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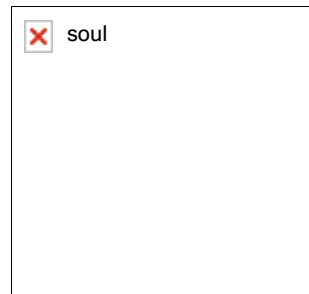
The self in social context

by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.

Report on a self-help workshop

Soul searching at self-help seminar

Published on December 29, 2008



A few weeks ago, I attended a daylong workshop on self-awareness and [self-help](#). As an academic psychologist, I have always stayed away from that sort of thing. I have regarded the self-help industry with a mixture of distrust and [envy](#). Distrust because I felt that what the industry sells is largely based on armchair psychologizing of questionable validity; envy because many coaches and workshop leaders do very well for themselves, both financially and in terms of getting social approval.

My reluctance to take a closer look was shaken when I read a book by Mr. Shu (not his real name). Without making any references to academic psychology, Mr. Shu, who has a master's degree in psychology, conveyed many reasonable ideas about self-acceptance, about how to overcome judging others, and on how to find the courage to make a new beginning. I felt that students of [cognitive therapy](#) and counseling might be comfortable with many of these ideas. There was hardly any esoteric mumbo-jumbo in this book that would have put me off. So I looked forward to attending a workshop on well-being and health.

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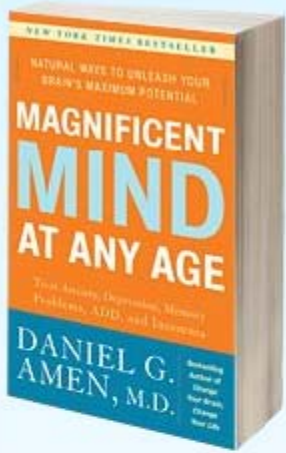
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The workshop was scheduled to start at 9:00 a. m. I arrived half an hour early and took the opportunity to do some Sam Gosling type snooping (check out his book "[Snoop](#)," which teaches you to form impressions of others without meeting them). I looked around the room for clues about Mr. Shu's [personality](#) and professionalism. The venue was a conference room in a hotel with ceiling mirrors and chandeliers. The lighting was good and there was mellow background music. There was a flipchart of the kind that

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business people would use (Mr. Shu had worked for many years in [marketing](#)). To one side, there was a huge panel with various appealing photographs, including one featuring a broadly smiling Mr. Shu. Near the center, there was a sort of shrine with two candles and a picture of the Madonna (the saint, not the performer). Pens and paper were provided and both bore Mr. Shu's contact information. On the other side, there was a long table with books and CDs, merchandise in other words. This man is a pro I thought.

Then Mr. Shu arrives with a smile, dressed casually but not sloppy. He congratulates everyone on the decision to take his seminar, a mildly self-serving gesture I am thinking. He begins by guiding us in a half hour [meditation](#) that is so relaxing that I almost fall asleep. I will myself back into consciousness lest I might fall out of my chair. Again I am thinking, 'Well done. He is a pro.'

But then it gets funky. Shu suggests that (a) all disease has its roots in psychological conflict and that (b) all disease will ultimately lead to some good. A woman in the audience reports that she has survived four years of breast and bone cancer and that she has been attending Shu's seminars for as long. Shu congratulates her on her cancer. He then relates the story of Ingrid who talked to her cancer and thanked it. The cancer talked back, but over time its voice became softer until it, and the cancer itself, disappeared. Meanwhile, I am thinking that for many people the cancer does not talk back and refuses to shrink. These people die and are not available at seminars to testify (Robyn Dawes calls this the 'structural availability bias'). Shu believes that cancer is an expression of self-hatred and specifically the hatred that the cancer cells direct at themselves. People who succumb must not have overcome this hatred. With the correct positive approach, Shu says we can all live to 100 to 200 years. I conclude that aside from the mythical elders of Genesis, no one has mastered this art. Will Shu himself succeed? Alas, members of his current audiences may not be around to find out.

Next, Shu considers nursing home patients. These individuals had been control fiends during most of their lives. The "law of balance" dictates that a high level of control at some point must be offset by loss of control at some other point. Whatever happens to you, Shu proclaims, you asked for it. A woman in the audience follows up by asking about Parkinson's disease. Shu repeats his theory. Parkinson's is a loss of motor control visited on those who claimed too much control in their lives. To underscore his point, he mimics Parkinson's paralysis by jerking wildly his right arm. No one protests.

In what I perceive as a modest challenge to Shu, a woman asks for his views on children born with a handicap. The subtext of her question is 'What have these humans done to deserve their burden?' Shu does not hesitate to invoke the law of balance again. This time he has to set aside the limits of individual lifetimes. What matters after all is the immortal soul. The soul incarnates strategically, he says, choosing a particular body, a

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particular time, particular [parents](#), etc. The soul knows which incarnation offers the right challenges and the right opportunities for growth.

This is the only time I cannot resist to chime in. 'How do you know this?' I ask, referring to reincarnation. 'I know it in my heart,' Shu replies while putting his hand on his chest. 'We could discuss this for a long time,' he continues, which I interpret as meaning he does not want to discuss it.

And so it goes on in several cycles consisting of mediations, reassurances, metaphysics, and coffee breaks. In the end, I'm trying to separate the worthwhile (e.g., the advice to take it easy) from the gratuitous and the obnoxious (e.g., blaming the sick). Now, my experience that day was a sample of 1, and thus may not be all that representative of the self-help culture. Nonetheless, I was struck by how different this culture is from the scientific culture. It seems to me that most adherents of either culture do not want to interact with the other. Whether greater contact is desirable, I cannot say yet. What do you think?

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