and listening to others), it seems that writing—the fact of writing for oneself and for others—came late to play a sizeable role.

The self-authoring subject is assumed to be a literate subject, and literacy is assumed to be part of a successful life. The significance of this point is not to be underestimated. Without literacy, the self-constructing itself loses the capacity to anchor its “truths.” As the philosophy scholar Alexander Nehamas notes,

it is difficult to imagine that one can formulate one’s own art of living without writing about it because it is difficult to imagine that the complex views that such an art requires can be expressed in any other way. Further, unless one writes about it, one’s art will not be able to constitute a model for others in the longer run.

While one’s identity might have formerly been anchored in (and limited by) a community where one’s story was shared in spoken language and known informally, the self-creating self must create a written narrative of his or her life and secure it in written language. While literacy itself brings with it the possibility of the insularity or inwardsness that some have labeled “narcissism,” it also provides the possibility of leaving a written legacy—a work that outlasts one’s own life. In this sense, the work of creating one’s own life would not be a labor but rather, in Arendt’s terms, a work—something that lasts.

But many written self-help exercises are by no means meant for others to read. These are not memoirs but rather aids in realizing one’s internal states and desires. Julia Cameron calls this sort of writing “a tool for creative recovery.” Rather than existing as works of art, this writing is an ongoing daily labor. For example, Cameron’s Artist’s Way requires three pages of handwritten, uncensored, free-form language written first thing in the morning. The “morning pages” are a nonnegotiable part of the “recovery” process. But the contents of these stream-of-consciousness pages are informed by exercises and questions or exercises posed in the book. For example, in an exercise called “Goal Search,” Cameron writes:
The simple act of imagining a dream in concrete detail helps us to bring it into reality. Think of your goal search as a preliminary architect's drawing for the life you would wish to have.

THE STEPS

1. Name your dream. That's right. Write it down. "In a perfect world, I would secretly love to be a _________."

2. Name one concrete goal that signals to you its accomplishment. On your emotional compass, this goal signifies true north.
   (Note: two people may want to be an actress. They share that dream. For one, an article in People magazine is the concrete goal. To her, glamour is the emotional center for her dream; glamour is true north. For the second actress, the concrete goal is a good review in a Broadway play. To her, respect as a creative artist is the emotional center of her dream; respect is true north. . . .

3. In a perfect world, where would you like to be in five years in relation to your dream and true north?

4. In the world we inhabit now, what action can you take, this year, to move you closer?

5. What action can you take this month? This week? This day? Right now?65

Another Artist's Way exercise involves imagining a perfect childhood and how your life might be different if you'd gotten "perfect nurturing."66 And a decade earlier, Irene C. Kassorla instructed her female readers:

Start making a list: "WHAT I DON'T WANT TO BE." . . . Now start a second list. This list begins: "WHAT I MIGHT NOT MIND BEING." . . .

Now I ask them to write a third list, "I THINK I MIGHT LIKE."65

Individuals are asked to assess their current lives against imagined, presumably better, futures. But, far from writing their own scripts, individuals are guided through specific types of questions. The most extreme example of the self-improvement author directing individual writing is in the case of mission statements that are created by using an electronic form online at the FranklinCovey website (www.frankincovey.com). The person "writing" his or her mission statement uses pull-down menus and fills in blank spaces in forms to provide words describing his or her values, principles, assets, and liabilities, and then a "mission statement" is generated by a database template (see fig. 5.2). Similarly, Anthony Robbins and Oprah Winfrey each have had extensive journal writing sections on their websites, and Winfrey has launched an interactive online subscriber self-help program called "Live Your Best Life."66 But, more typically, book-based self-improvement culture relies on a series of questions that invite the reader to revel in a pleasurable pornography of possibilities. "What would you do if money were no object?" "What would you do if you knew you could not fail?" "What would you want in your life if you'd had a perfect childhood?" Reality—the real world of financial constraints, failed plans, and typically insufficient childhoods—is jettisoned for a world of fantasy where any career or outcome is possible. Consider this exercise from The Artist's Way:

Figure 5.2. The FranklinCovey Company's online interactive "Mission Builder." On this page the form requires users to specify what admirable qualities in characters they want to use as role models. Viewed at www.frankincovey.com/cgi-bin/mission_builder/mission-builder/mb8 on September 29, 2001. Excerpted from www.FranklinCovey.com. Used with permission. All rights reserved.
If you had five other lives to lead, what would you do in each of them? I would be a pilot, a cowhand, a physicist, a psychic, a monk. You might be a scuba diver, a cop, a writer of children’s books, a football player, a belly dancer, a painter, a performance artist, a history teacher, a healer, a coach. . . . Whatever occurs to you, jot it down. Do not overthink this exercise. The point of these lives is to have fun in them—more fun than you might be having in this one.67

The trouble with these sorts of exercises is threefold. First, comparing one’s current situation to some imagined perfect future is a recipe for dissatisfaction and constant striving. Second, it is striking that at precisely the moment when individuals are asked to imagine every possibility for their own individual lives in ever greater detail that one finds no exercises imagining a collective future. I have yet to find a bestselling self-improvement book that prompts one to consider, for example, the following: “If you could live in a world where profit were not the motivating force of production, what would your life look like?” or “How would your life be different if the nutritional, medical, and educational needs of children were the top priority of every individual, every group, and every institution?” or “How would your life be different if racism/sexism/anti-Semitism or other religious intolerance were no longer a structuring principle of social relations?” Were such questions part of the discourse of self-improvement culture, the writing exercises found in self-help books might be a remarkable tool for social transformation. One’s realization of one’s self might genuinely lead to societal change (though the steps between imagining the idealized future and realizing it would likely involve a good bit more effort than imagination.) However, in its current insularity, the literature of self-improvement directs the reader to familiar frameworks, namely, what one should seek for one’s self narrowly conceived as a private individual rather than as a citizen or stakeholder in larger and more public arenas.

Finally, as a literature that is notable for its almost wholesale lack of imagination and its reliance on direct appropriation from others’ works, self-help literature doesn’t inspire the cultivation of new vocabularies, the broaching of new and more challenging questions, the development of what political theorists such as Richard Rorty call “strong poets”—individuals whose self-creation generates new vocabularies and new possibilities for others.68 Even when self-help authors such as Anthony Robbins suggest that individuals analyze the metaphors that shape their thinking and enhance their vocabularies as a way of developing a range of responses, the questions are premised on the assumption of an autonomous, and often isolated individual whose self-mastery is central to his individual and isolated success.69 Robbins writes:

In the back of this book you’ll find some blank pages. You might find them ideal for this goal-setting session. Let’s get down to business:

1. Pretend it’s the holiday season—time for giving and receiving abundant gifts! Dream big! Write down all your dreams, all of the things you want to have, do, be, and share. Imagine the people, feelings, and places you want to be a part of your life. Sit down right now, grab your pencil, and start writing. Don’t try to figure out how you’re going to get there; just write it down. There are no limits.

2. Now go over the list you made and estimate when you expect to reach those outcomes: six months, one year, two years, five years, ten years, twenty years. It’s helpful to see what sort of a time frame you’re operating in. Note how your list came out. Some people find that the list they made is dominated by things they want today. Others find their greatest dreams are far in the future, in some perfect world of total success and fulfillment. But a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, and it’s important to be aware of the first steps as much as the final ones.

3. Once you’ve set some time frames, pick four goals that you can realize this year. Pick the things you’re most committed to, most excited about, things that would give you the most satisfaction. On another sheet of paper, write them down again, and also write down why you absolutely will achieve them. Why to do something is much more powerful than how—if you get a big enough why, you can always figure out the how.70

Although authors such as Robbins understand the power of language and metaphor, they offer the prescribed language of self-improvement discourse, which corrals the reader back toward a predictable and limited set of concerns—back into what the French fin de siècle social theorist Gabriel Tarde
called “the grooves of borrowed thought”71—patterns of thought that are unlikely to create any serious disruption of the status quo. In these labors that are purported to be labors of self-creation, the exercises provided are actually most effective not for the creation of newly invented selves but rather for the maintenance of existing notions of the self and its relation to the social and political worlds. Rather than authoring or inventing a new sort of self, these literatures tend to ensure that no one steps too far outside either the self-help genre or the generic lives it fosters.

“Imagineering”: Visualizing One’s Life and Managing One’s Image

While authoring one’s life—telling one’s story in writing—is a central component of inventing the self, in an increasingly visual culture, more visual and figural forms of self-making have also come to play a central role. Much has been written on the impact and implications of the shift from an oral and aural culture to a literate text-based culture, a trend that is associated with the rise of modernity and the privileging of reason and rationality.72 Similarly, much has been written regarding the shift from a literary culture to a visual and pictorial culture, or what some social theorists have called a shift from a discursive culture to a figural or iconic culture, a development that is tied to the emergence of postmodernity and is associated with an emphasis on sensation, feeling, and affect rather than reason.73 There are important political implications in these developments. The literate subject engaged in dialogue, particularly written discourse, is said to have a greater capacity for reasoning and reflection, while the subject who is primarily visually oriented is imagined as more reactive and emotional. The former is an ideal for citizenship, while the latter is assumed to be easily swayed by the emotions and thus ideal for the development of supposedly “unruly” masses. Images are understood to speak more directly to unconscious desires, while language is assumed to foster rational decision-making. Thus this work of envisioning a self, rather than writing about one’s self, is associated with pleasure and play, subject not to the rational processes of speech but rather to the perceptual world of image and sensation. Mind-power no longer takes the form of positive thinking alone but includes exercises in visualization and imagination. In her 1979 book Creative Visualization, Shakti Gawain writes:

Creative visualization is the technique of using your imagination to create what you want in your life. There is nothing at all new, strange, or unusual about creative visualization. You are already using it every day, every minute in fact. It is your natural power of imagination, the basic creative energy of the universe which you use constantly, whether or not you are aware of it. . . .

Imagination is the ability to create an idea or mental picture in your mind. In creative visualization you use your imagination to create a clear image of something you wish to manifest. Then you continue to focus on the idea or picture regularly, giving it positive energy until it becomes objective reality . . . in other words, until you actually achieve what you have been visualizing.74

Another typical example of a visualization exercise, making a “treasure map,” is recommended by numerous self-help authors, Gawain among them:

Making a “treasure map” is a very powerful technique, and fun to do. . . . You can make a treasure map by drawing or painting it, or by making a collage using pictures or words cut from magazines, books, or cards, photographs, lettering, drawing, and so on. . . . Basically the treasure map should show you in your ideal scene, with your goal fully realized.75

In her 1998 Take Time for Your Life, Cheryl Richardson also advocates the use of a treasure map, but in a break with the self-help tradition of appropriating the ideas of others without attribution, Richardson, to her credit, attributes the exercise to an earlier inspirational author. “A treasure map,” she writes, “is another way to keep your mind fueled with what really matters. In 1948, Robert Collier, in his book The Secret of the Ages, introduced the concept of creating a ‘treasure map’ as a way to visualize those things that you’d like to have in your life.”76

The treasure map also figures prominently in Sarah Ban Breathnach’s 1995 Simple Abundance:

JANUARY 29: YOUR PERSONAL TREASURE MAP

No self-respecting, swashbuckling buccaneer would set out in search of buried treasure without a map. Why should you? A personal treasure map is a collage of your ideal life that you create as a visual tool to focus your creative energy in the direction you wish to go.
First of all, you'll have to visualize your ideal life. Take a moment to get quiet and go within. Close your eyes. Now see how you live and who lives with you. What does your dream house look like? What part of the country is it in? Do you have children? How many? What type of garden do you have? Is there a gazebo in the backyard? A swimming pool? Do you have any pets? What kind of car is parked in the driveway? What kind of job do you have? Are you publishing your own newsletter, directing a feature film, or raising thoroughbred horses? Now see if you can't find pictures in magazines to match your ideal ones. Cut them out and create a collage on an eight-by-ten-inch piece of posterboard.  

And Breathnach suggests that everyone create an “illustrated discovery journal”:

One of the most pleasurable ways to start finding out your personal preferences is by creating an illustrated discovery journal. This is your explorer’s log as you begin to make your way into the darkest terra incognita: your authentic inner world. . . . Here is an occasion where one picture speaks a thousand words. Meditating on one visual image a day can jump-start your creativity and lead to revealing insights.  

While on January 28—remember this is a daybook—one is exploring one’s authentic, given, inner world, by January 29 one is creating “a wish list to the Universe” that bears a striking resemblance to a Christmas list, with a number of big-ticket items: house, car, swimming pool, Thoroughbred horses. One has gone from being an explorer to being a buccaneer, which is perhaps not at all a bad analogy for the directions suggested in Simple Abundance, which more often than not suggests shopping as a solution to problems.  

In another, more high-tech exercise, Anthony Robbins suggests that one imagine oneself the director of one's own life, a film auteur rather than a text-based author:

Just as a movie director can change the effect his movie has on an audience, you can change the effect any experience in life has upon yourself. A director can change the camera angle, the volume and type of music, the speed and amount of movement, the color and quality of the image, and thus create any state he wants in his

audience. You can direct your brain in the same way to generate any state or behavior that supports your highest goals or needs. Let me show you how.  

Robbins’s use of the idea of a film director’s subjectivity recalls the work of the social theorist Walter Benjamin, who observed that the development of the printing press fostered the possibility of every person becoming an author. More recently, the advent of videotape recorders and computerized editing equipment renders everyone capable of imagining him or herself as an auteur: the director of his or her life. Mechanical reproduction, particularly the rise of photography and cinema, Benjamin argued, had diminished our access to singular experiences—to the presence of the living individual, to the unique “aura” of each thing and person:  

This situation might also be characterized as follows: for the first time—and this is the effect of the film—man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However, the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays.  

Mechanical reproduction, particularly filmmaking, sets the stage not only for a culture of celebrity, where the individual star’s presence has been imbued with tremendous power, but also for a world lived from the outside looking in that all the while harbors a nostalgia for the notion of an “authentic” world, lived from the inside out. While modernity brought with it an inward turn—the rise of the psychological interiority associated with, for example, the novel—our increasingly visual culture brings with it the tendency to imagine oneself as one would appear. Rather than living one’s life in as unmediated a fashion as possible, the self-help reader engaged in Robbins’s exercise imagines herself directing herself in a film, a ghostly puppeteer of a marionette that is her imagined self. One conceives of one’s interiority by imagining how it might appear. This double gaze is not altogether new for women, who have long been charged with surveilling themselves as objects of masculine desire, or for other subordinated peoples, who must be mindful of the supervision of their masters. It is not
surprising, then, that Helen Gurley Brown suggests not a quest for authenticity but rather a pursuit of marketable appearances. She advocates cosmetic surgery among aging women for "anyone who cares how she looks." And, under a heading entitled "Acceptable (Necessary!) Bullshit," she explains how overt lies are a necessary and acceptable part of courtship. In Brown's business of life, feminine wiles and artifice are indispensable tools in the quest for a successful life. However, the extension of this image of self-surveillance to everyone is new, and is consistent with a culture that increasingly requires one to imagine one's self as a product. For example, embracing Tom Peters's idea of oneself as the CEO of Me, Inc., also requires a shift from plain packaging to a visually appealing one:

Whatever you decide, you should look at your brand's power as an exercise in new-look résumé management—an exercise that you start by doing away once and for all with the word "résumé." You don't have an old-fashioned resume anymore! You've got a marketing brochure for brand You...

[Y]ou've got to be a broad-gauged visionary—a leader, a teacher, a farsighted "imaginier." Engineering one's image is part of self-mastery, but it is also, in the current context, critical to commodifying oneself—to keeping oneself marketable in a volatile labor market, or mastering the contingencies of the labor market. When Michel Foucault asked why not be a work of art, "like a lamp or a building," his metaphor offered the idea of the self as an object, as a commodity. This view, though it is likely that Foucault would protest, is completely consistent with Tom Peters's ideal of "brand You." Peters was among the first to observe that aestheticizing products would be increasingly important to their marketability. This process is hardly limited to the inanimate: a 1996 New York Times headline kicker read: "Fearing the Ax, Men Choose the Scalpel." Cosmetic surgery, the Times reported, was on the rise among men who feared that reaching middle age would make them candidates for downsizing. Maintaining an attractive, saleable image becomes critical in a culture saturated with media images. When one imagines life as a sport or a battle, artifice, camouflage, ruse, and deception are legitimate means. Credibility, rather than authenticity, is the issue. Yet appearing authentic while conforming to external values produces for the self-creating self an endlessly contradictory task of reconciling incommensurable values. How does this self, caught between a newly expanded sense of interiority and faced with an increased demand that it shape itself for the marketplace, render itself "authentic"? What does the self-help literature advise, when there is not only a tension between appearing marketable and remaining authentic or true to oneself but also internal contradictions in the very notion of creating or inventing an authentic self? I want to look at each of these questions in turn.

Authenticating the Invented Self

Enthusiasm is the key to bolstering one's authenticity and promoting the appearance of self-mastery. Unlike authenticity, enthusiasm does not rely on any claim of origins, truthfulness, or integrity but instead depends upon energetic endorsement. Enthusiasm—the suggestion that one is infused with "theos," or supernatural inspiration—offers a serviceable substitute for authenticity. After all, what could be more authentic and masterful than to be infused with divine authority? Consider, for example, the characteristics of Tom Peters's prose in his most recent publications. Gone are the somber color schemes of the covers of In Search of Excellence or Thriving on Chaos. In their place are the orange, turquoise, and yellow colors of the covers of The Pursuit of Wow! and The Tom Peters Seminar. Peters's texts, which had already been notable for their use of exclamation marks, are riddled with them by the time of the publication of The Pursuit of Wow! Peters is quoted in a recent interview on the importance of the exclamation mark: "Today, it's an exclamation-mark world. What is Silicon Valley but one big bright exclamation mark? If you had a Silicon Valley flag, isn't that what it would be?"

Consider this passage from Peters's 1992 Liberation Management, which sits between Chaos and Wow! as a transitional work, where Peters proposes the notion of the company as carnival:

Dynamism. Say "carnival" and you think energy, surprise, buzz, fun. The mark of the carnival—and what makes it most different from a day at most offices—is its dynamism. Dynamism is a signature, the reason we go back. To create and maintain a carnival is never to get an inch away from dynamic imagery. As chief, you must feel the dynamics in your fingertips, be guided by them in every decision.
Subtopics include “Toward Zany,” “The Little Band of Jugglers,” and “Bonkers Organizations.” Peters’s “wild and crazy” rhetoric substitutes an ethos of play for an ethos of “mission” or “life’s purpose.” Business is a pleasure and pleasure is a business for the CEO of Me, Inc. In Wow, Peters explains how to restructure a church for the 1990s:

Typically dull white folks (of any denomination) could learn a lot from the best inner-city African-American churches, starting with Reverend Cecil Williams’s inspiring, energetic Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco. (Hint, for starters: Glide doesn’t have “services,” it has “celebrations”). African Americans are represented as the enthusiastic, passionate, feeling, and irrational other—aspects of the other that are to be incorporated into one’s own business plan. Rational, thoughtful, careful economic planning is no longer sufficient: it must be infused and enhanced with enthusiasm. As in evangelical religions, where the emotional force of the conversion experience, along with impassioned public testimony about one’s conversion, are the factors that authenticate and legitimize “salvation,” the emotional enthusiasm of the entrepreneur legitimizes his or her activity without the considerable inconvenience of an ethical stance. What Peters overlooks is that the enthusiasm of the African American church is made possible not simply by a dynamic, charismatic pastor but by the presence of an engaged community. His 1994 account of the entrepreneurial self is, by contrast, a lonely one, unmoored from community and the ethical values that are intrinsic to communities:

Each of us is ultimately lonely. In the end, it’s up to each of us alone to figure out who we are, who we are not, and to act more or less consistently with those conclusions.

In my view, anyone who is not very confused all the time about ethical issues is out of touch with the frightful (and joyous) richness of the world. But at least being confused means that we are considering our ethical stance and that of the institutions we associate with.

That’s a good start.  

The CEOs of Me, Inc., ultimately alone and confused, are left to grapple with their problems, ethical and otherwise, entirely on their own. This is not only the ethical relativism of one culture in relation to another but also the ethical relativism of atomized individuals in relation to each other. Such a self, passionate though she or he may be, lives a life of alternating exhilaration and exhaustion:

The life of an entrepreneur is occasionally exhilarating, and almost always exhausting. Only unbridled passion for the concept is likely to see you through the 17-hour days (month after month) and the painful mistakes that are part and parcel of the start-up process. Such isolated individuals—working seventeen-hour days—cannot, of course, engage in the labor of caring for others, or, it seems, even of caring for themselves. The work of producing oneself as the CEO of Me, Inc., requires that one belabor the self and leave care aside. Such atomized individuals, removed from any communities, may find themselves aggregated as a mass or a crowd. Robbins’s seminars rely on this crowd experience, generating enthusiasm in the mass arena. Accounts of his preevent activities include reports of his “pumping up” for the event with a series of exercises. Robbins explains:

When I lead seminars, I always set off scenes of raucous, joyous, chaotic frenzy.

If you walked in the door at the right moment, you would come upon perhaps three hundred people jumping up and down, screeching and hollering, roaring like lions, waving their arms, shaking their fists like Rocky, clapping their hands, puffing up their chests, strutting like peacocks, giving the thumbs-up sign, and otherwise acting as if they had so much personal power they could light up a city if they wanted to.

One way to get yourself into a state that supports your achieving any outcome is to act “as if” you were already there.

The impossibility of finding one’s “authentic” self is mitigated by the possibility of accessing, at least, one’s most persuasive self. One does not need to be an authority if one can appear authoritative. “Awakening the Power Within”—accessing stores of energy—stands in for authenticity. “Congruity”—Robbins’s version of authenticity—yields energy, and energy is, in turn, a sign of “congruity.”

Incongruity keeps me from being all I can be, from doing all I can do, and from creating my strongest state. Giving oneself contradictory messages is a subliminal way of pulling a punch. . . .
We’ve all experienced the price of incongruence when part of us really wants something but another part within seems to stop us. Congruence is power. People who consistently succeed are those who can commit all their resources, mental and physical, to work together toward achieving a task. Stop a moment now and think of the three most congruent people you know. Now think of the three most incongruent people you know. What is the difference between them? How do congruent people affect you personally versus people who are incongruent?99

The difficulty, of course, is that individuals who have multiple and often conflicting commitments—to families, to communities, and to their work—may find it all but impossible to reconcile these conflicting demands, to gain congruence, and thus may “fail” to “awaken the giant within.” Paradoxically, Robbins’s solution to finding what he calls “congruency” isn’t to search one’s soul for one’s deepest values but rather to imitate other people:

One way to develop congruency is to model the physiologies of people who are congruent. The essence of modeling is to discover which part of the brain an effective person uses in a given situation. If you want to be effective, you want to use your brain in the same way. If you mirror someone’s physiology exactly, you will tap the same part of your brain.100

Producing this persuasive self was the topic of Arlie Russell Hochschild’s 1983 study of the working conditions of flight attendants. Hochschild observed that presenting oneself as genuinely caring was a critical part of the flight attendant’s work. This work, which Hochschild called emotional labor, was required by corporations wishing to represent “themselves”—their organizations—as friendly, and their service as superior. These corporations provided (and presumably continue to provide) service training to ensure that flight attendants learned the skills of emotional management necessary to present themselves as “caring professionals.” Hochschild called this phenomenon “the managed heart” and observed: “The more the heart is managed, the more we value the unmanaged heart.”101 With the blurring of the boundaries between public and private life—evidenced in part by the rise of a construct like Peters’s CEO of Me, Inc.—one is no longer compelled to manage the heart only in the context of the corporate workplace. Or rather, more accurately, the corporate workplace is interiorized:

one takes the workplace with one everywhere. Managing the heart while appearing completely natural (i.e., congruent) becomes even more important for success. In such a context, authenticating the invented self becomes a central, if futile, pursuit. Working on one’s self while presenting an appearance of effortlessness, of seamless congruence and boundless energy, is critical to one’s success. Moreover, engaging in the fantasy that one actually does “invent” oneself is an even more contradictory demand of the literatures of self-improvement.

Inventing the Authentic Self

To understand what the task of creating an authentic life might mean, it is useful to consider the varied meanings and the etymology of this term.102 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, in its earliest forms, the word *authenticus* (Latin) referred to authority, as in “one who does a thing himself, a principal, a master, an autocrat.” It was only later, in thirteenth-century France, that the term began to be conflated with the notion of something genuine or original. Thus “authenticity” can be understood in one of two ways. In the earlier case, authenticity is understood as the development of authority over oneself, or self-mastery. And in the second case, authenticity is understood as the quest for some kind of original ur-self unsullied by the impact of socialization. Such a self has to be “discovered,” “uncovered,” or “recovered” and figures prominently in the literatures of self-improvement, where one is urged to “excavate” and “unearth” one’s true self or true desires. In the first case, the self is understood to be engaged in what Foucault would call a “practice of freedom”—the self creating itself as a work of art or inventing new forms of subjectivity (though Foucault himself eschews any notion of authenticity). This sort of authenticity requires not only freedom from the demands of the market—from the necessity of adapting oneself to the labor market—but also freedom from dependence on others. The ideal of creating a life of which one is the master, not the subject—of being self-creating rather than subject to the desires and discourses of others—would appear to be at the heart of any practice of freedom, and thus crucial for social change. But, as in any version of the self that assumes a highly autonomous individual agent, the belief in such an authoritative, authentic, self-authoring self requires the repression of any consideration of the contributions of others to one’s self and one’s world.
The quest for either of these sorts of authenticity, self-mastery or self-discovery, requires a disavowal of the value of the caring labor of others in shaping the self. One must be fully and completely independent or autonomous. In the first case, where one is to be master of oneself, the labor of others and the possibilities for freedom that it creates are denied or minimized. And in the second case, where one is to recover oneself from the damages of socialization, that labor is denigrated. Thus an important part of the work of the belabored self is to engage in a denial of the impact of, or the value of, others’ contributions to oneself. One must see one’s self as either commanding, masterful, and in control and not subject to the exigencies of life or the labor market (thus authoritative, or self-authoring) or as given, unique, damaged by social forces, but recoverable (thus minimizing or denying the positive value of others). In the first case, one has no debt to these persons and institutions, because if the goal is to be singularly self-forming, one needs to deny the impact of others. In the second case, one has to deny the debt to, for example, one’s parents and the social institutions that formed one, because this impact is seen as damage, as something to recover from. In either case, these forms of authenticity are inconsistent with the reality that one is neither wholly a cause nor wholly an effect. Thus the literatures of self-improvement, and self-creations of other kinds, reliant as they are on the liberal notion of an autonomous self, require their adherents to engage in a denial of the importance of—even the existence of—the labors of others and the forces of history. In a repudiation of this notion of the self as its own author, Hannah Arendt wrote:

Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author.

When Foucault imagined life as a work of art he imagined an art object. Arendt, in contrast, imagined life as a narrative, authored by the social collectivity rather than by the lone individual. While her metaphor brings along its own problematic (e.g., the potential aestheticizing of the political realm), it offers a notion of agency that is both embedded and relational.

Fundamentally, it is our culture’s fantasy of a disengaged, masterful, rational, and controlling self that creates the possibilities for endless and futile self-improvement. The work of belaboring the self consists not of the necessary activities of daily life—the labor that goes into sustaining and reproducing human life that Arendt describes as continuous until death. Rather, the work of this self-belaboring itself includes a labor of active forgetting, of denying the dependence, vulnerability, and contingency of this purportedly autonomous self. This liberal notion of the self, which took its cues from the philosophy of the ancient Greeks, relies, in its inception, on an ideal of self-mastery that necessarily required the mastery and exploitation of others. Whether this mastery is seen as creating one’s life as a work of art or of realizing all of one’s business opportunities or of winning at the game of life, this idea of self-mastery has its origins in a context of the alienation from and domination of others.

Up until the late twentieth century, the polite fiction of an autonomous individual who could direct his life course managed to sustain itself. When women, as well as others oppressed through racial and ethnic stereotyping, were required to operate as “the other” to this rational, self-authorizing self, the cultural landscape managed to sustain the myth of the self-making man, however wobbly and unsupportable the construct may have been. The extension of this particular notion of individual freedom to each and all has destabilized it. As the ideal of creating a life or leaving one’s mark—arguably an appealing one—is made available to those people who have traditionally been excluded, the limitations of this ideal of a self-serving, autonomous individual are ever more apparent. Put simply, if everyone is busy making sure that they get to “be all they can be,” then who will clean the house, cook the dinners, diaper the babies, and nurse the infirm, not to mention labor in the factories, sweep the streets, drive the taxis, and load the sanitation trucks? All the work of care—both the private and public labors of care—are rendered meaningless and debased when one is seeking some grander work of self-making, some vision of life as a permanent reified work of art. Ultimately, then, Arendt’s categories of labor and work—as apt as they appear to be—may need to be understood as descriptive of ideological formations that we have inherited from the Greeks, and that we reproduce in our daily lives, rather than as prescriptive of an equitable way of organizing the world. The fiction of a masterful self that can make of its life a work of art ultimately fails us if the ideal is predicated on the
privileging of work over labor and the dual refusal to recognize both the labor of others and the absolute, irrefutable vulnerabilities of corporeal, embodied selves. The ideal of life as a work of art is meant to insulate the self from the more economistic metaphor of life as a business, but in the end it fails to do so when it elevates work—understood as leaving a legacy—over labor, the reproduction of life itself.

Not only is it the labor of others, and the value of labor itself, that must be denied by the masterful self, but also it is the vulnerabilities of our bodies. In the model of the self-mastering self, the forms of selfhood that “fail” to be self-sufficient, self-reliant, and self-authoring are seen as somehow defective. As the ideal of an autonomous, self-serving, and masterful subject is applied to everyone, and as the values of the market overflow into every arena, “failed” and “defective” forms of selfhood—childhood, illness, disability, or aged infirmity—no longer find a safe haven. Whereas once the intimate sphere provided a refuge for these cast-off forms of selfhood, an increasingly market-oriented, gains-maximizing intimate arena offers no place of respite. Insulating the self from these affronts to its vulnerabilities through constant efforts at self-mastery and self-management is a central, if futile, undertaking of the belabored self. The belabored self grapples with the encroachment of market principles into every sphere of life, and finds that individual resources to fight such a battle are ultimately limited and ineffectual.

Maintaining the fiction of the autonomous self, a laborious fiction that is ultimately unsustainable, has become hard work. However, we are left with a tremendous problem if we are to abandon the notion of personal freedom at precisely the moment that this ideal has been extended to those who had formerly been excluded. Do we wish to reject the idea of a self with the freedom to create his or her own life at precisely the moment that this ideal has been extended to women and other oppressed groups? Such a direction strikes me as suspect, even reactionary. In the final chapter, I will consider what might be recuperated from the notion of “being all one can be.”