The Science of Self-Help

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A vast apparatus of uplift and solicitude services Americans' longings for success and happiness. Self-help, positive thinking, actualization, motivation, empowerment: the industry of worldly wisdom whirs on like a perpetual-motion dynamo, powered by the consumers' insatiable compulsion to have it all and to feel good about themselves, and by the purveyors' confidence that they, at any rate, can indeed have it all, by turning out swill by the boatload and feeding the cravings of the perennially feckless.

Self-help has been around a long time, and its recipients are growing ever needier while its providers are becoming more and more energetic. Classics of the genre have included Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (published in 1936, it has sold 15 million copies and still ranks high on Amazon's list of top sellers); Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* (published in 1952, it preaches triumph, notably in salesmanship, by way of "reprogramming" one's thoughts); M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled* (many have traveled this road: since 1978 the book has sold over five million copies); Dr. Laura Schlessinger's *Ten Stupid Things Women Do to Mess Up Their Lives* (her nude photo is on the Internet for proof that she writes from experience); Leo Buscaglia's *Living, Loving, and Learning* (at the time of his death in 1998, his books had sold over thirteen million copies in twenty languages); Thomas Harris's *I'm OK—You're OK*; John Gray's *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (during the 1990s it outsold almost every other book in the known universe except the Bible); Steven Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*; Dr. Phil McGraw's *Self Matters: Creating Your Life from the Inside Out* (the cosmically famous Dr. Phil makes some $20 million a year from his books, television show, newsletter, and such memorabilia as baseball hats and t-shirts); and Tony Robbins's *Unlimited Power* (the poster boy for unlimited pelf, he makes Dr. Phil look like a piker, bringing in $80 million annually). In 2008 the self-help business made the cash registers ring to the tune of some $12 billion.

The recidivism rate for self-help users is high; if you go in for this sort of thing at all, odds are that you're a repeat offender. Successful self-help authors nearly always follow a bestseller with formulaic offshoots; Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen built an empire on their monumental *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, with hundreds of books in a relentlessly ramifying series, offering warm comfort to the importunate multitudes under their ministry, among them the souls of horse lovers, convicts, and NASCAR fans.

Since the 1990s self-help wizards have chiefly been offering advice in how to attract honors and emoluments, perhaps even win love and attain an ideal body mass index, while you tune in to the music of the sacred, after a New Age fashion. Marianne Williamson—the most ethereal of robber baronesses, author of such million-sellers as *A Return to Love*, *Enchanted Love*, and *Healing the Soul of America*, presiding minister at Elizabeth Taylor's 1991 wedding at Michael Jackson's Neverland Ranch, confidante to Hillary Clinton—has averred, "Money is energy, and energy is infinite in the universe." With this infinite resource available to all, the poor schmo who fails to cash in must be not only a slacker but also an infidel. Soulcraft means getting yours: "Seek ye first the kingdom of Heaven and the Maserati will get there when it's supposed to." Even the righteous might have to serve their time, but the Maserati is part and parcel of the heavenly kingdom. Ms. Williamson can afford as many as she wants.

I have not read the books mentioned above, but have only read about them, in the accounts of severe critics. Three anti-self-help books I have relied on for information and that I strongly recommend are Tom Tiede's *Self-Help Nation*, Steve Salerno's *SHAM*, and Barbara Ehrenreich's recent *Bright-Sided*. Ehrenreich's is the liveliest and most learned of the lot, though one tires of her nailing home the point that conservatives are generally more upbeat than liberals because in their happiness they are oblivious to the misery of others. Surely the promise of the socialist paradise where joy shall be universally available has seen its day.

It is easy to dismiss the self-help literature as a money-making machine for writer tycoons; so much of it obviously is. But studying self-help seriously not only illuminates the American character but may actually turn up some needed wisdom. So I have explored, gingerly, as one does a cracked tooth, three facets of the self-help genre: first, the self-conscious wisdom literature exemplified by the work of Dr. Wayne W. Dyer, the Sage of Maui, self-described student of American philosophic genius, who has composed a 390-page commentary on Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, and who presents a two-hour disquisition with ten bullet points on your PBS station every time there

is a pledge drive; second, the positive psychology movement, which disdains the self-help label and claims to be unfolding "a science of happiness," and whose vanguard spokesman is Tal Ben-Shahar, an Israeli-born international consultant, lecturer, and writer who was until recently a professor at Harvard, his course informally known as Happiness 101 the most popular at the university; and the achievement masters, who are a sterner lot in general than most self-help boys and girls, and whose eyes burn bright with the latest discoveries in the forging of excellence from quite commonplace human material.

Wayne Dyer's is the sort of success story Americans love to hear. Born in 1940, he came up the hard way, son of a jailbird father, denizen of Detroit orphanages and foster homes, doing every odd job he could in order to make a buck, always proud of his resilience and independence. He earned a doctorate in educational counseling from Wayne State University, and wound up teaching would-be counselors at St. John's University and working as a therapist. Positive thinking was his style and his substance, and he landed a contract to write a book about his guiding ideas, *Your Erroneous Zones* (1976). The book looked to be headed nowhere, but Dyer quit his teaching job to barnstorm the nation, and his indefatigable flogging launched the book toward the top of the charts, winning him guest spots with Johnny Carson and Phil Donahue.

Critics of the Self-Help Industry

Self-Help Nation: The Long Overdue, Entirely Justified, Delightfully Hostile Guide to the Snake-Oil Peddlers Who Are Sapping Our Nation's Soul
By Tom Tiede
Atlantic Monthly ~ 2001 ~ 192 pp.

SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless
By Steve Salerno
Crown ~ 2005 ~ 275 pp. ~ $24.95 (cloth) $13.95 (paper)

Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America
By Barbara Ehrenreich
Metropolitan ~ 2009 ~ 237 pp. ~ $23 (cloth) $15 (paper)

He was a made man, and he was not one to let the advantage slip. Dyer has written over thirty books; produced numerous CDs and DVDs and such items indispensable to one's spiritual well-being as the "Everyday Wisdom Perpetual Flip Calendar" and "Inner Peace Cards"; played himself in a 2009 feature film, *The Shift*, demonstrating the power of his wisdom to irradiate the souls of forlorn yuppies who have forgotten, or never known, how to live; done a weekly radio show, and considered hosting his own television show, but rejected that plan because it would have cut into his sweet life in Hawaii. Along the way, or The Way, he has collected three wives and eight children. He gave up alcohol many years ago, and tells a chilling story or two about his behavior while drinking, but evidently does not speak of himself as a recovered alcoholic. An exemplar of energy, confidence, tenacity, self-reliance, and gentleness, tall and rugged and becomingly bald, Dyer appears to have overcome the bad things that have happened to him, or that he has done, and to deserve the great good fortune he has enjoyed. One is sad to learn that he announced last year he has leukemia.

Dyer's would seem to be the classic case of ambition realized, and wonderfully so, beyond any orphan boy's dreams of fame and wealth and perfectly curling Pacific surf. But although Dyer began his writing career as a conventional instructor in how to play a winning game by the great world's rules, he has moved well beyond that. A plug for *The Shift* on his website intones, "Take your life from ambition TO MEANING." In the movie a creepy corporate type, enraged that his wife is pregnant, learns about selfless love from a mentally ill homeless black man, and returns to save his marriage; a harried housewife rediscovers her talent and passion for drawing and compels

Works of Wayne Dyer Discussed

Excuses Begone!: How to Change Lifelong, Self-Defeating Thinking Habits
Hay House ~ 2009 ~ 257 pp.
$24.95 (cloth)

The Power of Intention: Learning to Co-Create Your World Your Way
Hay House ~ 2004 ~ 259 pp.
$24.95 (cloth) $14.95 (paper)

The Shift
Hay House ~ 2008 ~ 121 min.
$19.95 (DVD)

Your Erroneous Zones
Avon ~ 1976 ~ 320 pp.
$7.99 (paper)

her dullard husband to accept the disruption in domestic routine that this newly awakened self of hers will cause; and a film director who has just lost out on the chance to make a blockbuster finds, while interviewing Wayne Dyer for a documentary that he considers hack work, what a serious vocation is. The shift of the title is from what Dyer calls ego-consciousness to unity-consciousness, from living for one's grasping and pitiable self to serving others and thereby connecting joyously to the Source, as our mentor tends coyly to call God, presumably not wishing to put off those easily offended by such a parochial appellation. The universe being a generous and loving place to those who treat it well, the person who serves others will end up getting all he could possibly want for himself: renounce your ego, and abundance shall shower upon you, even if you don't really require such blandishments anymore.

In *The Power of Intention* (2004), Dyer writes that the world gives back whatever you project onto it, so that "connectors" live in moral, emotional, and physical equilibrium with the Source—vibrating at a high frequency that converts any hatred they encounter to love, impervious to war or economic depression, grateful for everything that has ever happened to them and thus made them who they are. "They'll even go so far as to tell you that imbalances in the earth such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and extreme weather patterns are the result of a collective imbalance in human consciousness." Dyer here sounds like the actor and renowned visionary Danny Glover, who declared that the 2010 earthquake in Haiti was caused by the failure of our political masters to reverse climate change: "You know what I'm saying." Strange to say—or perhaps not so strange, America being a capacious and dreamy land, where marvels are possible—Ralph Waldo Emerson said something very similar, in his 1836 essay "Nature":

> As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions. A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit. So fast will disagreeable appearances, swine, spiders, snakes, pests, madhouses, prisons, enemies, vanish; they are temporary and shall be no more seen.

Sage of Concord, meet the Sage of Maui.

But then Dyer and the great American Transcendentalists are already on familiar terms. Dyer keeps a photograph of Emerson, as well as one of Thoreau, on his writing desk. The DVD lectures he gave on "Ten Secrets to Success and Inner Peace" and "There's a Spiritual Solution to Every Problem" were delivered at the Concord church where Emerson himself had spoken, and Dyer made appropriate obeisance to the presiding spirit. The peroration

to Dyer's 2009 book *Excuses Begone!* incorporates a quotation from Thoreau's 1851 journal about boyhood moments of supreme exaltation: "There comes into my mind such an indescribable, infinite, all-absorbing, divine, heavenly pleasure, a sense of elevation and expansion, and [I] have nought to do with it. I perceive that I am dealt with by superior powers." This is the American soul at its most eloquent. Dyer too claims to have known such transports, though they have not helped his creaking prose and pedestrian philosophizing, and he recommends the life of untrammeled ecstasy to the reader, who has only to rid himself of the excuses produced by "the habitual mind"—I am too old, I am too poor, I am too fat, I am too tired—in order to enjoy it. In short, Dyer is a self-styled Transcendentalist epigone. And while there is a lot to be said for the high fliers of mid-nineteenth-century New England, a large portion of their teaching is bunk—and so is Dyer's. To say that one's thoughts and feelings are within one's power to control is one thing, and not an unwise one: the Stoics said as much—indeed, insisted that they are the *only* matters one always can control. To say that one's thoughts and feelings can rid the earth of cyclones and water moccasins is another thing, upon which any further comment is unnecessary.

The positive psychologists keep their distance from such pronouncements; as Tal Ben-Shahar observes in his DVD lecture *Happiness 101*, the self-help brigade "over-promises and under-delivers." In *Happier* (2007), Ben-Shahar quotes from *The Positive Psychology Manifesto* of 1999, which defines his field as "the scientific study of optimal human functioning": answering what Ben-Shahar calls "the question of questions," posed by sages down the millennia, how to make people happier, science shall prevail where misdirected speculation and exhortation have failed.

Martin Seligman, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and past president of the American Psychological Association, is the honored founder of the movement, which was "officially launched" in 1998. To endow Seligman with this status, however, is to scant the path-breaking work of Abraham Maslow in the 1950s and 60s; in such books as *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* and *Religion, Values, and Peak Experiences*, Maslow proclaimed the supremacy of the "self-actualizing" person, who realizes the fullness of his or her nature—without doing harm to others, of course—and lives as happily as one can on earth. Maslow was the real founder of positive psychology, even if he did not call it by that name.

Today's leading pitchman for positivity, Ben-Shahar, may not rise to the Transcendentalists' heights of grandiosity, but hope springs eternal: "I believe that if enough people realize the true nature of happiness as the ultimate

currency, we will witness society-wide abundance not only of happiness but also of goodness." The newest science may not spell an end to scorpions and tropical fevers, but it just might see a reduction in drive-by shootings, ground glass in Halloween candy, and closed-door congressional negotiations.

Like Wayne Dyer, Ben-Shahar means to lead us "from ambition TO MEANING." And like Dyer, Ben-Shahar enjoys telling stories about himself, especially of the days when he was frothing with ambition and chronically unhappy. He became squash champion of Israel at sixteen, but that didn't make him happy. By dint of working harder than his competition, he made himself one of the best squash players in the world. But he was wound so tightly that he would choke in crucial moments, he never won the world title, and he wore his body down so severely that doctors advised him to retire at twenty-one. All that was cause for unhappiness. He became a Harvard undergraduate and studied computer science, but the subject didn't excite him, and he would flagellate himself for his academic imperfections. Unhappiness hung over him like a perpetual cloud. Then, however, wanting to find out why he was so unhappy, he took up the study of philosophy and psychology, learned

Works on Positive Psychology Discussed

Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment
By Martin Seligman
Free Press ~ 2002 ~ 321 pp. ~ $16 (paper)

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By Tal Ben-Shahar:

The Pursuit of Perfect: How to Stop Chasing Perfection and Start Living a RICHER, HAPPIER *Life*
McGraw-Hill ~ 2009 ~ 246 pp. ~ $22.95 (cloth)

Happiness 101
PBS ~ 2009 ~ 70 min. ~ $24.99 (DVD)

Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment
McGraw-Hill ~ 2007 ~ 192 pp. ~ $21.95 (cloth)

there was more to life than runaway ambition, cut loose when he felt like it, enjoyed eating pizza with friends, let his grades slip a little, and became wise in the manner of those who think positively but not intemperately so.

What does positive psychology understand that its once-triumphant predecessors failed to do? Its theoretical foundation is what Seligman and Ben-Shahar call "the cognitive revolution" that overthrew the reigning theories of psychodynamics and behaviorism in the 1960s. The psychiatrist Aaron T. Beck was the animating force behind cognitive therapy, which coaches the patient in recognizing patterns of thinking that give rise to roiling emotions and self-destructive behavior. It is the leading talk therapy for depression. The conventional psychodynamic approach to depression, which encouraged the sufferer to tear open and probe all his old wounds, tended to do far more harm than good, Beck found in his Freudian training, for the re-opened past would just keep bleeding as the old wounds failed to heal. To focus instead on the present and future and to understand how one's habitual thoughts direct one's feelings became the new clinical emphasis. It is not events themselves but our interpretation of them, Ben-Shahar summarizes, that determines our emotional reaction; irrational interpretations beget emotional fevers and chills, while considered interpretations produce temperate responses. In a small way, cognitive therapy teaches one to philosophize, very practically, beginning with one's present condition. Weeks of cognitive therapy often do patients more good than years of psychoanalysis. Beck divined that we needn't be in thrall to the past or to the subconscious or to uncontrollable emotions, as the Freudians say we are, or to our environmental conditioning, as the behaviorists insist. Psychic freedom is much more in our power than the old orthodoxies believed. Thinking clearly about the matters under our conscious control is liberating.

This robust practicality—a brass-tacks approach to getting results here and now—Ben-Shahar sees as decidedly in the Aristotelian tradition as opposed to the Platonic: in Raphael's painting *The School of Athens*, he writes, Plato is shown pointing to the heavens, Aristotle toward the earth. Raphael notwithstanding, the modern professor of happiness does not get the classical philosopher quite right. For Aristotle taught that the greatest happiness lies in the life of contemplation, of thinking raptly about the eternal things, the things that cannot be other than they are, such as the heavenly bodies or the truths of mathematics: this supreme happiness Aristotle calls *makaria*, blessedness, which is superior to *eudaimonia*, the happiness of morally virtuous or excellent men.

Still, Aristotelian moral virtue is no small thing, surely deserving of emulation, and Martin Seligman, in *Authentic Happiness*, comes nearer its

core than Ben-Shahar does. "*Eudaimonia*, what I call gratification, is part and parcel of right action. It cannot be derived from bodily pleasure, nor is it a state than can be chemically induced or attained by any shortcuts. It can only be had by activity consonant with noble purpose." Ben-Shahar interestingly joins Aristotelian ethics to cognitive psychology, declaring that while it is wise to accept all our emotions, however tortured or perverse some may be, we are not to accept any shabby behavior that unfortunate feelings engender: the life of feeling must be subordinate to that of action, and subject to the oversight of reason. Accepting our feelings in the proper way opens up "the possibility of acting nobly." Nobility—not a word used much these days by philosophers or psychologists—is surely a worthy end for the democratic man and woman, and the happiness it offers lies in right action.

What are the practical, everyday measures Ben-Shahar encourages his students and other readers to take in their pursuit of happiness? His target audience, after all, is in need of strong medicine. In *Happier*, Ben-Shahar claims that in the United States the depression rate is ten times higher than it was in the 1960s, and cites one study that found that nearly 45 percent of American college students have been "so depressed that they had difficulty functioning." Rich wisdom is called for.

His latest book, *The Pursuit of Perfect: How to Stop Chasing Perfection and Start Living a* RICHER, HAPPIER *Life* is designed, like his Harvard course, as therapeutic—not for people we commonly think of as losers, but for those who can't win for winning. Perfectionism, he writes, is harmful to Ivy League prodigies and other living things. Rejecting failure, the perfectionist avoids risk that might lead to mere excellence, and thereby condemns himself to doing less than his best. Rejecting painful feelings, he practices unremitting cheeriness even in the face of grave setbacks, and lives a stunted and unreal emotional life. Rejecting success, he is never happy even with high achievement, for that invariably fails to live up to his fantasy of world domination.

Against the doleful Perfectionist, Ben-Shahar sets the admirable Optimalist. How does one make the necessary transformation? In work, aim not for impossible magnificence but for the "good enough," the steady pursuit of which will raise your performance to your highest capability. In love, recognize that your partner is flawed, just as you are. Accept suffering, even on occasion very hard suffering, as an unavoidable feature of life on earth. Don't fall for utopian political promises, which not only fail to deliver every time but violate human nature and cause unspeakable misery and death. Get some exercise. Meditate. Love yourself.

This is the scientific fruit of those who consider themselves not only the wisest of our time but evidently the wisest of all time. Clearly, much of Ben-

Shahar's teaching is sensible, unexceptionable. It is also obvious and insipid. Accept imperfection and pain. Do some jogging. Slow down and count your breaths. You used at least to get Cracker Jack with such prizes.

Did I mention, Love yourself? Self-love is the lever with which the positive types of every denomination move their world. Even—especially—when you think you are loving others, the best thing you are doing is loving yourself. Ben-Shahar cites that ever-popular Harvard grad Emerson on the fruits of solicitude, and the lesson is that of self-interest rightly understood: "It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself." Like Emerson, like Dyer, Ben-Shahar is helping the self that helps another get something he really wants out of the deal. As the English radio comedian Vivian Foster famously remarked, "We are all here on earth to help others; what on earth the others are here for, I don't know." According to the great American wisdom literature, they are here to make you feel good about yourself. That is the sort of thing you go to Harvard to learn these days, and surely there is no better place to acquire the knowledge that you are fortunate not to be one of *them*. Whether Harvard's meeting your need for wisdom with the platitudes and pseudo-profundities of Happiness 101 can be called great good fortune, however, is something else again.

Amid the blather, hokum, and trumpery, there is a sub-genre of self-help lit that represents the traditional granite in the American character, and which proffers hope that not all of our countrymen in a generation or two will be sops or ninnies. For some, the pursuit of happiness remains above all the pursuit of excellence. Three recent books, Geoff Colvin's *Talent Is Overrated*, Daniel Coyle's *The Talent Code*, and Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*, examine high achievement—literary, musical, business, sporting—down the ages, in the light of recent discoveries in psychology and neurology. What all three writers agree on, despite some obvious ideological differences, is that hard work, so-called deliberate or deep practice, extremely intense and pursued over many years, makes the difference between the remarkable and the less accomplished. Inborn genius, to which we commonly attribute success, is in fact so rare that it doesn't really figure in the calculations. Even Mozart, legendary prodigy of prodigies who began composing at the age of five, almost from infancy received rigorous instruction from his father, about as fine a music teacher as could be found, and did not produce works of mastery until he was twenty. The teenage Benjamin Franklin, Colvin relates, carried out a program to improve his writing that involved recasting in his own words, sentence by sentence, essays from *The Spectator* by the outstanding

English journalists Addison and Steele, and even rewriting their essays in verse, in order to expand his vocabulary. When the Beatles were starting out, Malcolm Gladwell writes, they played gigs in Hamburg strip clubs of eight hours a night, seven nights a week; by the time of their overnight success, they had logged some twelve hundred live performances, more than most bands play during their whole careers.

A minimum of ten thousand hours of practice, usually accomplished over at least ten years, the experts agree, is required to attain proficiency in a complex skill. Yet the long-accepted understanding of the workings of the brain, highlighting just its neurons and synapses, could not explain why this is so. Recently, however, neuroscientists have begun to recognize the importance of a thick fatty substance called myelin, or white matter. Daniel Coyle quotes one UCLA neurology professor as declaring myelin to be nothing less than "the key to talking, reading, learning skills, being human."

That is a strange overstatement—myelin can hardly be the key to "being human," since other animals have white matter, too. But it does play a crucial part in the functioning of our brains. Our neural "circuits" require the production of myelin to regulate their function; the substance makes their signals faster and stronger and helps in those signals' precise placement. And it is serious work that best stimulates myelin manufacture. The more one diligently practices a particular activity, the more myelin is wrapped round

Works on Deep Practice Discussed

Talent Is Overrated: What Really *Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else*
By Geoff Colvin
Portfolio ~ 2008 ~ 228 pp. ~ $25.95 (cloth) $16 (paper)

The Talent Code: Greatness Isn't Born. It's Grown. Here's How.
By Daniel Coyle
Bantam ~ 2009 ~ 246 pp. ~ $25 (cloth)

Outliers: The Story of Success
By Malcolm Gladwell
Little, Brown ~ 2008 ~ 310 pp. ~ $27.99 (cloth)

and round the active nerve fibers. Each myelin wrap encircles the fiber in layer upon layer, as many as fifty times. The process is so painstaking and protracted that one scientist at the National Institutes of Health compares myelinating a single neural circuit to insulating a transatlantic cable. Indeed, myelin fortifies and quickens nerve impulses much as rubber insulation does transmission along a copper wire.

Studied repetition grows myelin and thereby enhances the particular skill you are working on, whether you are "playing shortstop or playing Schubert," as Coyle writes. One commonly speaks of muscle memory in describing a physical skill honed to a saber's sharpness, but that is an evocative misnomer: the locus of perfected motion lies in the cultivation less of our muscles than our neural pathways.

"It's time to rewrite the maxim that practice makes perfect," Coyle writes. "The truth is, practice makes myelin, and myelin makes perfect." But there is a particular sort of practice—deep practice—that is ideal for making myelin. Deep practice carries you to the very edge of your abilities: here you inevitably fail, and fail repeatedly, before you succeed. Just as you gain in physical strength by increasing the weight you lift to your upper limits, so, by performing over and over again the skills you can hardly manage to get right, you train your neural circuitry in the direction of competence, or even excellence. (You can, however, also train the circuits toward incompetence, so that if you fall into bad habits, new circuits must be myelinated to correct them.)

Deep practice entails concentration well beyond mere repetition by rote: the world's best at many demanding activities—music, chess, writing, sport—devote three to five hours per day to practice, and an hour or two of deep practice at a time generally works one to exhaustion. The adept, his skills made automatic by at least a decade of regular deep practice, can get more benefit from an hour's intense focus than the neophyte or the mediocrity can from a long day's haphazard pains. But even the master must practice continually to preserve his mastery. Like every other living tissue, myelin ceaselessly deteriorates and regenerates; daily work ensures that the regeneration keeps up its end of the bargain. After the age of fifty, we tend to lose more myelin than we gain, so just maintaining what we already have gets harder as we age. Vladimir Horowitz, who continued to perform pianistic marvels into his eighties, said that if he skipped practice for one day, he noticed it; for two days, his wife noticed it; and for three days, the world noticed it.

The neuroscience of myelin has an underlying moral teaching: you have to work hard for what you get, and in order to keep what you've got. This

teaching suits a new, truly democratic age, upending a longstanding belief that inborn talent determines success more than any other factor. That belief in the effortless ascent of unearned genius and the inexorable settling to the bottom of unfortunate multitudes is the democratic vestige of the defining tenet of an aristocratic society: the accident of birth determines your place in life, genetic blessedness smoothes your way to the top—an inexplicable gift for speaking or writing or singing or running fast or jumping prodigiously high being the modern equivalent of Hapsburg blood. Such a worldview has damaging consequences. To believe that chance is more important than resolve and exertion in marking your life's course is to surrender the value of moral choice to some inscrutable fatality. Under this all too familiar dispensation, it is tempting to resent others' triumphs, for there is always someone more successful and evidently no more deserving than you. Many become resigned to their own station only with the utmost bitterness, and some fume at the injustice of the arrangements, whether political, economic, or cosmic. These are the inevitable lacerations suffered by those who live in a meritocracy in which merit appears to be bestowed to a disturbing degree by the luck of the draw.

The new truth we are now meant to accept is both liberating and sobering: rarely does native ability alone ensure a triumphant path through life; it is those willing to put in the years of effort who know not merely the sweetness of the prize at the end but also the incomparable pleasure of dedication to a calling. This is invigorating stuff, and one is glad to hear it as the product of the latest science. But common sense tells us it is not the whole truth. For we are all creatures, not self-created beings. Beauty, size, strength, health, energy, disposition, verbal or spatial or mathematical or emotional intelligence, ability in music or painting or oratory, simply are not parceled out equally—and in any chosen activity, not even single-minded devotion and expert training and wholesome diet can ensure that all will come out even in the end. Natural inequalities will always make for differences between one person and the next, and these differences will always be cause for unhappiness.

Still, the myelin theory should somewhat ameliorate such unhappiness. At the heart of this theory is the confidence that every person of normal capacities can surpass, with the help of fine teaching and by dint of perseverance, limits on his achievement that once seemed fixed. That does not mean everyone will be above average, as the old joke goes. It does mean that the average should rise, and everyone willing to put in the work be able more fully to realize his potential, if not necessarily his dreams. And it should be easier to come to terms with the distance between one's dreams and one's

accomplishments: taking greater responsibility for your own shortcomings, you will be likely to accept more readily the hand that nature dealt you, for you will also be able to take greater pride in your achievements than when they seemed perhaps unearned.

But if the myelinated society is not to exacerbate current resentments rather than alleviate them, everyone must really have a chance to flourish. First-rate education for all will be a moral necessity as never before. America today tolerates so glaring a disparity between our best schools and our worst largely because we have written off a large portion of our population as too dumb to learn. Underneath an avalanche of cynical excuses for educational failure lies the tacit assumption—left over from the eugenic fantasies of such moral luminaries as Margaret Sanger, Walter Lippmann, and Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes—that generations of inbreeding among the poorest of the poor have produced an inherently unintelligent underclass that will never have what it takes to rise from its misery. Coyle's most moving chapter describes how this line of thinking has been proved wrong by the astonishing success of the Knowledge Is Power Program, or KIPP, founded in 1993 by a couple of frustrated young teachers, Michael Feinberg and David Levin, in Houston's inner-city schools. By 2008 there were sixty-six KIPP schools coast to coast, with 16,000 students. KIPP takes children who seem headed for mediocrity or failure—who have little or no hope of ever making it out of the slums—and turns them into exemplary scholars with bright futures.

Generous severity and loving regimentation work wonders. The school day lasts from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., with additional classes every other Saturday. The KIPP school is what Coyle calls "a bastion of deep practice. [Teachers] constantly remind KIPP students that their brains are muscles: the more they work them, the smarter they will get—and there's plenty of work to do. Two hours of homework a night is standard; worksheets number in the hundreds; the day is filled with stretches of intense silent work."

KIPP operates on the principle—reinforced by the research findings of Martin Seligman—that self-discipline is more important than IQ in determining academic performance. There is strict instruction in just about everything you can think of: how loudly to talk, how to sit while listening, how to carry your notebook, how much toilet paper to use. Students are brought to understand that they can make their way confidently in the strange world beyond the hood. "College is the *spiritus sancti* that is invoked hundreds of times each day, not so much as a place as a glowing ideal." From the lowest rungs of elementary school, KIPP students pay campus visits to colleges,

where KIPP alumni offer advice and inspiration. Eighty percent of KIPP students go on to college. Along the way, they learn how to be courteous, considerate young men and women.

Coyle sees KIPP's success as the myelin theory at work:

> Usually, we think of character as deep and unchanging, an innate quality that flows outward, showing itself through behavior. KIPP shows that character might be more like a skill—ignited by certain signals, and honed through deep practice.
>
> Seen this way, KIPP stands on a foundation of myelin. Every time a KIPP student imagines himself in college, a surge of energy is created.…Every time a KIPP student forces himself to obey one of these persnickety rules, a circuit is fired, insulated, and strengthened. (Impulse control, after all, is a circuit like any other.) Every time the entire school screeches to a halt to fix misbehavior, skills are being built.

KIPP succeeds because it incorporates the truth of behaviorism—that environment forms character—with the truth of cognitive psychology—that habits of thought shape emotion and action. The sometimes severe behaviorist elements are essential because the harmful effects of an upbringing in the slums must be overcome. The cognitive elements are indispensable because the schools are not producing automata but preparing youths for challenging lives that will require reasoned choice, decency, and scruple. This passage from Coyle, vital with hope for social improvement one child at a time, points to a need that the self-help literature does not come close to addressing.

In the absence of something better, one appreciates the recent books on achievement, but one wishes for a modern primer in high achievement for the end most worth achieving: a noble character. Allan Bloom used to enjoy saying that while we have life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the Greeks had death, slavery, and happiness. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle wrote that happiness, the end for which man was made, is an activity in accordance with virtue or excellence—an activity, not a feeling, as so much of what passes for wisdom currently would have it. A life of moral virtue demanded continual effort, and Aristotle knew that morally virtuous men strove to outshine their rivals, in courage and self-mastery, generosity and magnificence, justice and greatness of soul, as though they were competing in the Olympic Games. Modern democratic men, for their part, Tocqueville famously declared, tend to be intensely rivalrous but to have low ambitions. Even the worthy Daniel Coyle relies rather too heavily on uplifting examples

from the sporting world to promote the pursuit of excellence. But winning at games is a far cry from aspiring to moral greatness; there are of course great athletes, indeed high achievers of all stripes, whose lives are trivial or dissipated or monstrous. Aristotle used the Olympic Games as an analogy for lofty purpose, not as a supreme instance of it. To revive the ancient spirit of competitiveness with regard to high things would be a worthy goal for the American literature of worldly counsel. For now, however, even the best purveyors of functional wisdom offer less than we really need. And as for the rest, there is pap from sea to shining sea, of wanton avarice, or diaphanous lunacy, or simpleton dullness. One fears for a nation awash in this drivel. One longs for a practical democratic philosopher to save us from drowning in it.

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