CELEBRITY PERSONAS, SELF-HELP CULTURE, AND COLLECTIVE PSYCHOLOGY: REFLECTIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

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The self-help industry bombards us with books and messages about how to live happier lives, but their advice is not always helpful. Celebrity endorsements of self-help methods and mythologies in popular culture create communicative tensions in our collective psyche, feeding messages of hope and optimism that are often, somewhat ironically, detrimental to our happiness. As a result, we now have a growing body of anti-self-help literature telling us to ditch the positive thinking, cut the endless fixation on goal setting, and live more resiliently in the face of life's inevitable adversity (Brown 2016; Manson 2016; Brinkmann 2017).

Celebrities who tell mystical stories about secret laws in the universe and the magnetic power of positive thinking (see Kelsey 2018) often tap into the psyches of hopeful self-help consumers who painfully fall for the confirmation bias of celebrity success stories. Those advocates and followers of Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret,* for example, rarely stop to ask where the unsuccessful people are – those who tried to "think positive" but didn't try hard enough and failed to attract fortune, fame, and success. This positive thinking model of self-help has been critiqued as an unhelpful hangover from our protestant past, having a particularly detrimental impact in American society (Ehrenreich 2010).

But it isn't all bad news. There are other performative contexts in which celebrity personas can intervene and shed light on the shadows of illusive self-help dupes, dreams, and false promises. The charisma, successes and stories of celebrity personas can provide inspiring contexts for sharing self-help methods and philosophies. It is *what* these celebrity personas embody and *how* they share advice that warrants critical attention. Here, the field of persona studies has a significant role to play in scrutinising the role of celebrity personas in the growing public discourse around psychology, mental health and collective wellbeing.

When I started writing the book that I am currently working on, I had just recovered from a serious bout of anxiety that stemmed from my accumulative life struggles with imposter syndrome. Many readers will be familiar with the story of imposter syndrome: the symptom of self-doubt that is deeply engrained in an individual's psyche through various personal, cultural and psychological experiences in their life. Many of us mask this trait with various personas on a daily basis, and we often get along just fine. But sometimes, for some people, it is debilitating.

For many years, I had struggled to enjoy success or achievement. As I grew up, my worries and sense of impending doom intensified and became an engrained pattern of my inner dialogue. Dysfunctional tensions in my psyche controlled my inner authorship and my self-doubt grew. I adopted a resilient persona to fool myself as much as anyone else. I masked fear with extroverted confidence and self-deprecating humour in my personal, social and professional personas. This worked for some time, but not forever. In 2018, at the age of 35, I decided I could no longer endure the fear and anxiety that was stopping me from enjoying life. I was ready to fracture my persona, lift my mask and ask for help.

Through a combination of serendipity, curiosity and perseverance, my experience motivated me to write a book about the work of a celebrity persona that resonated with me on my road to recovery. Whilst receiving Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), I read one of those 'life-changing' books. Derren Brown had been the guest on two of my favourite podcasts: *The Joe Rogan Experience* and *Making Sense with Sam Harris*. During these two conversations he promoted his latest book, *Happy: Why more or less everything is absolutely fine* (2016). Having been influenced by the Stoics, Brown drew on Stoic philosophy to write "an anti-self-help-self-help book" on happiness. Brown offered ways of living a more considered life without the burden of blind faith, self-blame and disappointment that often comes with positive thinking.

The foundations of CBT draw on Stoic philosophy, and *Happy* soon became a recurring talking point when I met my therapist. I found countless similarities between my thoughts and habits and Brown's examples of the stories we tell ourselves and how they affect us. *Happy* nudged me into a reading marathon on Stoic philosophy: I had soon read the ancient works of Marcus Aurelius (2014), Seneca (2004) and Epictetus (2008) followed by more recent Stoic endorsements from Massimo Pigliucci (2017) and Ryan Holiday (2014, 2016, 2019).

But when I caught up on more of Brown's recent work, I realised something: in his performative persona, which reflects distinct characteristics of the magician archetype (Campbell 1949; Barlow 2017), Brown speaks to us as individuals *and* collectives – trying to help us transform and individuate through those personal and cultural struggles in the psyche. When enlightened, the archetypal stage magician uses their performative skills, intellectual knowledge, intuitive tendencies, healthy scepticism, and visionary talents to the benefit of others. All individuals and collectives can foster this archetypal trait when those potentials are realised and utilised. In Brown's case, he is trying to tell us stories and engage us with dramas and illusionary theatrics that are meaningful and resonate with audiences in ways that help to realise those potentials.

Brown's television mini-series, *Apocalypse* (2012) showed how Stoic meditations of gratitude and negative visualisation can guide us through transformative journeys – away from the childish tendencies that we often carry into adulthood and towards transcendence – fulfilling our duty to others and a greater good. In his stage show, *Miracle* (2018a), Brown echoes his disapproval of the self-help industry for duping us into a culture of goal-setting and positive thinking, providing us with a compelling case for living life in the moment rather than endlessly chasing the Holy Grail of happiness that never arrives. Likewise, in *Miracle*, Brown uses his stage persona to expose the faith healing industry as a case where the dark side of magic cruelly misleads it victims with false hope and illusive dreams based on the power of God.

Brown's more recent shows, *The Push* (2018b) and *Sacrifice* (2018c) were both available at on Netflix at the same time, demonstrating the contrasting potentials of the human shadow. *The Push* shows how social conformity can lead good people to commit a terrible crime. *Sacrifice* shows that whilst a politics of fear and polarisation suppresses our empathy towards others, even a man with strong views against immigration will take a bullet to protect an illegal immigrant. As Jung (1959) proposed, the unconscious does not only host our darkest traits, it holds our greatest potentials that are often suppressed through our cultural experiences. The shadow contains the dark and the light, from the demonic to the divine.

Brown sheds light on our personal and societal shadows; addressing the state of a collectively anxious, fearful and polarised culture that's in need of some better collective self-help. Whilst applying the concept of "collective psychology" (see The Collective Psychology Project 2018) in this book about Brown, I've continued listening to him talking about his work, his ethos as a performer and the meanings that he tries to convey through his performances. As

Brown admits, magic is often about the ego of the performer and other childish urges to impress. Therefore, in recent years, he has adapted his persona to orchestrate theatrics and performances that resonate with *the audience* – forcing *us* to reflect on ourselves as humans and the nature of our beliefs.

Some critics see Brown himself as a shadow magician, fooling and tricking audiences with hoaxes and fake stunts. But perhaps it is the case that Brown's work has remained popular for over 20 years because, by his own admission, his performative persona has moved beyond the self-serving urges of ego, towards a meaning making ethos that resonates with audiences and the times in which we live.

Celebrity personas have a part to play in guiding us through the transmedia terrains of collective storytelling and the self-help industry. But we must keep a critical eye on the *what* and *how* of this work, and the influence it has in popular culture.

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