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# America Should Be Ashamed of SHAM

*Steve Salerno is a reporter with wide experience. As a freelance feature writer, Salerno has written for magazines including Harper's, Esquire, Sports Illustrated, and many others. He has contributed articles to the Los Angeles Times and The Wall Street Journal. Many of his articles have focused upon "money stories," that deal with financial scandals and controversies in the business world. Now, he is ready to report on the biggest scandal he has ever encountered—America's self-help movement.*

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Salerno writes: "In twenty-four years as a business writer and an investigative journalist, I have covered all kinds of 'money stories.' I have written about boondoggles on bankers' row and sleight of hand at Seventh Avenue fashion houses. I've written about the gyrations of the stock market as well as the myriad forces that surround, yet never quite explain, investing itself. I've written about money as it relates to sales, money as it relates to sports, money as it relates to music, money as it relates to love. It's safe to say that if it involves money, combined with some form of human aspiration, I've probably written about it."

Nevertheless, Salerno's experience in reporting still left him amazed when he confronted an industry whose story "represents the *ultimate* marriage of money and aspiration." That story is the rise and dominance of what he calls the "Self-Help and Actualization Movement"—identified in his book by the acronym SHAM.

America's SHAM empire includes an army of therapists, authors, motivational speakers and "corporate coaches," all ready to offer help, encouragement, motivation, correction, and assurance—for a price.

Salerno knows big money when he sees it. The SHAM industry is big business. Self-help books are never far from the best-seller list, and the products, conferences, and services of self-help gurus come at considerable cost. The top speakers earn more than ten million dollars per year, and the self-help sector of the economy is growing by leaps and bounds.

There's a good reason for that, Salerno explains. Self-help business is repeat business. The self-help industry would go out of business if its books and products actually *solved* the problems—real or perceived—that led customers to buy the products in the first place.

Of course, comedians are quick to jump on the oxymoron that lies at the very heart of the industry. If people could genuinely help themselves, they wouldn't need the self-help movement. As comedian George Carlin has quipped: "If you're reading it in a book, folks, it ain't *self-help*. It's *help*."

No matter what it is called, the self-help movement is big business and a growth industry. Last year, *Publishers Weekly* reported, "Self-help books are a Teflon category for many booksellers. No matter the economy or current events, the demand is constant."

The repeat business is often no accident. Salerno served for some time as editor of the books program associated with the magazine, *Men's Health*. Part of the giant Rodale publishing empire, *Men's Health* offered a book service directed

towards male customers. The company conducted surveys in order to identify “the customers’ worst fears and chronic problems,” which then became fodder for future books and products. The secret behind the program’s success was, Salerno reports, the fact that many customers could be enticed to buy yet more books on self-help within eighteen months.

Depending on how one defines the category, publishers release thousands of new self-help books each year. Some of these books make their way to the very top of the best-seller list—and stay there for months or years. But the market for self-help books and products is not limited to mainstream bookstores. Salerno reports that such products are staples of the more than 5000 New Age bookstores now found in the United States. In reality, much of the energy behind the New Age phenomenon has now been refocused into SHAM with New Age consultants and coaches now ready to talk about profits and marketshare rather than meditation and channeling.

Salerno acknowledges that the self-help tradition has a long pedigree in the United States. After all, Benjamin Franklin wrote what may be identified as America’s first self-help book, *Poor Richard’s Almanack*. But the real rise of the self-help industry, at least in publishing, can be traced to 1937 with the publication of Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and Napoleon Hill’s *Think and Grow Rich*. Thirty years later, Thomas A. Harris redefined the industry with his best-seller, *I’m OK-You’re OK*, which revolutionized the genre.

Once again, a book’s title was the reverse of its content. As Salerno understands, Harris “explicitly posited that the average person is damaged early in childhood and walks around thereafter in a paranoid, self-pitying state.” His book supposedly offered a way out of that state of victimization.

In reality, victimization has become a major theme of the entire industry. Salerno suggests that the SHAM industry is divided into two camps. The first is *Empowerment* and the second is *Victimization*. He explains: “Victimization and Empowerment represent the yin and yang of the self-help movement. It is likely that this schism will always exist, no matter which guru or message becomes the flavor of the day.”

The focus on victimization allows Americans to blame other persons—or impersonal forces—for their problems. Salerno sees Alcoholics Anonymous [AA] as the “template” for the victimization worldview. Human problems are translated into the vocabulary and categories of victimization so that persons can speak of overcoming what has been done to them, what has happened to them, or those who have afflicted them.

The truth is that virtually everyone can find someone to blame. In her spoof of the self-help movement, *I’m Dysfunctional, You’re Dysfunctional*, skeptic Wendy Kaminer asserted that the victimizers are usually close at hand: “Grandfather was an alcoholic, mother is a compulsive rescuer, Uncle Murray weighs 270 pounds. Father is a sex addict, your sister is anorexic,”—and the beat goes on.

There is simply no way to get around the fact that the self-help movement is more focused on the *self* than on help. Americans are evidently quite ready to focus on themselves as an ongoing project and to buy, read, and accept arguments that place blame far outside our own responsibility.

Problems are redefined in terms of therapeutic categories. Individuals are described as *dysfunctional*, and those who deny this diagnosis are charged with being in *denial*.

Salerno identifies “five overlapping messages” of the Recovery movement—one of the central streams in the self-help river. These messages include: 1. You’re damaged goods. 2. Good is bad. 3. It’s all about *you*. 4. All suffering is created equal. And 5. It’s not your fault. Together, these five messages explain everything from the nation’s current focus on addiction and a general proclivity to self-centeredness, to the moral evasions of President Bill Clinton and the executives caught in recent business scandals.

Beyond this, Salerno detects a significant cultural damage. Children are raised in an increasingly therapeutic culture in which, as children, they are taught to take responsibility for their actions, but as they become adults are told to blame someone or something else. Salerno also suggests that the impact of SHAM is leading to something like the feminization of society. He accurately notes that most of the central categories of the self-help movement are essentially feminine. Perceptively, he notes that many of these categories are now being sold to men under the category of “corporate coaching.” As management theorist Warren Bennis has observed, men will accept this therapeutic advice so long as it is packaged as “coaching.”

Steve Salerno is hardly the first to criticize the self-help movement, nor will he be the last. Nevertheless, his unique perspective as an investigative journalist offers a perspective that other authors may miss. Salerno suggests that the self-help movement is making America helpless. Christians will understand that the problem is far worse than that. Indeed, the self-help movement represents a false gospel that offers an unreal hope of redemption. The very category of “self-help” represents a repudiation of the Christian message—that God in Christ has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. But then, the entire biblical worldview of sin is missing from the self-help worldview. The greatest threat of the self-help movement is that it will leave Americans not merely helpless, but hopelessly lost.

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