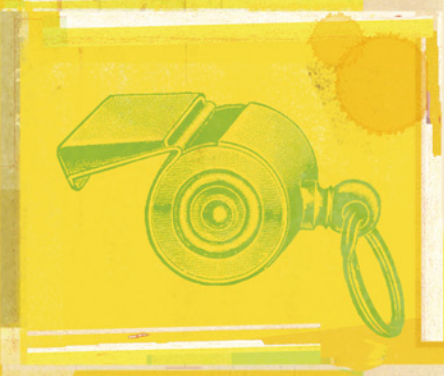


LIFE



DO THE WORK • BE AUTHENTIC • SEE THE LIGHT



J. TYLER

SELF SERVICE

FIRE YOUR SHRINK.
TODAY IT'S ALL ABOUT
FINDING A GOOD
LIFE COACH.

BY EVAN RATLIFF | ILLUSTRATION JO TYLER

I've been leaking energy lately. Or at least that's what Bill Baren, my life coach, tells me. I pay him to know these kinds of things. It's a rainy Friday afternoon, and he's sitting in my office, asking me what I think is causing this seepage. I'd never realized that I had energy leaks before, but now that he says so, I'm thinking I probably do. This concerns me, because Bill thinks the outflow could be inhibiting some changes I'd like to make, such as reducing my extraordinarily high levels of procrastination. I've hired Bill to coach me out of failings like these.

"Managing time is very difficult to do," he says, "and nobody likes it. But managing energy is easier because all it takes is a direct consciousness of what is happening and why." So just by identifying my leaks, I can staunch them? "Not overnight," he cautions. I can, over time, "change my relationship" to them by saying, "OK, I realize that this is draining for me. What do I need to do? Where is my energy gas station that I can go to when I need to fill up again?"

Now, if you knew me at all, you'd think I was stifling laughter. I tend to be unreceptive to the argot and practice of "personal development." I've never gone to therapy—despite the friendly suggestions of some ex-girlfriends—and have long declared my intention to be the last living San Franciscan who has never tried yoga, meditation, or Burning Man. But if derision is what you expect from this story, you're wrong, because when

Bill tells me about energy filling stations, I'm right there with him. I want to find the cracks in my tank. I want to get to the gas pump ASAP. And I believe that Bill is going to help me do all this.

It's true that my first instinct, when I heard about life coaching, was to make fun of it—then I discovered how huge a phenomenon it is. The U.S. personal coaching market, at \$1.5 billion and growing, is the hottest segment of the larger, megabillion-dollar self-improvement industry. While there are no reliable figures on the number of practicing professionals, the International Coach Federation, which has 130 chapters in 30 countries, estimates there are more than 20,000. That includes executive and “leadership” coaches, hired by companies to work with employees from the CEO level down; but a larger share of the market belongs to generalized life coaches, hired at several hundred dollars a month by regular folks to help them upgrade their lives. Which means that there are a lot of other people out there sitting down with guys like Bill Baren, talking about things like energy leaks. What, I



IT DIDN'T TAKE ME LONG TO DRAW UP A LIST OF ISSUES I WANTED TO ADDRESS, MOST OF WHICH—FROM PROCRASTINATION TO A PERSISTENT LOW-GRADE MELANCHOLY—I HAD ALWAYS DEEMED TOO TRIVIAL TO SEEK THERAPY.

wondered, is the attraction to this goal-based, do-it-yourself therapy, these personal trainers for everyday affairs? What does a good life coach actually do?

To find out, I decided to hire one. I found a Web site listing local coaches, and selected Bill by the unscientific criteria that he advises in the widest range of areas—from “life purpose” to relationships to finance. He listed his specialty as “integrating creativity and life balance with financial success,” which, to the extent that I understood it, sounded right up my alley. When I got around to calling him a few days later, he agreed to give me three sessions for just under half of his standard \$465 monthly fee—with the caveat that I shouldn't expect much change out of such a short coaching relationship. It didn't take me long to draw up a list of issues I wanted to address, most of which—from procrastination to a persistent low-grade melancholy—I had always deemed too trivial to seek therapy. Three sessions might not transform my life, but maybe they could give me the push I needed.

Waiting for Bill to drop by my office for that first session, I'm expecting either a suit-wearing Organization Man or a cheesy *Daily Affirmations* Stuart Smalley type in a cardigan. So I'm slightly disappointed when he shows up in dark jeans, an orange turtleneck, and a baseball cap. He strikes me as serious but laid back, and he immediately notices a Jurassic 5 LP in a pile by my desk.

“Man, that record's a classic,” he says.

I recall that his Web site had said something about a previous gig in the music business. “What did you do?” I ask.

“I owned a record label.”

“Which one?”

“That one.” He points to the record. “I signed Jurassic 5.”

With that, Bill tramples one of my major assumptions about life coaches. After seeing several training courses advertised in the spirit of late-night infomercials (“Make Money Without Leaving Your Home!”), I'd assumed that coaches were refugees of botched careers. The profession is not officially licensed or regulated by the government. You need only declare yourself a coach, and voilà, you are. There are dozens of classes of varying difficulty, but none require any skills or prerequisites—only cash. While organizations like the International Coach Federation have created certification programs to help clients sort out the more qualified of the bunch, most—including Bill—remain uncertified.

Though he lacks coaching credentials, Bill turns out to have

owned not one but three record labels, with revenues of \$15 million. He decided a few years ago that the music business wasn't consistent with his “value structure,” and sold them off. Looking for a new direction, he met and then apprenticed with a life coach in the process of opening a training school. Now coaching full-time at age 39, Bill has about 15 paying clients, among them lawyers, landscape architects, and artists.

As our session gets going, I describe my procrastination problem to Bill. I explain that while I am a prolific procrastinator, in some ways I'm not even particularly good at it. I rarely accomplish any work-related tasks before noon, and I don't spend my mornings in bed or at the beach but in my office, reading blogs and staring out the window. I tell him that I've recently identified a more general lack of motivation, thanks to which I fail to produce even a fraction of the amount of work my freelance peers publish. I can't even generate enough assignments to procrastinate starting them.

Bill lets me drone on for a while, asking me questions as I move from work to relationships and back. He gradually steers me away from complaints and into larger issues—like what kind of thinking saps my energy and what kind doesn't. “Do you believe in what you are doing?” he asks. Sure, I say, unconvincingly. Because the problem, he continues, is not necessarily procrastination but rather how work and relationships are connected to “whatever your purpose is.”

“What would it mean for you to be successful at what you do?” he asks. “These are all the big questions.”

I admit that I lack answers, and we leave the big questions hanging at the end of session one. The next day he emails me some homework to complete, including exercises like identifying my personal qualities from a list, and writing a one-line “purpose statement” that I’m to share with two other people. Being coached is more labor-intensive than I expected. But the nice thing about the assignments, I realize happily, is that they offer me a chance to put off writing this article.

Depending on whom you ask, the life-coaching profession traces its roots variously to the 1960s human-potential movement, Jungian psychology, Greek philosophy, or some recombinant form of those and other intellectual strains. Its modern incarnation, however, emerged largely through the efforts of Thomas Leonard, a San Francisco financial planner who began noticing in the 1980s that his yuppie clients seemed dissatisfied with their lives. Many ended up talking to him about more than finances, and he found himself helping them grapple with questions ranging from how many kids to have to where to go on vacation.

Leonard turned his skills into a new profession, and in the early 1990s he founded a string of organizations—Coach University, Coachville, and the International Coach Federation—that established the field. By the time he passed away in 2003, he had helped spawn a billion-dollar industry. Riding the wave of an increasingly transformation-hungry American culture, life coaches operate at the more lucrative end of a spectrum that starts with *Chicken Soup for the Soul* and ends with large-audience motivational speakers like Tony Robbins and Dr. Phil. The profession has even found its way into a daytime reality TV series, *Starting Over*, in which six women live in a house where life coaches are brought in to solve their copious problems. (Turns out the show isn’t realistic in at least one regard: 60 percent of coaching clients are men.)

Yet, to many in the industry, the boom is yet to come. “If you surveyed the population in the U.S. and asked, ‘Do you know what a life coach is?’, a very small minority would say yes,” says Shirzad Chamine, president and CEO of the San Rafael, California-based Coach Training Institute. “When I tell most people about coaching, they think it’s something sports-related—even highly educated people. So that says to me that this industry is in its infancy.”

The field has specialized as it has expanded, and for prospective clients, the selection process can be daunting. There are coaches specializing in helping you to change careers, improve your diet, or “consciously source your goals.” There are Christian coaches, coaches for parents, and coaches that help people come out of the closet. Most of them offer free trial sessions to sample their skills. Bill, who finds almost all his clients through referrals, told me that his conversion rate from free sessions was over 50 percent.

Once you sign on, the program often requires a three- to four-month commitment, which, coaches argue, is essential for forcing people to take the process seriously (but which is also convenient for guaranteeing business). Bill made an exception in my case, although I still had to mail him a signed “mutual commitment”



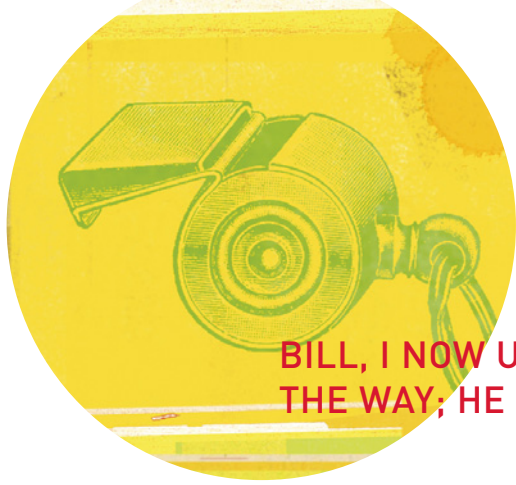
form that promised, among other things, that I would “do the work,” “be authentic,” and “see the light.”

The process itself can, to the uninitiated, sound a lot like psychotherapy—an impression that coaches have labored to avoid. Therapy, in their view, is stigmatized by the implication that you have to have something wrong with you to sign on. “Coaching is very action-oriented, and it is present- and future-focused,” says Chamine, echoing the common refrain. “It stays away from any conversation about you being broken and our wanting to fix you.”

Therapists I spoke with were not opposed to coaching, although they were concerned about the lack of consistent training and the easy explanations coaches use to distinguish themselves. “I think the language can be overly simplistic,” says Dr. Steve Gravenkemper, president of the Society of Consulting Psychology at the American Psychological Association. He says that psychotherapists help the traumatized in a way coaches can’t. “The differentiation for me would be how severely is the problem interfering in that person’s ability to perform day-to-day activities.” Someone who can’t get out of bed because of depression or who cries through meetings probably needs a counselor rather than a coach. But increasingly, he says, his colleagues are also training as life coaches, expanding their own marketability to people who might otherwise shun professional help. When I try steering Bill into my past, he is careful to reframe every issue in the here and now. “That would be more therapy work,” he tells me when I bring up enduring regrets over a past relationship.

We do the second session by phone, and it’s a little harder for me to connect with the disembodied Bill. (Most coaching, it turns out, isn’t conducted in person, something I’m told clients often prefer.) By now Bill’s questions and assignments have led us to a few mutual conclusions. One is that my laziness stems in part from using fear as my motivation—namely, the fear that each story will be my last if I screw it up. “People talk about crack and consistently chasing the first high,” Bill says. “It’s the same thing when people are motivated by fear. Because eventually you realize that fear is not really all that rational.” While having my daily routine compared to smoking crack is disconcerting, I think I get the point. What I don’t get from Bill yet is what to do about it.

I’ve written my purpose statement, modeled on the ones provided in his assignments. It reads: “I am in the business of sharing my



BILL, I NOW UNDERSTAND, IS NOT SUPPOSED TO SHOW ME THE WAY; HE IS SUPPOSED TO HELP ME FIND IT MYSELF.

mind with other people.” But I feel embarrassed declaring it to two friends, and it becomes a further distraction when I begin fretting over whether it’s poorly written. So far, at least, reading it over doesn’t seem to energize me.

After our second session, I decide to check out some coaching courses to get a sense of the thinking behind Bill’s methods, and I take two orientation “teleclasses” offered by an organization called the Coach Training Alliance. About 20 of us from all over the country join a phone conference with a sunny teacher named Lisa Pisano, who offers up the basic premises of coaching and answers earnest questions from people-positive types I feel awkward being grouped with. “Coaches don’t give advice,” she says at one point. “Our clients are responsible for knowing the answers.” The coach is a “mirror,” a source of “accountability” rather than a “consultant” offering “expertise.” Bill, I now understand, is not supposed to show me the way; he is supposed to help me find it myself.

There is some science behind the method. According to Suzy Green, a professor in the Coaching Psychology Unit at the University of Sydney, Australia, a small number of controlled studies have shown the efficacy of life coaching. “The research is still embryonic,” she writes me. But “there is some evidence to suggest that life coaching can increase goal attainment, well-being, and hope and decrease depression, anxiety, and stress.”

As the CTT’s Chamine puts it, “Your coach does not have to be a genius to see something about how you are going about your life that you can’t possibly see yourself. But when you come up with it yourself, it has a much more powerful impact.”

I call Bill for my third and final session, and he tells me I’m a half-hour early and asks me to call back. When I do, he picks up the phone and asks, “What did you do with that extra time?” He’s pulled a fast one on me. “I just wanted to see what you would do if I gave you that little window of time,” he says. As it happens, it was probably my most productive 30 minutes of the day. I dashed off email replies to half a dozen messages that had been languishing in my inbox, and made two phone calls—more than I often do over several hours. He doesn’t need to tell me the lesson: Given a restricted amount of time, I accomplish more than when I feel I have unlimited hours available for work.

It’s clear that Bill’s been thinking about my case. He tells me that he went out and bought a couple of books on procrastination—something I never would have deigned to do. Given our limited time, he’s willing to spell out more conclusions for me

than he normally would. Besides seeking out a larger purpose to connect to my daily tasks, he says, I could take some steps to minimize my bad work habits. For instance: Each time I start to lose focus, I should physically get up, take a walk, change my location, anything. Even if I have to do it all the time. He also suggests that procrastination may be somehow useful to me as a time for processing information, and that perhaps I shouldn’t criticize myself for it.

When I suggest to Bill that it seems like some of his coaching crosses the advice boundary I’ve heard about, he agrees. In his view, people hire him because they see some experience he’s had that makes him an expert in what it is that they want. “If I’ve done this a hundred times already, and you are struggling to come up with ideas,” Bill says, “you better believe that ideas are going to be flowing out of me and into you.”

I like the idea of sailing out of my problems on Bill’s tide of solutions. But will that take away some of the I-did-it-myself sense of accomplishment that makes the cure stick? Bill tells me there are many issues he won’t advise on. But at the heart of his refusal to do so is the recognition that coaching is essentially a demand-driven business. If clients don’t like what he gives them, he won’t get referrals and his well will run dry. The statistics are pretty grim: Only 10 percent of coaches who go through training programs end up making a living at it.

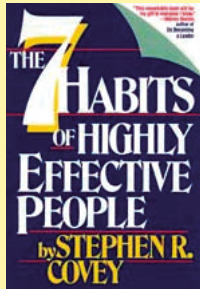
At one point I ask Bill whether he thinks his services are a kind of luxury item, spawned by a culture obsessed with self-improvement. “We have been spoiled into thinking that if we think it, we can have it,” he replies after a moment’s thought. Then his face brightens. “Is that a good thing? Yeah, I think that’s a great thing.” It occurs to me, however, that not everyone can have “it,” and that when some people fail to get to whatever it is, they might end up even unhappier than before.

Though I probably won’t shell out the extra \$465 a month to continue with Bill—my cynicism runs deep, and my finances run shallow—I admit that having a coach changed my perspective. I’ve been using his anti-procrastination tips. Every time I find myself surfing the Net, I get out of my chair, take little walks, or play the piano. It’s something I can easily excel at—fighting procrastination with procrastination.

So go ahead, make fun. Tell me I’ve entered the cult of self-help, that I’ve been bamboozled by new age marketing. I’ll be laughing all the way to the energy pump, because I’ve got proof that life coaching works. You’re reading it. 🍌

SELF-HELP HALL OF FAME

BY DAVID SPATARO



STEPHEN COVEY
www.stephencovey.com

Arguably the founding father of modern self-help, Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* set off a personal-improvement craze.

Company man, inspirational speaker, management guru, Covey's emphasis is business, but his teachings apply to family dysfunction just as well.

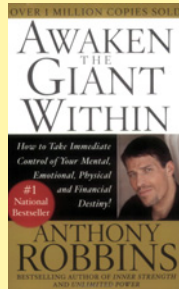
Cocktail quote: "Priority is a function of context."

Latest book: *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*

Organizations: Covey Leadership Center, which merged with Franklin Quest to become FranklinCovey, a global professional services firm.

Best sellers: 4

Copies sold: Over 16 million
Spin-offs: *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*. After the success of *Seven Habits*, there had to be an eighth. The sequel includes a DVD with 16 inspirational films.



ANTHONY ROBBINS
www.anthonyrobbins.com

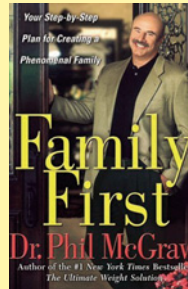
Known for erasing phobias and addictions onstage with all the drama of a faith healer, Robbins nevertheless shirks conventional spirituality for "neuro-linguistic programming," a pseudo-scientific approach to self-mastery modeled after the behavior of successful individuals (like him).

Cocktail quote: "Once you have mastered time, you will understand how true it is that most people overestimate what they can accomplish in a year—and underestimate what they can achieve in a decade!"
Latest release: The audio title *Your Driving Force*

Organizations: 7, including a professional training corporation; a consumer products outfit, and the Anthony Robbins Foundation, a nonprofit that provides assistance to the homeless, the elderly, and inner-city youth.

Best sellers: 3, and his spoken works are the best-selling audiobooks ever.

Copies sold: 50 million tapes
Spin-offs: *Personal Power*, a spoken series that sold more than 24 million units in less than five years; *PowerTalk*, a monthly CD subscription service featuring interviews with highly successful individuals; and Namale, a Fijian resort where guests pay \$7,000 for a nine-day seminar (lodging included).



DR. PHIL
www.drphil.com

Since airing as Oprah's tough-love-dispensing sidekick, Dr. Phil has turned the "get real" approach into a motivational empire.

Cocktail quote: "Failure is no accident."

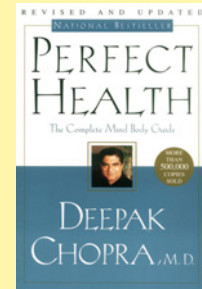
Latest book: *Family First: Your Step-by-Step Plan for Creating a Phenomenal Family*

Organizations: The Dr. Phil Foundation, a nonprofit that attempts to fight the problems he addresses on television, with its primary focus on childhood obesity and related diseases.

Best sellers: 6

Copies sold: 22 million

Spin-offs: Nationally syndicated one-hour television show; radio appearances; and a Dr. Phil column in Oprah's monthly pub, *O, The Oprah Magazine*.



DEEPAK CHOPRA
www.chopra.com

The most visible figurehead of the current holistic movement, Chopra was the chief of staff at Boston Regional Medical Center when he began exploring the integration of mind, body, and spirit. His academic credentials inspire confidence in the less alternative-minded, who might otherwise hold his woo-woo teachings suspect.

Cocktail quote: "You can free yourself from aging by reinterpreting your body and by grasping the link between belief and biology."

Latest book: *The Spontaneous Fulfillment of Desire: Harnessing the Infinite Power of Coincidence*

Organizations: The Chopra Center for Well-Being, advancing the cause of mind/body spiritual healing, education, and research through fundraising for projects.

Best sellers: 6

Copies sold: Over 20 million
Spin-offs: Public television shows such as *The Soul of Healing with Deepak Chopra, M.D.*