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# Capitalism, Consumerism, and Individualism: Investigating the Rhetoric of *The Secret*

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Capitalism, Consumerism, and Individualism: Investigating the Rhetoric of *The Secret*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Communication  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my grandfather, the late Gaston Fernandez de la Torriente, a constant inspiration as a person and a scholar. I would also like to dedicate this to all of the people who have supported me throughout my graduate education: my parents, the faculty and staff in the Department of Communication, and Eric who has supported me every step of the way.

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# Capitalism, Consumerism, and Individualism: Investigating the Rhetoric of *The Secret*

Carolina Fernandez

## ABSTRACT

I am investigating a New Age spiritual movement called the Law of Attraction that has been the source of recent media attention due to the recent publication of a self-help book called *The Secret*. The book investigates this phenomenon, which is a theory that takes positive thinking to the extreme. The theory states that reality can be literally manifested through one's thoughts. I am interested in this trend because it supports consumerist values, entrepreneurship, and self-actualization while using socialist rhetoric to promote capitalist values. I am also interested in the implications that this rhetoric holds for women and marginalized groups.

I will investigate how the theory draws on quotes from spiritual leaders, famous scientists, and revered world figures and abstracts their meanings by placing them in a paradigm for their own use. I will also look at how they use the authority of science and an appeal to traditionally Christian language to promote blind faith in this principle.

I will look at how this movement positions consumerism and consumption as a means of self-actualization and spiritual salvation and analyze how the theory lends itself to the ideals of capitalism. Finally, I will emphasize how the Law of Attraction disregards women and marginalized groups by ignoring systemic restraints by focusing only on the power of the individual with a blatant disregard for social institutions and systems.

This project will be a textual rhetorical analysis that will incorporate an

ethnographic study, textual analysis, and a critical theoretical approach to theory. The goal of this project is to interrogate a contemporary self-help and New Age spiritual movement that is symptomatic of the contemporary preoccupation with self-actualization and the discourse of positive-thinking.

## Chapter One

### Literature Review

New Age religions became popular in the 1980s and are characterized by a broad range of beliefs, ideas, and practices that often do not align with one another. Although there are some broad characteristics that tend to encompass most of them, theorists differ on what constitutes a New Age religion. Stone; Wesley; and Campbell discern six similar characteristics of New Age religions: (1) they are marked by a pronounced religious individualism; (2) they are religions of experience; (3) they are characterized by guru leaders who emphasize a pragmatic approach to revelation; (4) they are more accepting of relativism than traditional religions; (5) the theology is holistic and usually opposed to dualisms; and (6) they are organizationally more open than traditional religious institutions. (Dawson) Perhaps the single most marked characteristic, is that “New Agers tend to focus on what they refer to as personal transformation and spiritual growth” (Aldred 61-62).

A broad range of literature has addressed the prevalence of New Age religions in American society, the reason for their emergence, their cultural significance, and other various factors, yet because of the multi-varied beliefs that different New Age movements support, it is important as Dawson (1998) notes, to offer new studies that focus on specific New Age religious movements, their organization, and individual characteristics, to understand more fully these movements as individual practices that often have significant differentiating values.



One of the newer contributions to the New Age genre, *The Secret*,<sup>1</sup> is based on The Law of Attraction, a principle that has roots in the transcendental movement of the late 1800s (Griswold) and has recently re-emerged in the public consciousness through the publication of a book and the dissemination of an instructional film. Although the marketing of both the book and the film tend to rhetorically frame the book as a self-help tool, the element of spirituality is inherently embedded in applying the principle in practice.

Operationally, *The Secret* could be defined as either a New Age Spiritual movement or a cult. According to sociologist Roy Wallace, cults are defined “as oriented toward the problems of the individuals; loosely structured; tolerant; and non-exclusive. They make few demands on members; possess no clear distinction between members and non-members; have a rapid turnover of membership; and are transient as collectivities.”

However, because of the loaded connotations that accompany the word “cult,” I have chosen to use Dawson’s definition of *The Secret* as a New Age spiritual movement that has been wedded to self-help in order to reach a broader audience that may not traditionally hold New Age spiritual views. I would like to suggest that the rhetorical devices used in the marketing and distribution of *The Secret*, encourage faith-like acceptance of its ideas through mystifying the underlying principles to a lay audience while simultaneously interpellating the rhetoric of science to “prove” the validity of The Law of Attraction. Although it is marketed towards the mainstream, the theory offers an apparently postmodern approach to life, ethics, and worldview that works to subversively promote conservative, capitalist values. By employing identity discourse through

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<sup>1</sup> When I am referring to *The Secret* in theory I leave it in normal format. When I am discussing the book I italicize it.

encouraging self-actualization and self-control, proponents of The Law of Attraction promote individualism in the service of socio-economic hegemony.

### What is The Law of Attraction and The Secret?

The principle of the Law of Attraction states that people are in control of their lives and can manifest their realities through envisioning them. Therefore, if one thinks positively about the outcome of something it is more likely to happen than if one worries about it or exerts “negative energy” towards the subject. For example, if you are anti-war according to the literature, you are manifesting war, but if you are pro-peace you are manifesting peace. The subtleties in language and the disciplining of the self account for a great deal of the purported power of the theory.

*The Secret* is a book and a film that was both produced and written by Rhonda Byrne, a middle-aged Australian television producer. The DVD, which has sold over 2 million copies, was released in 2006 and the book, which spent time at number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list, has sold 6 million copies and was published the same year. Byrne has been a guest or featured on several national talk-host shows, and was also profiled for *Time Magazine's* "Top 100." *The Secret* has been the subject of three episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey show*. Byrne, as well as some of the “experts” that are cited in her book and DVD, were guests on the shows, and the programs featured several testimonials on how employing the Law of Attraction has "saved" people- a single mother claimed she escaped bankruptcy by employing the methods suggested by *The Secret*, and another woman claimed she was rescued from romantic solitude and discovered her soul mate by applying the theory to her life.

As a phenomenon, *The Secret* is a conglomeration of marketing materials that discuss the Law of Attraction. The book presents a seeming synthesis of ideas and quotes garnered from sources as diverse as Albert Einstein, Hermes, and Benjamin Franklin. These quotes in turn are supplemented throughout the book by “experts“ and practitioners of *The Secret*, whose identities are listed at the back of the book, or at the end of the DVD respectively. One of the main rhetorical justifications made by the author for the validity of The Law of Attraction is through abstracting historical references and inserting retroactive “proof” that *The Secret* has been used by all of those famous figures cited. For example, the official website claims that “*The Secret* reveals the most powerful law in the universe. The knowledge of this law has run like a golden thread through the lives and the teachings of all the prophets, seers, sages, and saviors in the world’s history and through the lives of all truly great men and women all that they have ever accomplished or attained has been done in full accordance with this most powerful law” ([www.secret.tv](http://www.secret.tv)).

#### Method

During the course of this study, I read *The Secret*, watched the DVD, and viewed *The Oprah Winfrey Show* episodes that addressed the topic. In addition, for six weeks, I attended weekly group meetings that were designed for people who were interesting in using The Law of Attraction in their own lives. I took copious notes during the course of the group meetings as well as recorded two interviews that I conducted with the leader and one of the members of the Law of Attraction group.

## Historical Context

The Secret is very closely associated with the New Thought movement which, according to Griswold, became popular in the 1890s and arose out of mesmerism and the transcendental views of Emerson (309). Griswold notes that followers of New Thought believed that “thoughts are things,” the individual was actually divine, and God was posited as a “universal presence” or “All Mind.” All of these beliefs directly correspond to the belief system that orients The Law of Attraction. Griswold notes that the followers of New Thought tended to be consumer-oriented and were adhering to the belief system in hopes of making money. “They wanted to succeed, to grow rich, to rise in the world, rather than to commune with the All-Mind. For New Thought was a get-rich-quick-religion, a something-for-nothing religion; that was the secret of its appeal” (311). Indeed, I would argue that is the *secret* behind the appeal of *The Secret*.

Griswold also notes the alignment of the movement’s underlying values with the American capitalist dream, by emphasizing the “economic potency of character,” and stressing the American value of equality of opportunity. Griswold argues that New Thought took the penance aspect out of worship while maintaining Puritan, Protestant and capitalist values. “It was no longer necessary to sit upon hard pews and drop pennies in the plate. One had merely to ask the slave of the lamp for the correct endowment of virtues and success was his. This is a revealing indication of how deep-rooted the popular conviction was that only the virtuous man could, or should, succeed (313).

Griswold’s analysis provides a solid structure from which to analyze some of the underlying issues inherent in The Secret. It is interesting that this movement was similarly popular in terms of initial money-making potential for its promoters and leaders

as *The Secret* has proven to be for Byrne. However, the essay ends with Griswold calling New Thought a fad. Although it may have lost its mainstream popularity, it still contains ideas that exist today and has spawned similar movements such as *The Secret*. I think it is valuable to interrogate why these ideas enjoy a resurgence at key times in history, and to acknowledge that these movements do not die, but in fact simply recede out of public consciousness only to be replaced by a similar new trend that stresses the same values.

### Timing

Theorists largely concur that one of the reasons for the recent influx of New Age spirituality and the confluence of consumer materials that accompany it, are a reflection of the individualized consumer culture that is embedded in a social narrative that encourages self-realization and transcendence through the acquisition of material goods (Aldred 2002; Heelas 1993). In essence, some New Age movements covertly suggest that transcendence has become equated with material worth. “As Dave Hunt and T.A. McMahon observe in *America: The Sorcerer’s New Apprentice*, ‘Beneath the seemingly sincere double-speak about higher consciousness, enlightenment, astral travel, infinite psychic powers, and cosmic law, blatant bottom-line materialistic probability plays a big part in the new spirituality’” (Aldred 62).

Featherstone cites Burger and Luckman who define consumer culture as the culture of society that is based on the assumption that the movement towards mass consumerism was accelerated by a general reorganization of symbolic products, everyday experiences and practices (137). Although Featherstone suggests that consumer culture does not result in the eclipse of the sacred by materialism, in the case of *The Secret*, I

suggest that although it incorporates accepted sacred teachings and practices, it in fact does diminish the sacred aspects of the religions it pulls from through its distortion of the underlying principles of the symbols and the focus on consumption.

The critique of abstraction of the sacred applies to many New Age Religious movements. “Besides its narcissism, or perhaps even linked to it, one of the more controversial aspects of New Age concerns commodification of religion and the freedom to appropriate spiritual ideas and practices from other traditions” (York 367). According to York (2001) appropriating spiritual traditions from existing cultures (in some cases when they are not marketing it themselves) is robbing them of distinctive cultural value that threatens the very being of the practice as originally imagined in its cultural context (369). Although York suggests that if “Marshall McLuhan’s ‘global village’” is the future of society, perhaps NRMs (New Religious Movements) could provide “generative matrices of accommodation and inspiration for the collective good” (371). Although this may be true for some New Age movements in addition to New Religious movement, this is inherently unattainable for supporters of The Secret. The theory does not invest itself in focusing on the collective good, and even if it did, because intentions are displaced, personal, and not focused on communal good, it would be a monumental task to appropriate these principles in the name of a better society.

Another reason that The Secret can enjoy such popularity at this point in time is that there has been a continual shift since the 1960s from traditional religious orientations to an interest in spirituality. In my experience with a group of individuals that I interviewed at a Law of Attraction group, this seemed to hold true. The members had an aversion to the word “religion” but emphatically defined themselves as spiritual. They

also talked about The Law of Attraction as a spiritual practice. Roof (1993) notes that a 1999 Galup poll found that many Americans believe that “ ‘spirituality’ and ‘religiousness’ are mutually exclusive” (Marler and Hadaway 290). Marler and Hadaway also claim that although the majority of Americans consider themselves both religious and spiritual, data shows that there is an increasing tendency to self-identify as “spiritual only” (293). In their poll of respondents in four states, 71 percent thought there was a difference between being religious and being spiritual.

The current boom in the faith of consumerism also accounts for the increase in spirituality being appropriated by the market. According to Dawson (1998) religion has undergone privatization and pluralism which has resulted in “religious allegiances [that] have become essentially voluntary and a competitive market for the allegiances has emerged” (134). Dawson suggests that the tension between the public and private spheres of home and institutional life create a dichotomy for the individual. “In this situation, personal identity, promoted as all-important at the private level and the natural end-product of making the right choices, is frustrated by a structurally diverse public realm that demands an elaborate differentiation of social roles and restricts real choices” (137). Thus modern living results in a fragmented self.

The fragmentation that is inherent in modern life then possibly could leave individuals with the desire to create a fully unified identity, between home and work, self-identity and perception, and spirituality and science. Dawson notes that the characteristics commonly shared by New Religious Movements, and I would argue New Age spiritual movements, point to the fact that they are more compatible with science than conventional religions, and thus adhere better with the new social order (141).

New religions are not simply providing the meaning for life that the scientific worldview fails to adequately provide. They are actively seizing on both the new cultural relativism promoted by the spread of social scientific knowledge and some of the means and data of the natural sciences to facilitate and legitimate their existence. (142)

The timing for resurgence in an interest in a New Age spiritual movement like *The Secret*, accompanies an increase in an interest in spirituality over religion, an increase in a more fluid and accommodating consumer market that has begun to commodify sacred symbolism, and a desire to create unity through self-actualization and the merging of rationality and spiritualism. Although the search for unity as Lacan notes is certainly futile, it can have a host of interesting by-products in its expression through the combination of self-discipline and control.

It might appear that consumerism, the availability to mix and match religions and the endless choices that accompany postmodernism would result in the forming of an individual, freely constituted, more fully unified and actualized individual; yet the unity, and of course the illusion of choice is merely a displaced fantasy. Foucault defines a docile body as one that “may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (136). In *Discipline and Punish*, he notes the prominence with which the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries began to discipline the body in institutional contexts, which resulted in the ever-increasing regulation of the self. Yet, for those subjected to institutional control there was still room to critique and recognize institutional control as such. The theory of *The Secret* and other self-help texts like it seem to come from nowhere, have no ideology, and appear not to contain an institutional agenda.



Therefore, those who consume the material believe they are making a choice buying into disciplining themselves, and perhaps even transcending control by government or religion. In fact, through their disciplined action they unreflexively are serving the interests of capitalism, consumerism, and ideology.

In the historical context of which Foucault writes, he notes that control in the military was exercised through an attempt to assure that quality of time is used efficiently and no distractions interfere in concerted action (150). Yet one could suppose, when the soldier in Foucault's case lies alone at night, his mind may still contain a remnant of his own will; he may recognize that he has been disciplined. The danger inherent in the new form of self-discipline is that the individual blissfully supports institutional control and envisions that he has made the choice to self-actualize.

Self-actualization is a key principle in *The Secret*, and as a rhetorical device it is beginning to be used by managers in corporations in order to make their employees more productive in institutional settings. The discourses of New Age spirituality both feed into and draw from guru management theory which encourages entrepreneurship; however, in the corporate context, self-actualization is concerned with the well-being of the individual insofar as the employee feels fulfilled with and through work. Nadesan argues that the discourses of the New Age incorporate spiritualism to promote entrepreneurial views of subjectivity that attempt to adapt individuals to new workplace arrangements" (4). She notes: "The discourse of corporate spiritualism often prescribes specific strategies for 'turning within' to discover and nurture the authentic self and for fostering expressivity (14).

Nadesan posits that entrepreneurial forms of spirituality are necessary to maintain

the capitalistic system. “Individuals subjected by these latter discourses would have difficulty accepting the value or validity of the more resistant populist discourse, because New Age corporate spiritualism and evangelical capitalism explain success as an outcome of individual initiative and reject the possibility that organizational and/or institutional factors may hinder achievement” (Nadesan 6). Finally, she proposes that these entrepreneurial ideas work against collective group resistance to change corporate practices. In this same vein, I would argue that the entrepreneurial vision of self-actualization purported in *The Secret* is conducive to hindering group action for collective social change.

## Chapter Two

### Globalization, The Capitalist Imperative and Abstraction

From the very birth of the nation and throughout its history, the United States has always been a “capitalist paradise” (Dowd 53). In addition to the conditions of its historical founding, this trend was marked by strategic economic directives that have been made throughout the country’s history. Dowd notes that historical policies such as subsidizing the railroad networks, maintaining a protectionist tariff policy, and the protection of property rights over worker’s rights all helped to solidify the primal importance of the ethos of capitalism (Dowd 53).

It would make sense, then, that movements like New Thought and Mind Cure (which *The Secret* is based on) would emerge in the mid-1800s, which coincided with an economic/industrial boom. By the same token, *The Secret* has become popular at a time when the West is enjoying an unprecedented amount of economic and technological growth and varying religious beliefs have begun to compete for followers in a consumer market (Miller). Communication and media scholar Louise Woodstock (180) notes that one of the reasons for the success of the self-help genre is that spirituality has become acquainted with the moral values of the individual, while religion has become associated with institutional repression. Just as New Thought and Mind Cure worked to enforce the American principles of capitalism and individualism, so too, has *The Secret* benefited from these same values.

The value of individualism borne out of Protestantism and capitalism seems to underlie *The Secret’s* sometimes revolutionary rhetoric. A powerful series of quotes in

the book offer evidence of this inward focus. The following statement suggests that the universe revolves around the individual reader's infinitesimal mental power and positions him or her as a veritable god. "The universe will start to rearrange itself to make it happen for you" (Dr. Joe Vitale 51). The statement is clear. The world will work for you, if you can tap into the power of *The Secret*, you will exercise ultimate control. This proposition feeds the fantasy of exercising complete control over *your* world, and can seem incredibly appealing in the perceived fragmented state of the postmodern world.

The text also draws on Judeo-Christian language and imagery in order to invoke a moral paradigm that is familiar to many in the West. This move is illustrated here, in this quote that elevates the individual to the status of "king":

You are the heir to the kingdom. Prosperity is your birthright, and you hold the key to more abundance—in every area of your life—than you can possibly imagine. You deserve every good thing you want, and the Universe will give you every good thing you want, but you have to summon it into your life (109).

Byrne positions the reader as creator of the natural world, and then claims without *your* existence, the earth would not exist. The text goes on to allude to Jesus Christ, in stating you are "heir to the kingdom," which references the Christian belief that Jesus is the king of men, and heir to the kingdom of God.

As several scholars (Bellah et al. 1996; Puntam 2000; Yankelovich 1981; Woodstock 2007) have noted, this type of extreme individualism that is manifested in the self-help genre is problematic because although it is certainly important to have a feeling of self-worth, this "center of the universe mentality" is sure to breed some rather large egos, and also has the capability to create a hesitancy to participate in the world socially.

One of the last quotes in the book demonstrates the extent to which the focus on individualism pervades the text:

The earth turns on its orbit for You. The oceans ebb and flow for You. The birds sing for You. The sun rises and it sets for You. The stars come out for You. Every beautiful thing you see, every wondrous thing you experience, is all there, for You. Take a look around. None of it can exist, without You. No matter who you thought you were, now you know the Truth of Who You Really Are. You are the master of the Universe. You are the heir to the kingdom. You are the perfection of Life. And now you know The Secret. (183)

Again appropriating Biblical language, Byrne replaces the word “God” with “You,” implying you are God. Interestingly, Byrne provides a caveat in the foreword for the reason that she capitalizes the word “you.” She claims that she wants the reader to feel a personal connection with the book, and feel as if she is talking explicitly to him or her. However, in the key places that she does employ this method, as in the aforementioned example, there seems to be other rhetorical justifications that could accompany her stated desire to connect.

Through the Biblical allusions, the reader not only gets to be creator (God), but also His manifestation as Jesus (heir). This type of language works to enforce a staunch individualism, yet uses familiar religious prototypes in order to elevate it into the familiarity of the paradigm of Western sacredness. This type of wording implores the reader not just to conceive of his/herself as the creator of the world, but of their destiny, a value that also aligns with the American conception of capitalism.

## Globalization and Historical Abstraction

Out of capitalism, increased production and technological advances, sprung globalization, a phenomena that Dowd argues the United State's largely helped to make possible through creating a standardizing process that paved the way for an expanding mass market (54). "That the United States was the first home of mass production ineluctably led to its becoming the first home of giant firms" (55). Following World War II, and the worldwide expansion of industry and big business, the road was paved for globalization and the United State's took the helm of this new revolution.

"Globalization" is a term that is frequently used today to describe a phenomenon that includes many cultural, religious and technological factors. As technological innovations and communication networks become more advanced, the world appears to be "smaller" in the sense that there are no more uncharted territories or a realm of the unknown that cannot be reached or discovered. Cross-cultural influences as well as new global financial and business ventures seem to be a result of this advancement in communications.

Although it is a phenomenon in and of itself, Dowd defines globalization as not just a tendency but an ideology. "As an ideology, globalization implies both the *inevitability* and *desirability* of the above described tendencies toward integration and the *denial* of the existence of dysfunctional movements arising from this tendency" (original emphasis; 170). Critics argue that the problem with globalization is that at least culturally, the West, and most forcefully the United States, is the dominant cultural agent that inflects its ideology onto less-developed countries, and the reciprocal trickle of

cultural influence that comes back to the West from the Third World does not compensate for the Western corruption of native cultures.

Yet, there are supporters that conceive of globalization as a principle that has the power to bring about a more unified world. From this position, the ever-narrowing gap in knowledge and practices can account for a utopian vision of a world where all cultures equally influence each other, and peace and justice becomes a template for the global order. Summarizing the stance of Giddens (1998:31ff), Leibowitz (119) notes that Giddens characterizes globalization not as a destructive imperialist force of cultural homogenization but more deeply as a creative power that shakes up established traditions and ways of life and, indeed, generates new possibilities for human identities by freeing them from the confines of traditional Western *and* non-Western locations.

In the same way, *The Secret* homogenizes varying cultural, intellectual, and religious traditions, and uses the ideology of what I will term “retroactive globalization”—an attempt to homogenize all of global historicity into a unity that is bound together, in this case, by the thread of *The Secret*. Throughout the book, Byrne makes it appear as if every great culture and tradition in the world adhered in some way to the principles of *The Law of Attraction*. Byrne supports this notion by collecting various quotes and sayings and abstracting the original meaning to make it fit into the context of *The Secret*. The majority of these quotes are extremely vague, thereby allowing for multiple interpretations. However, within the context of the book, they are categorically defined as evidence of the historically proven existence and adherence to *The Law of Attraction*.

For example, Einstein is quoted in the text as saying, “The most important

question any human being can ask themselves is, ‘Is this a friendly Universe?’” (40). Byrne goes on to say that the answer must be yes, because in order for The Law of Attraction to work, one must believe that the Universe, like a friend, is ‘on your side.’ Instead of merely taking a quote and answering it in terms of The Secret, the leap is made to claim that Einstein in fact, *practiced* The Secret. “Albert Einstein posed this powerful question because he knew The Secret. He knew by asking the question it would force us to think and make a choice” (40). Although Byrne is careful here, and says Einstein “knew” The Secret (which is altogether probable because he lived during the advent of the New Thought movement), the second sentence that attributes intention to Einstein (i.e., he wants to force us to make a choice about whether or not to believe in the Law of Attraction) is a striking, yet typical, example of Byrne’s interpretive moves.

The next paragraph capitalizes on the famous physicist’s image yet again. “To take Einstein’s intention even further, you can affirm and proclaim, “This is a magnificent Universe. The Universe is bringing all good things to me. The Universe is conspiring for me in all things” (40). By prefacing this statement with a claim that it was the *intention* of Einstein for us to believe these ideas about the Universe, not only is the original quote abstracted, but his beliefs are concretized as coinciding with The Law of Attraction.

In the same way that quotes from intellectuals are appropriated and commodified within the realm of cultural capital, so too are quotes from famous religious figures. As Schmit noted, leaders in transcendentalism, spiritualism, and Mind Control also used cross-cultural religious beliefs to supplement their theories. Many pulled from Hinduism, Buddhism, and other multivariate and fundamentally opposed beliefs in order to explain



the power of mind and the primacy of consciousness as a determining factor in one's life. This is significant, because as Miller (10) argues, abstraction is a culturally significant effect of commodification. As a commodity itself, *The Secret* abstracts sacred elements from individual religions in order to capitalize on the wisdom embedded in the quotes, yet this abstraction simultaneously distorts the original message, not just by improperly placing it in the paradigm of *The Secret*, but by disjointing the quotes and subjectifying them as cultural commodities within the economic commodity of the book itself. In this way, the apparent postmodern remedy (unification of The Spirit) which is supposed to be learned in *The Secret* is ironic, because the text uses postmodern tactics to piece together a seemingly unified but internally disjointed solution for the postmodern condition.

Another example of this abstraction is Jack Canfield's (the author of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series) musings on Mother Teresa. "Mother Teresa was brilliant. She said, I will never attend an anti-war rally. If you have a peace rally, invite me.' She knew. She understood The Secret. Look what she manifested in the world" (143). This quote is framed in the book next to an explanation about how what you resist appears in your life. According to the theory, if you are anti-war, you are manifesting war, or if you have negative thoughts about anything (poverty, social injustice, etc.), you are manifesting it.

As a means of building credibility, Mother Teresa is strategically used most likely because she is universally liked and respected across cultural and religious boundaries and most readers will be open to hearing what she has to say. Canfield begins by complimenting Mother Teresa then he abstracts a quote that she made about being a loving individual in the world in order to assert that she knew and understood The Secret. He suggests that it is by virtue of that knowledge that she "manifested" positive things in

the world. Although clearly Mother Teresa was a loving person, it was not just her “positive energy” that manifested good things in the world. She actually worked with the poor and brought about change through actions, not just thought. Of course, the most problematic issue here is that Mother Teresa was Catholic and would have in no way subscribed to the conception of the individual as God and Creator. She would have been fundamentally opposed to the underlying justification for The Law of Attraction, yet Canfield makes it seem as if this theory was a part of her belief system.

Another foundational principle of Christianity which was embodied in the work of Mother Teresa herself is the concept of sacrificing oneself for others. Yet, *The Secret* blatantly speaks against any reason for sacrifice. “There is a big difference between giving and sacrificing. Giving from a heart that is overflowing feels so good. Sacrificing does not feel good. Sacrifice will eventually lead to resentment” (108). Although sacrifice in the Christian tradition represents the ultimate embodiment of the faith, the type of religion that *The Secret* is suggesting is a hedonistic religion. If it does not feel good, one should not do it. Clearly, when taken to its logical conclusion, this also raises vexing issues about responsibility and social participation. Canfield reiterates the unpleasantness of sacrifice later in the book, “When I really understood that my primary aim was to feel and experience joy, then I began to do only those things which brought my joy. I have a saying: ‘If it ain’t fun, don’t do it!’” (178). Sacrifice is one of the underlying values in all of the major world religions. That *The Secret* draws from these same religions that value sacrifice as a concept, and then simultaneously denounces it as bothersome; is co-indicative of the opportunism inherent in the movement.

In one of the most blatant examples of spiritual abstraction, the book uses a quote

from Buddha, “All that we are is a result of what we have thought” (73). This quote is placed in the book directly following a discussion about expecting checks in the mail instead of bills in order to manifest unexpected income. Clearly, Buddha’s anti-materialist philosophy does not align in any way with the desire of expecting material rewards, yet the presence of this quote in this strategic place is taken to fit within the context of *The Secret* and create a link between materialism and transcendentalism.

Following this same vein is another example that aligns material wealth with spiritualism by abstracting characters from the Bible and claiming that they were rich in their time so it is acceptable for the reader to want to be rich and also spiritual.

If you have been brought up to believe that being wealthy is not spiritual, then I highly recommend you read *The Millionaires of the Bible Series* by Catherine Ponder. In these glorious books you will discover that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Jesus were not only prosperity teachers, but also millionaires themselves, with more affluent lifestyles than many present-day millionaires could conceive of. (Byrne 109)

Of course, this is speculation on not only the part of Byrne but the author of the aforementioned book. By suggesting that Jesus and these other Biblical figures were “prosperity teachers,” (which is what several “experts” in the book claim to be) is an abstraction of the word “prosperity.” These early Christian leaders certainly preached a “prosperous” spiritual life, but framed alongside self-help gurus who claim they too are prosperity teachers (in this sense they teach individuals how to gain material wealth among other things), suggests that Jesus and these other figures were teaching people how to accumulate material wealth.

Regardless of how these Biblical characters actually lived (and I am skeptical that it is more affluent than “many present-day millionaires”), materialism does not coincide with the teachings of Jesus or Buddha, nor is a central tenet of any other major world religion. This type of abstraction coincides with what “Stuart Hall (1977) calls the reality effect, in which mass-mediated messages obscure themselves, appearing natural and spontaneous, acting as ‘social cement.’” (Woodstock 185).

Besides justifying materialism through projecting it onto the lives and consciousnesses of historical figures, Byrne also encourages using *The Secret* to further capital for the reader. In a disturbing story about capitalizing off trivial objects, Lee Brower, a self-proclaimed “wealth trainer and specialist, author, and teacher” tells a story about how he was having difficulty in his family (78). He said that he picked up a rock and made a conscious decision to touch it several times during the day and to talk about what he was grateful for. This part is seemingly innocuous and innocent, but Brower goes on to say that “a guy from South Africa,” (although who this is and in what context they are acquainted is unclear) saw him drop it and asked him the purpose of the rock. When he explained it, the man called it a gratitude rock. The story continues as Brower claims that he got an e-mail from this person two weeks later telling him this man’s son was dying from a rare disease. According to Brower, the man requested that he send him three rocks (although why the man did not pick up some of his own is also not stated). Brower sent him the rocks, and claims that four or five months later, the man’s son was doing better. The clincher in the story is that the man started selling rocks as “gratitude rocks” for \$10 each and had sold over 1,000 rocks. Brower goes on to say that this man raised the money for charity, but the emphasis on entrepreneurialism, materialism, and the

commodification of triviality over the son's recovery is blatant.

This is the way that the emphasis on materialism is framed in the text. Instead of claiming that materialism is a direct path to salvation, the testimonials lead the reader to make the connection between relevant religious figures or thinkers, and the acceptability of having excessive wealth. Testimonials from the "experts" consulted in the book, as well as stories from individuals, frequently focus on gaining material wealth through practicing The Secret. For example, Jack Canfield claims that since he learned The Secret and began applying it, his life has become "truly magical" (40). He claims it is the "life that everybody dreams of" (40) He then goes on to detail how he lives in a multi-million dollar mansion, has a "wife to die for" (presumably because of her physical attributes), and has vacationed in "all the fabulous spots in the world" (40). His "magical" life is a life of excessive material wealth.

By the same token, Dr. Joe Vitale says, "I can imagine what a lot of people are thinking: 'How can I attract more money into my life? How can I get more of the green stuff? How can I get more of wealth and prosperity?'" (101). In yet another nod to consumerism, Vitale compares the Universe to a catalog:

This is really fun. It's like having the Universe as your catalogue. You flip through it and say, I'd like to have this experience and I'd like to have that product and I'd like to have a person like that.' It is you placing your order with the Universe. It's really that easy. (48).

The Universe as a catalog, (or as a genie, which is also cited in the book as how the system works) is a metaphor that is often used to describe how The Law of Attraction manifests reality. The Universe-as-a-catalog metaphor holds loaded implications for this

theory as a path to spiritual salvation because the system as a whole is framed as an exercise in consumerism.

### Inherent Contradictions

Although the focus on materialism is clear, *The Law of Attraction* apparently defies one of the central tenets of capitalism—competition. “We are all One, and so when you compete, you compete against You. Focus only on your dreams, your visions and take all competition out of the equation” (Byrne 163). Clearly this statement is contradictory to encouraging material wealth and entrepreneurialism which as a system relies on the principle of competition in a free market economy. In this realm, as well as throughout the book, there are many confounding principles that are inherently problematic to the theory. Although as Woodstock (2007) suggests, this tends to be symptomatic of many self-help theories. She argues that the contradictory nature of self-help’s messages and the tendency to focus on individualism as a solution rather than a social answer have remained prevalent in the self-help genre.

After decrying the negativity of competition, later on in the book, there is a reference that seems to suggest that if the reader applies *The Secret*, he or she will be the envy of others which would thus naturally attract competition to the individual through the desire of others. “You will live in a different reality, a different life. And people will look at you and say, ‘What do you do different from me?’ Well, the only thing that is different is that you work with *The Secret*” (Marie Diamond 180).

One of the most interesting facets of the rhetorical use of this theory is that socialist revolutionary rhetoric is inscribed seemingly to appeal to the masses. However,

despite the socialist guise, the emphasis on materialism, personal wealth and individualism, directly contradict this. Marx suggests that divisions of labor and class result in an alienation of the working class. “Marx’s account of the alienation of labor and the commodity fetish found concrete historical realization in the shifts that took place in industrial capitalism in the first half of the twentieth century” (Miller 39).

This type of alienation in turn is soothed by the consumer imperative, and also by the American values of the capitalist system. The promise that anyone can succeed resonates as a glistening hope to the proletariat. As we have seen, The United States historically has been grounded in the types of values that *The Secret* uses in order to encourage belief in the system. *The Secret* is a perfect example of a self-help/spiritual aid that pushes the consumer imperative, capitalism, and individual choice to the next level and into the realm of total selfishness, self-surveillance, and transcendental worth equated with wealth.

However, the book demonstrates a socialist shift to appeal to the idea that there are real class divisions present in this country. At the beginning of the book, one of the first quotes suggests that the upper classes have always known about *The Secret* and have been trying to hold down the working classes by withholding it. “The leaders in the past who had *The Secret* wanted to keep the power and not share the power. They kept people ignorant of *The Secret*. People went to work, they did their job, they came home. They were on a treadmill with no power, because *The Secret* was kept in the few” (Dr. Denis Waitley, psychologist and trainer in the field of mind potential, 2) Dr. Waitley is using a very Marxist framework to suggest that (you, the reader) the proletariat are exploited. The book goes on to suggest a strong, entrepreneurial imperative to readers in order to

“get off the treadmill.”

Another quote that abstracts an historical group from its context, as well as suggests that this book is revolutionary for the working class, comes from Bob Proctor (who according to the book works in the field of “mind potential”). “Wise people have always known this. You can go right back to the ancient Babylonians. They’ve always known this. It’s a small select group of people” (5). This quote is followed by Byrne’s musings that the ancient Babylonians were a wealthy culture, and they became wealthy through The Secret. She says, “Through their [the Babylonians] understanding and application of the laws of the Universe, they became one of the wealthiest races in history” (6). Byrne is backing up an abstracted quote from one of her “experts” and then “proving” that the Babylonians practiced The Secret through her vague assertion that they knew how to apply the “laws of the Universe” and were therefore wealthy; directly following that quotation the discussion of the Babylonians ends. There is no historical evidence given that the Babylonians even had this worldview (which they did not, they believed in a pantheistic system similar to the Greeks), and certainly no discussion of their demise, which according to this book, they would have also had to attract to themselves.

Finally, although the book clearly has an underlying materialist principle that seems to be the drive for reading it, Bob Proctor offers another stab at the theory that the rich, ruling class bourgeoisie is withholding “The Secret” from us, the “masses.” He says, “Why do you think that 1 percent of the population earns around 96 percent of all the money that’s being earned? Do you think that’s an accident? It’s designed that way. They understand something. They understand The Secret, and now you are being introduced to



The Secret” (6). The call is clear. There is a ruling class, you must want to be a part of it, here is the answer, we are the liberators; this is a revolution. Yet, the imperative is that the reader must want to be a member of the bourgeoisie. “The enduring irony of self-help books was that although purportedly directing readers inward, as mass-marketed consumer products, they inherently offered other-directed idealized character types ready for readers’ adoption” (Woodstock 179).

In theory, self-employment, or falling outside the means of the capitalist mode of production, could serve to defy the ruling ideology. However, starting a business in a free-market trade system is the ultimate symbol of capitalism. Therefore, the authors illustrate that capitalism is flawed, that the masses have been kept in the dark for thousands of years, but are now being told the truth. If it is indeed the truth that they are learning—that the bourgeoisie in fact are harnessing metaphysical powers in order to be members of the ruling class, then they do not only possess luck, or are even harder workers. Rather they have superior minds and, through the pure power of thought, have been able to become successful.

It follows then, that if the reader is not able to use this power (that everyone has), he or she is not inherently as deserving as the bourgeoisie. According to *The Secret*, there is a valid reason and divine right for the bourgeoisie classes to be in power. In essence, *The Secret* lauds the core principle of capitalism and suggests that it is microcosmically re-configured in each individual (through entrepreneurialism), which results in an individual socialism of sorts, which of course is paradoxical. In this way, *The Secret* borrows socialist rhetoric to hail the individual as an oppressed member of society, and then instead of suggesting a revolution of the masses that serves to lift up all in the

working class, suggests through the stories in a chapter entitled “The Secret to Money,” that entrepreneurialism, the hallmark of the capitalist principle, is the answer to their oppression.

Of course, not only does this reinforce capitalism, but by its very nature as a product, the book encourages consumerism because in order to learn the tools to become one’s own mode of production and to successfully assimilate oneself to the bourgeois, one must feed into the capitalist system by purchasing the requisite materials (i.e., the book and DVD) in order to learn how to use it successfully.

Simultaneously, if one is to be considered successful, they must feel obliged to eventually become the leaders of their own mini-corporations, varied and dispersed, all offering more choices, more self-help, and more individuation to supersede their uncomfortable class positions. Again, while the book is trying to emphasize personal unity, this practice results in more fragmentation of the self. In this way the followers drop out of the system (perhaps quit their unsatisfying middle-management jobs), feed the system by purchasing the materials, feed off the system by consuming, establish their own capitalist systems, attempt to exercise this metaphysical mental power, call upon transcendental ideology and mysticism that is tinged with promises of reliability, and thus re-enter the capitalist system (ideally) as the bourgeoisie—not just through work, but newly Christened as the wielders of psychic power owing only to themselves. In this cycle, capitalism, consumerism, individualism, and a type of faith-based fanaticism are said to guarantee success.

## Self-Discipline and New Age Spirituality in Corporate Management

If, the role of work in capitalism is to reproduce social order, then employing these methods are somewhat anti-capitalistic because The Secret encourages individuals to transcend their class boundaries and strive for upwardly mobile financial states. However, as simple mathematics show, few will be able to transcend their class and become wealthy by employing these methods. Thus, what remains is a self-help/spiritual aid tool that is marketed towards the masses and which includes rhetoric that can be translated as becoming complacent to one's current state of affairs. The type of self-discipline and constant happiness that is mandated for the Law of Attraction to work will keep the individuals who practice this, to a certain extent, content in their lives with what they have, hoping and "knowing" that if they are happy with the relations in their lives, good things are sure to come. One such imperative demands that you must stay content, even if results are not manifesting themselves as you'd hoped.

Most of the time, when we don't see the things that we've requested, we get frustrated. We get disappointed. And we begin to become doubtful. Take that doubt and shift it. Recognize that feeling and replace it with a feeling of unwavering faith. 'I know that it's on its way.' (Lisa Nichols 52)

The demand to have unwavering faith, means theoretically, that no matter how bad things get, one must stay positive or circumstances will get worse. This type of conundrum—if it works, it is working; if it does not, you are not working hard enough; but in the meantime stay positive—offers a type of simplistic notion of existence that works perfectly to construct entrepreneurial discourses.

Few would argue that there are benefits to positive thinking, but what are the consequences of being compelled not to feel any distress at all? It seems that this ideology can become dangerous if you are asked to, with blind faith, push the negative out and only think positively.

Another thing people wonder about is, ‘How long will it take to manifest the car, the relationship, the money?’ I don’t have any rulebook that says it’s going to take thirty minutes or three days or thirty days. It’s more a matter of you being in alignment with the Universe itself. (Dr. Joe Vitale 62)

Therefore, if these techniques are not working for you, it is not that The Secret is not real it is that *you* are flawed. You are not trying hard enough, or you simply cannot do it. It seems as if this type of focus on the individual and self-discipline could yield psychologically damaging consequences for those who subscribe with “blind faith” yet still (if they are able to see beyond complacency) are not seeing positive changes in their lives.

This type of ideology yields a strong imperative for effective management techniques that encourage workers to be happier (with what they have). This in turn, ensures greater productivity and a lesser burden for company costs. Perhaps this is one reason why management theory has picked up on these techniques. According to a study conducted by Jorstad (1990) by 1988, 30 billion dollars a year was used for corporate-sponsored psychological training and inner-renewal programs (Nadesan 15). “Drawing on the strategies of the human resource movement, the discourse and techniques that constitute this industry typically focus on changing employees’ attitudes about work so that they see it as route for self-actualization and/or focus on developing leadership

potential” (Nadesan 15).

In this way, poor working conditions or a demand for higher wages are dismissed, and the workers will be told not only that they are equals but that their work is helping them become self-actualized. This type of myth, that the company would not be the same without each individual worker, functions in the same way as The Law of Attraction, which states that the Universe could not function without each person. This type of discourse helps to manipulate the individuals into thinking positively, to be happy, to quash dissent, and to ensure more productivity. “Moreover, although the discourse typically accentuates the individual, it conducts a sleight of hand that centers the corporation as agent, when it addresses the corporation as a spiritual entity that derives its life force from its entrepreneurial-like employees” (Nadesan 17). In corporate discourses, if the company is metaphorically the Universe, then the correlation following from the Law of Attraction is that one must have unwavering faith and trust that the Universe (or company in this sense) will fulfill its promise of good things to come.

The distinction that addresses work in *The Secret* uses clever rhetorical wordplay that could easily assimilate into a corporate model. By interchanging seemingly like words such as “action” and “work” the rhetorical use of these verbs could clearly be used for the manipulation of employees by management into producing more, achieving more, and putting in more time of their own volition. “*Action* is a word that can imply ‘work’ to some people, but inspired action will not feel like work at all” (55).

If the worker then conceives of themselves as participating in action, not work, then they are likely to be more self-motivated because they believe the practice is setting them on the path of self-realization and transcendence. As Woodstock notes of other self-

help materials, “An inescapable consequence of this emphasis on the self holds that responsibility begins and ends with the self. Answers are to be found internally” (Woodstock 182). If self-responsibility necessitates self-discipline, this type of absolute burden on the self can become problematic.

Taken to its logical extension, self-responsibility becomes burdensome because, according to the theory, things can be manifested at the unconscious level. If this is true, then even if one is consciously working at attracting positive things into their lives, their subconscious could be sabotaging all their hard work. “You attract to you the predominant thoughts that you’re holding in your awareness, whether those thoughts are conscious or unconscious. That’s the rub” (Michael Bernard Beckwith 19). Indeed that *is* the rub. If, by definition, the unconscious is compiled of buried thoughts and desires that people do not realize they even have, then there can be absolutely no way to discipline that part of the mind in waking hours. So, perhaps the practitioners of *The Secret* are suggesting that if applying the Law of Attraction is not working, you have a muddled, un-malleable unconscious. Due to the excessive focus on the individual, being unable to manifest things for oneself, suggests that you, the reader are inherently flawed.

## Chapter Three

### The Contradictory Co-Mingling of Science and Mysticism, Absence, Individualism and Marginalization

Three religious movements (transcendentalism, spiritualism, and mind cure) marked the shift at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century from hard-line traditional fire and brimstone Christianity to more liberal spiritual views and new ideas about consciousness (Schmit 42). New Thought (the precursor to the Law of Attraction) was an outsource of both the transcendental and mesmerist traditions and began to emerge as a popular movement at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Griswold (1933) notes, New Thought was a system, not a church. The Law of Attraction has been formulated in a similar way with groups meeting in varied and dispersed locales, many adhering to different fundamental belief systems and values but brought together through the promise of success and happiness that is promised to be realized through the potential of mind.

The Secret uses many of the same fundamental ideas that are foundational to New Thought. In fact, some of the “experts” quoted throughout the book include Prentice Mulford, one of the founders of New Thought, and Wallace Wattles, the author of *The Science of Getting Rich* and another New Thought practitioner. During the height of the New Thought movement, scientific thought and empiricism were enjoying an unprecedented amount of attention, and questions about the validity of God were being addressed. By the same token, The Secret has emerged at a time where technological advances seem to have proven that “hard” science in contemporary society reigns supreme over the “soft” sciences. “Similar to the late nineteenth century blooming of

psychological scholarship investigating these phenomena, the presence of this provocative brew today parallels the re-emergence of scientific interest in the study of consciousness in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” (Schmit 59). New Age religions also reflect contemporary interest in far East religious practices such as yoga, meditation, and concern with self-actualization that was an outgrowth of the psychological movements.

Although Byrne does not directly address these movements in the text, by identifying New Thought practitioners in the book as “expert” sources, she is able to ground *The Secret* in this historical tradition. She attempts to position *The Secret* in the same type of scientific theory that New Thought made so popular, yet she clearly does not understand the intricacies of these ideas and the way in which the process of scientific theory moves from just that—a proposed thesis—to a widely accepted reality. For example, Byrne admits that she has never studied quantum physics, yet claims that she understands enough about it to be sure that the Law of Attraction adheres to its principles. “I never studied science or physics at school, and yet when I read complex books on quantum physics I understood them perfectly because I wanted to understand them,” (156). Clearly the problem with this claim is that it leaves open the possibility that perhaps when reading these complex books, she in fact did, not understand them completely. I would argue based on her fallacious theoretical leaps (addressed in Chapter Two) that indeed this is the case.

Just as Griswold (1933) notes that few understood the theology and metaphysics around which New Thought was based, so too, is *The Secret* susceptible to these pitfalls. Byrne attempts to hail the rhetorical power of science by claiming that physics and



science corroborate the theory of the Law of Attraction. “One of the most exciting things about living in this time is that the discoveries of quantum physics and new science are totally in harmony with the teachings of The Secret” (Byrne 156). This claim is tricky because saying that science is in harmony with the teachings of The Secret does not mean that it verifies the theory; it only means that it does not directly refute it. She continues to explain this scientific connection by describing everything as energy (one of the central tenets of physics) but then makes a monumental theoretical leap from this statement to claiming that you can control the energy of other material objects. “Here is the ‘wow’ factor. When you think about what you want, and you emit that frequency, you cause the energy of what you want to vibrate at that frequency and bring it to You!” (156-57).

Perhaps these logical missteps are a result of the fact that she does not truly understand the complex scientific theories that she claims to have read and comprehended without any foundational education. Whether or not she truly understands quantum physics is not the issue, but by suggesting that this type of high theory is open and available for everyone to understand clearly reifies the idea that science is a supreme law, natural and indisputable, and that The Law of Attraction falls within it. Even though she uses this rhetoric of science as supreme authority and offers it as an open absolute truth, she simultaneously mystifies the concept of quantum physics (one of the major rhetorical strategies in the book) by oversimplifying the scientific grounds on which she bases her claims.

Coupling her assertions with vague and decontextualized “expert” testimony, Byrne’s *interpretation* of quantum physics appears as *the truth*. There is contradiction, however, in her logic. By hailing great thinkers, using quotes from doctors (chiropractors,

theorists, and scientists often not qualified to speak on the subjects in which they are cited), and attempting to ground her theory in science, Byrne seemingly supports her claims through secondary credibility afforded by these highly educated figures. Yet, at the same time, she tells her readers that they need not have education to understand complex theory, only will. If this were true, then a logical contradiction occurs between her attempts both to validate the theory in science and intellectualism and to dismiss the labor required to attain the insights. This undercutting of education leaves open the strong possibility that readers, like her, will misunderstand these theories when reading them without any background in which to frame them.

Byrne continues to try to forge a connection between science and The Law of Attraction by harnessing quotes from “experts” to prove it. One such quote from Dr. John Hagelin illustrates this tendency. “Quantum mechanics confirms it. Quantum cosmology confirms it. That the Universe essentially emerges from thought and all of this matter around us is just precipitated by thought” (160). Although Dr. Hagelin is, in fact, a quantum physicist, the referent for the word “it” is conveniently left out, thus leaving his quote open to interpretation. Dr. Hagelin’s claim that matter is precipitated by thought is not the same thing as saying that thoughts can control all aspects of material reality. I would argue that this is the crux of the book. There is a marked difference between the proven power of positive thinking in certain instances, and the logical extreme to which this text takes that argument.

In one instance, Byrne tries to make the case that what one visualizes actually comes into being. To support her argument, Byrne calls on physician Denis Waitley whom discusses a phenomenon that occurred when Olympic athletes visualized running a

race in their brain. The study he cites confirmed that the same muscles fired in the athlete's legs as if they were running the race. Following this observation (which supports the theory that your mind influences your bodily functions, not that it influences material reality outside of the body), Byrne continues to hail inventors such as the Wright Brothers and Edison, and says that they knew The Secret—and by virtue of it, invented things. “The only way anything has ever been invented or created is because one person saw a picture in his mind” (82). Clearly the only reason she is naming these inventors is an attempt to connect them with The Secret. By stating a fact, that nothing was invented without being thought about first, and then tagging these inventors names onto the following paragraph, she makes it seem as if these individuals used a visualization technique (which according to Byrne would prove they practiced The Law of Attraction) to come up with the invention. Although seemingly related, there is no proof that these scientists used visualization techniques, (although they obviously thought about the invention before its inception). Her statement therefore, is in no way connected to these inventors except through appropriation.

The discussion about scientific proof not only oversimplifies the scientific basis on which Byrne is trying to claim validity, but also implores the reader not to question the scientific portion too deeply, which is ironic, given that the book offers quotes that suggests that the elite in society are or have been holding down the masses in society. This quote from Bob Proctor drives home the point that you need not understand science to have faith in this principle. “The Law of Attraction is always working, whether you believe it or understand it or not” (15). This statement works almost as a threat to the reader. The underlying message conveys the idea that if one reads the scant and scattered

justification they give for its connection to quantum physics, without ever going into depth about the actual theories of quantum physics and how they operate, not to worry about it, because as stated above, it works whether you believe it or not. This appeal to ignorance depends upon the readers' complacency and most likely their inability or lack of desire to actually look into the apparent scientific justifications outside of the book. The suggestion therefore, is that one must believe in the theory otherwise it will work anyway and you will not have any control over the outcome.

Proctor further discourages the reader from actually trying to understand the theory—presumably because if you think deeply enough about it and investigate it in depth apparent flaws will emerge. “If you don’t understand the law that doesn’t mean you should reject it. You may not understand electricity, and yet you enjoy the benefits of it,” (Bob Proctor 21). Proctor claims that he does not know how electricity works either further trying to endear himself to the common reader. This move is the kind of rhetorical strategy that actually assumes the ignorance of the reader (which supports my earlier theory that this is marketed towards the proletariat) and appealing to them on a personal level. This is akin to the strategy that President George W. Bush used in his first campaign to appeal to the “common man.” He appeared simplistic, appealed to morals associated with the traditional American way of life and disregarded key issues. His faddish popularity at the time was partially owed to this strategy (Frank 2004). In the same way, *The Secret* has enjoyed a faddish popularity due to the mystification of its principles and the type of language that appeals to the masses.

The theoretical leap is also made to metaphorically compare the law of gravity, something that has been tested scientifically and is widely accepted as a valid theory, and

the law of attraction, which has not been subjected to any type of standardized experimentation (to the extent that this book claims that it operates) through quantum physics. “Just like the law of gravity, the law of attraction never slips up” (Byrne 36). Although according to the scientific method nothing is actually proven in science, only falsified. “Likewise, there are no exclusions to the law of attraction. If something came to you, you drew it, with prolonged thought. The law of attraction is precise” (Byrne 36).

With this clear bias based in science, and the abstraction of historical scientific figures to suggest that they used *The Secret* in achieving their greatest accomplishments, it would seem that there is no place for the equivalent of traditional Western faith in the theory. Yet, there is an extreme emphasis on faith, a principle that directly refutes the idea of science as an objective, quantified, replicable enterprise. “*How* it will happen, *how* the Universe will bring it to you, is not your concern or job. Allow the Universe to do it for you. When you are trying to work out *how* it will happen, you are emitting a frequency that contains a lack of faith—that you don’t believe you have it already” (51). Of course, the idea that you have to have faith in a scientific principle by definition, contradicts the process of the scientific method which is rooted in a rationalist enterprise. The reader is actually implored to have faith or it will not work, which totally refutes the principles of science (e.g., the result of an experiment will yield the same results if it is in fact demonstrating a generalizable law whether or not the individual has faith in it).

Faith is further discussed once again in Christian terms, even in discussions regarding science. Byrne claims that the Universe works through steps entitled the “Creative Process,” which she says is taken from the New Testament of the Bible. The steps are: ask, believe, receive. The author and experts want the reader to believe and

have unending faith that what they want will happen.

If your thoughts contain noticing you do not have it yet, you will continue to attract not having it yet. You must believe you have it already. You must believe you have received it. You have to emit the feeling frequency of having received it, to bring those pictures back as your life. (49)

Byrne is telling you that you must believe, that you have to emit a frequency, and that if you do not, you will bring negativity into your life. The incredible emphasis on faith refutes the basis on which she argues that it is a natural law that is precise and always working. “This is a feeling Universe. If you just intellectually believe something, but you have no corresponding feeling underneath that, you don’t necessarily have enough power to manifest what you want in your life. You have to feel it” (Michael Bernard Beckwith 52-53).

This odd juxtaposition leaves little room to pin down the theoretical grounding, which is exactly the intention of the author. If one is skeptical about traditional religions and the conceptions of faith that accompany them, *The Secret* can be justified through science; yet if an individual feels like they need a spiritual connection based in faith, that too is offered up to the reader. The faith-science link is what allows for the loophole afforded the reader when something does not work for them, that actually gets the theory outside of science. The results are not quantifiable and replicable, so therefore when the “science” portion of it does not work it was the faith portion which was remiss. In this way the theory is positioned as never being able to be quantifiably disproved.

## Marginalization through Equality

Another problematic tendency that can arise out of a theory that states you manifest everything in your life is that it totally discounts social problems, racism, classism, and all other sorts of issues that result in the marginalization of non-dominant groups. Therefore, if statistics show that blacks are more likely to live in poverty than whites, instead of addressing social inequities and political issues, this theory would assume that all of those individuals are just not harnessing The Law of Attraction properly and are either unable or unwilling to do so. If the former is the case they can be posited to be less intelligent and inherently less deserving, and if the latter is true then they do not deserve help because they are unwilling to help themselves. The case can then be made that it is the individuals fault.

Interestingly, even though The Secret emerged out of religious tendencies such as New Thought, socially it is actually more conservative than its predecessor, even though it has emerged nearly 100 years later. According to Schmit (45) transcendentalism emerged from Boston's Unitarian establishment and was headed by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Although these movements did champion free-thinking and self-reliance (46), Schmit also suggests that transcendentalism was one of the first religions in America to incorporate and acknowledge cross-cultural religious tendencies. Schmit also cites Braude (1989) who claims that the proponents of these movements were active abolitionists and worked to help gain women's rights.

Although supporters of New Thought may have encouraged the women's suffrage movement, The Secret forges problematic connections with women. Ellington (2000) notes Ebben's (1995) study, which shows that 75-80% of self-help books are bought by

women. *The Secret* has also been endorsed on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, a program that has a majority women audience. This makes women's issues an important factor in the book, and the erasure of all difference problematic for the dominant consumers of the text.

The way that gender, sexuality and race, and ethnicity are blatantly configured as "non-issues" further damages the image of individuals who may be struggling due to socially constructed issues. This quote by Bob Proctor, confirms the total erasure of different experiences: "See yourself living in abundance and you will attract it. It works every time, with every person" (12). If this is true, then the only people who are poor, or who cannot find employment, or are discriminated against, are simply not thinking in the correct manner. "It is supposed therefore in writing that everything that is formulated in discourse was already articulated in that semi-silence that precedes it, which continues to run obstinately beneath it, but which it covers and silences" (Foucault, *Archaeology* 25). This type of discourse silences important issues that are thus positioned in a conservative ideology that is grounded in the American capitalist tradition and is purely based on the principle of free will. As communication scholar Yeidy Rivero states, "Race is a social and historical construct that responds to economic, political and cultural conditions in specific temporal and geographic locations" (492). Ignoring racism and individualizing it, while placing the responsibility of historical social policies as a burden on the individual, oversimplifies social problems, erases their contexts, and offers the oppressors (whose will simply must have been stronger than the repressed) an easy way out of feeling guilt.

*The Secret* takes this position to the extreme and pathologizes marginalized groups by suggesting that if they are not strong enough to overcome their circumstances



it is of their own doing. In this quote by Michael Bernard Beckwith, he claims that no matter what background one belongs to it can be overcome. “And you can break yourself free from your hereditary patterns, cultural codes, social beliefs, and prove once and for all that the power within you is greater than the power within the world” (167). This statement is also contradictory because if the power within the world is being manifested at a more intense level than the individual can combat, that energy (according to the theory) will prevail.

History has proven that individual will does not always supersede negative forces. The Holocaust provides a powerful example of a large group of individuals who were persecuted based on their cultural and religious beliefs. In their case, their collective power was not greater than the damaging power and dominant forces surrounding them. In a very disturbing allusion to the Holocaust, Byrne claims that, indeed, the victims of this horrific crime did bring it upon themselves (although perhaps not consciously).

Often when people first hear this part of the Secret [that you attract all bad things to you] they recall events in history where masses of lives were lost, and they find it incomprehensible that so many people could have attracted themselves to the event. By the law of attraction, they had to be on the same frequency as the event. It doesn't necessarily mean they thought of that exact event, but the frequency of their thoughts matched the frequency of the event (28).

This is a delicate way of reducing victims of cultural extermination to agents in their own demise. As Rivero notes, “Reducing racism to individual psychology radically diminishes the issues involved” (492). In this case, the consequences of these irresponsible social messages can be dire. Placing victims in the role of agents means they were “asking for

it.” This claim seems to be reminiscent of a punishing Old Testament conception of God, only in this circumstance God is not the punisher; the individual is solely to blame. This illustrates how The Law of Attraction can lead to disturbing social consequences or indifference, for if the victims bring it on themselves, there is nothing anyone can do to help.

According to The Law of Attraction, poverty is also something one brings upon oneself. Byrne claims that if you do not have enough money it is because you are focusing on not having enough money. Although as anyone who has ever been financially unstable can attest to, it is difficult not to think about how you are going to pay your rent, or grocery bills, or buy diapers. However, according to Byrne, you must block those thoughts from your consciousness, and tell yourself that you are not poor. She claims that when that happens money will come to you. But the troubling question remains, what if it does not come to you? What if the individual in poverty is not able to sufficiently manifest the money they need with their thoughts. What does a single mother of three tell her children when there is no food on the table? All of these questions and similar ones in any number of scenarios leave The Law of Attraction open to critical scrutiny.

Although the author and her experts make a concerted effort to endear themselves to the “common man” and position themselves as equal to their readers, it is clear that many of them are out of touch with the dire circumstances that result from or lead to true poverty. Several of the experts claim they were poor at one time and manifested their own wealth, but many of them are educated and all but two are white. Taking social problems out of context by focusing on success stories that do not adhere to the norm

makes it appear as if each person in a similar situation, regardless of endless mitigating factors, has the same possibilities.

To further demonstrate how out of touch some of the individuals that are quoted in this book actually are with people experiencing real poverty, Bob Proctor's suggestion for getting out of debt is to "set up an automatic debt repayment program and then start to focus on prosperity" (102). Of course that might work if an individual has enough money in their account each month to pay all of their bills; but for the truly struggling, one of the reasons they cannot get out of debt is because they simply do not have the money to pay their bills on time.

The suggested cure-all remedies are not just limited to race, class, and gender, but also comment on sexuality, and how gay people will not be discriminated against if they feel good about themselves. This example is illustrated in a story by Bill Harris, a teacher and founder of the Centerpointe Research Institute, a for-profit enterprise that sells audio merchandise to increase positive mental states. He claims that a "student" of his named Robert who was taking an online class was unhappy because he felt he was the target of homophobic slurs at work, as he was walking down the street, and when he started to perform stand-up comedy. Harris's recommendation was not to focus on those things that he did not want, and only focus on what he wanted. Basically, Robert should start thinking positively about his circumstances. Harris claims that based on this advice, Robert never encountered another instance of homophobia.

Then he started taking this thing about focusing on what you want to heart, and he began really trying it. What happened within the next six to eight weeks was an absolute miracle. All the people in his office who had been harassing him either

transferred to another department, quit working at the company, or starting completely leaving him alone. He began to love his job. When he walked down the street, nobody harassed him anymore. They just weren't there. (18)

Using an example of someone who is gay and enduring harassment in their lives based on their sexuality surely suggests a rhetorical move against being open and honest about gay discrimination. The message in effect is, it is okay if you are gay, but do not bring your issues around us. If you do not want to be bothered, just think positively. It is interesting to note that Harris also used the word *miracle* to describe the change in Robert's life.

Although the attempt seems to be to interpellate faith, ironically it also seems to describe the likelihood that this scenario would ever play out in similar circumstances again. I believe that all of the above examples seem to exhibit a somewhat socially conservative bias that decentralizes society as agent, and places all responsibility on the individual. In this way, social action (outside of collective meditation) is rendered meaningless and social problems continue to manifest themselves because those at the bottom are just not trying hard enough or are inherently lesser than the dominant group.

Not only does *The Secret* marginalize non-dominant groups, but it also marginalizes and demonizes individuals with illness. In the section on health, the assertion is made that one's health is directly affected by one's thoughts. These claims are based on a fallacious leap, suggesting that because cells renew themselves, it is impossible not to renew oneself with healthy cells if one is thinking positively.

If our entire bodies are replaced within a few years, as science has proven, then how can it be that degeneration or illness remains in our bodies for years? It can only be held there by thought, by observation of the illness, and by the attention

given to the illness. (Byrne 130)

Clearly, if one's body is totally regenerated every few years, then no one would ever age. Although Byrne addresses this too, claiming that aging is only in the mind. If this assertion were indeed true, then one would only have to think about youthful cells and one would never die because their cells would never age. These absurd extensions are often suggested in this book, yet never fully addressed.

One of the worst recommendations Byrne makes is to suggest that not only should you ignore your own illness but other people's illnesses as well. She advises the reader to change the subject if a friend brings up being ill.

You are also inviting illness if you are listening to people talking about their illness. As you listen you are giving all of your thought and focus to illness, and when you give all of your thought to something, you are asking for it. And you are certainly not helping them. You are adding energy to their illness. If you really want to help that person, change the conversation to good things, if you can, or be on your way. (132)

This troubling example encourages the family and friends of an ill person, the person's primary support system when dealing with a serious illness, to ignore their thoughts and concerns and shut down their communication, one of the main things that an ill person may crave. With all of the silence that surrounds serious illness and death, and the need for communication during these difficult times, this suggestion sets back the whole movement for more openness surrounding these issues.

Throughout this section Byrne misleadingly quotes doctors who, when you flip to their profiles at the end of the book, you will find, are not medical doctors. A quote from

Dr. John Demartini, a former chiropractor suggests that disease is created in the body through being ungrateful. “Our physiology creates disease to give us feedback, to let us know we have an imbalanced perspective, or we’re not being loving and grateful” (127). Clearly, if this were indeed the case, every ungrateful person we know would be afflicted with disease, and individuals who were loving and grateful would never get disease. This type of thinking opens up a plethora of opportunities for the ill individual to blame themselves for bringing the disease to them.

Following this quote, Byrne interjects her opinion and takes his position even further:

Dr. Demartini is telling us that love and gratitude will dissolve all negativity in our lives, no matter what form it has taken. Love and gratitude can part seas, move mountains, and create miracles. And love and gratitude can dissolve any disease.

Again the Judeo-Christian reference about parting seas is an attempt to increase familiarity with and add clout to her argument. She uses examples of these self-healing “miracles” in a couple of stories where people have claimed to heal themselves.

Byrne follows this comment with a testimonial from an apparent lay person (she is not identified in the back) in a section entitled, “Laughter is the Best Medicine,” which turns out to be an incredible cliché in the context of the tale. The following story from Cathy Goodman illustrates the danger this type of thinking can provide for individuals with serious diseases:

I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I truly believed in my heart, with my strong faith, that I was already healed. Each day I would say, ‘Thank you for my healing.’ On and on and on I went, ‘Thank you for my healing.’ I believed in my

heart I was healed. I saw myself as if cancer was never in my body.

One of the things I did to heal myself was to watch very funny movies. That's all we would do was just laugh, laugh, and laugh. We couldn't afford to put any stress in my life, because we knew stress was one of the worst things you can do while you're trying to heal yourself.

From the time I was diagnosed to the time I was healed was approximately three months. And that's without any radiation or chemotherapy. (128-29)

Of course, not all ill individuals can afford to eliminate all stressors from their lives; individuals without a support system, those who must remain in charge of children, must continue to work, or have financial difficulties, etc. are unable to perform this "correct" way to self-heal. The use of cliché, (which I discuss in a later chapter as being equated with a reduction of credibility), of the old adage, "Laughter is the best medicine," further ridicules and diminishes the experience of people who actually suffer from cancer.

### Individualism

As several scholars have noted, the trend towards individualism in some of these New Age religions is nothing new. Dawson 1998 cites Campbell (1978) and Parsons (1989: 213) who note that the relativism and individualism of these new religious ideals work in synchrony with the values in contemporary society. Certainly, one of the reasons for the success and popularity of these movements is due to the fact that the issues raised resonate with contemporary concerns and desires.

The book suggests that non-action is the best policy, because putting energy towards something you do not want to happen will make it happen. In fact, the only thing

that is suggested that one must do to make the world a better place is to focus positive intent towards it. For those who are focused on individual prosperity, and are busy with their lives and families, this seems like an easy way to get off the hook. New Thought also offered proponents higher metaphysical gains, but just as Griswold (1933) notes, many were simply in it for the opportunity to become wealthy with little effort. “What most of them worshipped was not New Thought but success. New Thought, to them, was a new way to pay old debts” (311).

Byrne further reinforces this ideology by claiming that if there is a world issue that you are concerned about your only job is to focus on it with positive energy.

If it is a world situation, you are not powerless. You have *all* the power. Focus on everybody being in joy. Focus on abundance of food. Give your powerful thoughts to what is wanted. You have the ability to be so much to the world by emitting feelings of love and well-being despite what is happening around you. (144)

Not only is the underlying suggestion give attention only to an issue through your thoughts not through action, but once again, *The Secret* appeals to ignorance as a means of happiness by suggesting that people ignore the news. “When I discovered *The Secret* I made a decision that I would not watch the news or read newspapers anymore, because it did not make me feel good” (Byrne 145). The continuous call to not do anything unless it feels good can have negative consequences such as ignorance and closed-mindedness, and further encourages individualism and self-love. “When you feel good you uplift your life, and you uplift the world!” (146). Byrne implores the reader to just feel good about themselves and through virtue of loving themselves (not others) they will bring joy into



the world. The call to just feel good, along with the surrounding issues of ignoring racial and cultural inequalities, sexual differences, and individuals who are sick, encourages a full turn inward, a disconnect from important communicative practices, and ultimately a damaging social worldview that ultimately hinders social progress.

## Chapter Four: Ethnography

Although the majority of this project focuses on textual analysis, I felt that I should add a more human element and incorporate my experience of attending a group meeting of individuals who were interested in applying The Law of Attraction to their lives. Many of these group members were approaching the theory for the first time. This analysis demonstrates how a group did incorporate the teachings into a group setting.

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As I cross the bridge from Tampa to St. Petersburg, I see the ocean, expansive and glowing on both sides of the bridge in the late afternoon sun. Pelicans soar past like small torpedo planes, their expansive wings extended in flight. It is calming and I feel better about the experience to come. I am attending my first meeting devoted to The Law of Attraction. I pull up to a small blue house in a modest neighborhood. There is a ceramic angel in the yard. I glance at the clock and see that I am 15 minutes early. I do not want to go in if no one else is there (after all I am supposed to blend in, I think).

I wait for another few moments and soon an elderly woman emerges from her car and heads towards the door. I follow her in, and within moments I meet Lisa, the leader of the group. She is somewhat how I imagined her, mid-40s with blonde permed hair and big bangs, meticulously painted pink lips and equally bright pink toenails. Her French-manicured nails lead to fingers that are adorned with gold rings, and her tan wrists are stacked with a litany of gold bracelets. “Welcome,” she says, and I take a deep breath.

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## Method

I decided to study a group of people who are interested in the Law of Attraction because I thought that I would be able to see how people made sense of the principle in their own lives. I found the group online and it was organized and led by a woman entrepreneur named Lisa. She held the meetings out of her home, and during the course of my time attending the groups she was working on a book to add to the literature about the Law of Attraction, as well as trying to start a website and business that was supposed to help people apply the theory to their lives. However, as the study progressed it seemed clear that I also needed to focus on group dynamics. It was apparent very early on that the group was dysfunctional in nature. There were several layers of miscommunication that affected the goals of group members. I attended meetings each week over a period of six weeks, and also conducted interviews with the group leader and one member of the group, named Chloe, who regularly attended. In this analysis, I will also incorporate my own autoethnographic perspective to the study in order to provide an outside view from someone who was curious about the theory yet somewhat skeptical. I took extensive notes during group sessions as well as recorded them in further detail following the meetings. I taped the two interviews that I conducted with the Lisa and Chloe. Following this work, I transcribed the tapes and began to code the fieldnotes, where I identified three central themes that were prevalent in the group's communication: (1) negative corrections, (2) subversive self-promotion, and (3) message confusion.

## Group Effectiveness

During my observation I noticed that the group did not seem to achieve much in

terms of gaining self-awareness or aiding individual members in their lives. As a result, there was very little retention of group members. In addition, the number of people who attended the meetings diminished each week. Although spirituality was cited as a motivating factor for subscribing to the theory in individual interviews, the focus of the individuals in group meetings was on earning money in either career or business ventures.

Throughout my time in the group, as well as in an interview with another group member, I observed that one of the issues that kept the group from moving forward was the leader. Her goal—to write a book on the Law of Attraction—and the goals of the members—to make it work for them in their lives—were not in-sync, and therefore progress in both realms ultimately was stagnated.

The group was unable to communicate effectively with each other, and each communicative interaction seemed to be isolated rather than integrated. When the nature of the interactions were related, the individual's purpose seemed to be to divulge a personal narrative rather than to engage actively the material that was supposed to be learned through the course of the meetings. Essentially, the sessions consisted of a talking past each other, and because most group members wanted to talk in turn about their own narratives (including the leader), group focus was often lost. The resulting effect was group-induced isolation and aggravation.

This phenomenon was the result of the communicative interactions that frequently recurred during the course of the meetings. These interactions can be characterized as (1) *negative corrections*, when group members or the leader correct one another in relation to how they are disciplining their use of the theoretical language (in a decidedly negative

slant); (2) *subversive self-promotion*, which involves a group member tail-ending another person's personal narrative with their own equally comparable or superior feat; and (3) *message confusion*, which was manifested by the approach and language that the group leader used to frame her discussions.

In this analysis, I will discuss the aforementioned trends and how they affect group communication and retention. I will demonstrate how each dysfunctional communicative interaction can be aligned with a corresponding capitalist value that is embedded in the theory of the Law of Attraction. Drawing on literature that addresses women entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial identity (Gill and Ganesh 2007), I will argue that the theory tends to attract individuals who harbor capitalist values that encourage autonomy and discourage concern for the other, thus hindering their effectiveness in group settings. I will analyze group interaction through my involvements as well as situating it in terms of work that has been done on dysfunctional small group communication (Stohl and Schell 1991). I also investigate the underlying cultural values inherent to The Law of Attraction that are symptomatic of a socially conservative cultural trend by drawing on research that has been done from a feminist rhetorical perspective (Ellingson 2000). Finally, I will discuss guru-management style by looking at work that has been done on self-help management (Jackson 1999) and address message confusion by discussing issues of rhetorical power and the use of cliché (Jackson 1999; McGlone, Beck, and Pfiester 2006).

Although other scholars have acknowledged the consumer slant of self-help trends, as well as the socially conservative stance that is embedded in self-help rhetoric, my contribution will add to the literature because it is investigating a new contribution to

the self-help genre, *The Law of Attraction*, and offers a first-person account of the failure to integrate this particular “Law” in a group communication context.

### Negative Corrections and the Entrepreneurial Identity

The sky is overcast and cloudy. I’m sure my “postcard drive” (as I have come to call my trips across the bridge), will be bleak and uninspirational. To my surprise, as I cross the bridge, there is a strip of pink that crosses the horizon just under the layers of clouds. I can see the sun setting, and it pierces my eyes as I gaze at the glowing mass receding below the ocean. It casts a shimmering pink glow across the sea.

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As I approach the door, a young man in his late teens to early twenties (who I later find out is Lisa’s son, Seth) opens the door wordlessly. I thank him, but he remains silent. I enter the small living room and notice an array of white plastic chairs filling in the space between the couches and the television. Soft lighting emanates from lightly shaded lamps, and the tan suede couches are draped with leopard print blankets. Lisa is wearing a tight pink t-shirt and black cut off pants. She smiles and says, “How are you?” I choose a seat on one of the couches. As the members file in, I observe that contrary to what I had assumed, the majority of the group is not white, middle-class suburban women. Three Hispanic women who speak little English arrive, sporting matching bags and shoes and displaying perfect pedicures through peep-toe heels. Chloe, a white woman from South Africa, is jotting nervously on a notebook pad; and Dave, a chiropractor—and one of the few men in the group—flashes me a toothy grin. Lisa’s husband, Ron is also here. He is a large, burly man wearing a black t-shirt and faded jeans. He has a jovial

appearance and a smart goatee.

Lisa begins by asking us how we came to be interested in the Law of Attraction. It is clear that everyone has a different level of involvement and I wonder how that will affect the group. “So, who wants to talk about what they want to achieve?,” asks, scanning the circle. When no one replies, Ron volunteers, “Well, I want to lose weight.” “And how will you do that,” counters Lisa.

“Well, I will try to work out and I will try to eat right.”

Dave, a tall, lithe man in his late 30s, jumps in “No, no. You say, I am going to work out and I am going to eat right.” Lisa turns to Ron, “He’s right that is a better statement.”

Ron remains silent, and I feel slightly bad that he has been publicly reprimanded.

After a few more people have listed their achievements, she asks how our weeks have been. Molly, who is Ron’s boss, is a dour-looking woman who appears to be in her 40s. She is neatly dressed wearing khaki pants and a loose fitting polo. Her ashy blonde hair skims her shoulders, and her styled bangs frame her small face. She never smiles.

“Well, I was sick this week, so it wasn’t a good week,” she says. Dave again interrupts, “Well, you’re really not sick. Your body expresses your health, so you’re not sick. You have a healthy body and it’s working for you. The symptoms of sickness are signs your body is working and fighting off infection. So, you’re not sick. You’re actually getting better.”

I think this is a little presumptuous, after all it’s not his body, but I eagerly await Molly’s response. She shoots him a piercing look, “I’m in the process of getting better,” she retorts. I can tell she is somewhat annoyed and wonder if Lisa will respond; but she simply watches the interaction and changes the subject. After that interchange, the mood

remains tense for the remainder of the evening.

The interchanges I described in the above section are characteristic of *negative corrections*. These types of interactions were commonplace. Although not everyone in the group was actively involved in these, the policing of other group member's language to make sure they adhered to the appropriately disciplined phrases was a common phenomenon. The members either responded with hostility or shame when they were corrected in this way. These interactions thus bred competitiveness and animosity among the group members who were competitive, and fostered feelings of shame and disgrace among those who were not.

Part of the reason for this cycle of correction and counter-argument may speak to the type of personality a theory like The Law of Attraction can attract. The majority of people who sought out the group were concerned with either career or entrepreneurial goals. Many of them in fact, self-identified as entrepreneurs and fit into "entrepreneurial types," which "du Gay identifies as an ethic of personhood, which stresses autonomy, responsibility, and the freedom of choice," (Gill and Ganesh 2007, 270). This type fits very nicely into the mold of the types of personalities that were represented in the group: namely, individuals who were concerned with autonomy, self-fulfillment, and financial prosperity.

In Gill and Ganesh's (2007 280) study of women entrepreneurs they found that many of the subjects believed that they were intrinsically entrepreneurial by nature. "Thus the majority of participants did not frame starting, owning or maintaining a business as a purely rational, business-minded choice; rather, they saw it as a natural extension of themselves or a calling from an external source" (280).



Because their entrepreneurial identities were not perceived as constructed but inherent to their being, it stands that they may be invested in challenging any threat or competition to their feats in this realm. Heise (1999) proposes that humans are control systems who must make sure that their perceived perception of self is not violated. If this perception of self is challenged, Heise suggests that the individual must act in order to prevent cognitive dissonance: “actions of others seeking to affirm preferences different from ours may deflect us from the pursuit of our own preferred states and may instigate interpersonal competitions to dominate the situation” (6).

Tellingly, Lisa also fits this entrepreneurial schema and believes that she possesses a natural predilection for business. During our interview, she told me she quit high school in 11th grade because she got in trouble for forging the dean’s signature on hall passes. “Always the entrepreneur,” she commented with a sort of self-satisfied air. In addition to this, she has started a number of business ventures throughout her life, ranging from a private investigation firm to real estate, although all of them have subsequently failed. Many other members in the group not only have had multiple business ventures, but strive along with Lisa, to use the Law of Attraction to become independently wealthy.

These meetings then consisted largely of individuals who were their own entrepreneurs, entrenched in capitalistic values that stress hard-work, perseverance, and the idea that anything is possible. Trethewey (2001) argues that, “Such [entrepreneurial] identities are performed via discourses that emphasize consumerism, personal responsibility, and accomplishment for professional success,” (quoted in Gill and Ganesh 2007, 273). Therefore, such individuals perform identity through the consumption of products and measure success on a scale of material goods.

Ellingson cites Ebben (1995) and Simonds (1992) and notes, “Self-help texts also promote change through individuals, rather than challenging social, political or economic frameworks. Thus systemic and institutional inequities are left unexamined as the reader is encouraged to render him or herself the object of analysis and correction” (65). By only engaging in self-discipline, institutional flaws fall by the wayside, and it becomes easy to place the burden of responsibility on socially marginalized groups rather than the system in which they are embedded.

The discourse of personal responsibility lends itself to a belief in The Law of Attraction which also purports that individuals attract everything—whether good or bad—into their lives. This ideation of autonomy combined with the consumer elements that accompany many New Age movements very closely reflects conservative capitalist values. In effect, the idea of total self-sufficiency, not just in business but in spirituality, health and romance, embodies a microcosmic view of the capitalist system. “Scholars such as David J. Hess have argued that ‘New Age Capitalism’ is small-scale, relatively de-centralized entrepreneurial capitalism which can be distinguished from large-scale capitalism,” (Aldred 2002, 64).

In the paradigm of consumer culture, morality can easily be equated with following fashionable trends that promote “awareness” for whatever cause happens to be in vogue; whether it be eco-consciousness, breast cancer awareness, or AIDS in Africa, by purchasing green, pink, or red products respectively, one can be theoretically saved from the guilt that accompanies the consumer lifestyle. Similar to the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages that encouraged purchasing absolution of sins, consumer culture encourages “buying your way into heaven” through a plethora of trendy celebrity

endorsed causes. The literature on the Law of Attraction and the marketing materials that accompany it align with the mantra: salvation through consumption.

The Law of Attraction takes this consumer qua religion idea to the extreme. It is telling that the book was endorsed on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, perhaps the ultimate beacon of consumer-capitalist principles, headed by the woman who embodies the American dream. Winfrey herself came from extreme poverty and is now one of the richest women in the world. As Aldred notes, “If successful consumer capitalism depends on the consumer identifying with the product, then New Age takes it one step further where identity itself is purchased through consumption” (70). The followers of these movements are purchasing their entrepreneurial identities by subscribing to this theory, and in their purchase of the materials, they too hope to align themselves with great material success, like that enjoyed by Oprah.

#### Personal Narrative and Subversive Self-Promotion

Driving over the bridge to St. Petersburg, the sunset glimmers in hues of orange and blood red, the sun radiates onto the ocean, and I see men fishing thigh deep in water. Two men glide past in a long wooden fishing boat. A crane, also thigh deep in water, arches its long neck, mimicking the movements of the fishermen. I cross the bridge and see a woman in a wheelchair with a friend by her side. The aura is calm and peaceful. A feeling I find will soon be disrupted in the competitive atmosphere of the group.

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As I enter the living room, Deena, an elderly group member who attends occasionally, is already seated on the couch and Lisa has printed “Random Acts of

Kindness” in bold purple letters on the dry erase board. She is wearing a black fitted tee from her website, and has sprinkled glitter powder on her décolletage. I take a seat in a chair and Deena offers me the seat next to her on the couch. I move to sit next to her. As the others enter incrementally, we begin the meeting. Lisa begins by dictating the Margaret Mead quote, “Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world,” and then proceeds to talk about the founder of LiveAid. “That was one person’s idea,” she says.

This is a theme that often comes up: “One person’s idea.” Anything is possible with “one person’s idea.” I think these statements are ultimately devoid of meaning. They are repeated over and over with no real aim. Self-fulfillment? Autonomy? Her words seem to be little more than a conglomeration of patched together pithy statements, but I try to focus back on her words. She quickly moves from this social justice template to talking once again about money, business, and goals. Randy, Chloe’s boyfriend, volunteers to talk about how the Law of Attraction has worked for him. He talks eagerly about his conquests of selling five boats in one day—and says the theory was working for him because he needed the money for a trip. He claims his focus on selling allowed him to earn all of the money for the trip through positive thinking.

When it is my turn to talk about my goal and how I will use the Law of Attraction, I talk about trying to get into a good PhD program with funding. I say that my plan is to study for the GRE and try to get good letters of recommendation. Ron suggests that Lisa might know someone who could write me letters—obviously he does not know how the system works—but I comment that it would probably be better to get my professors who knew my work to speak for me. I wince internally, hoping that didn’t

come off as arrogant. After I finish, Lisa comments, “A degree just wasn’t for me, but my brother has two doctorates. It’s just whatever works for you.” I am taken aback by this statement. I am not trying to one-up her or appear conceited; and I wonder why she must tack that on to the end of my story, but I remain silent.

After that comment, she begins to talk about herself. “Believe it or not, I used to be afraid of public speaking. But I have to give good information if I want people to keep coming. I was a different person with a suit on—it’s my comfort zone. I wore a suit to work for twenty years. My friends used to make fun of me because I only owned one pair of blue jeans. But even when I tried to buy casual clothes, they still said they were ‘yuppie’ casual clothes.” I wonder why she is trying to position herself as a corporate earner who is so defined by her entrepreneurial identity that she is even unable to wear “normal” clothes. It seems to me that she must not only compete with those of us in the group, but also illustrate that she is somehow superior to her friends. The above episode is what I have termed *subversive self-promotion*. She often employs this maneuver with group members, and it results in the encouragement of talking past and not talking with each other. Although I was not trying to brag that I was working towards getting into a PhD program, she perceived my success as threatening and therefore had to minimize it by claiming that in effect, she too could earn a PhD, it just was not for her. In this way, she not only diminishes me, but also the aspiration of wanting to achieve my goal.

Immediately following this, she begins to talk about herself and must re-assert her dominance and success by talking about how she “worked in a suit” for 20 years and even when she tried to dress casually still wore “yuppie clothes.” These comments further assert her natural inclination for business, profit, and leadership, while simultaneously

undermining my aspiration. Although this was the first and I believe only time she used this tactic on me, I was not surprised, nor particularly offended because I had seen the maneuver employed so many other times on different group members.

Her initial use of what I have termed subversive self-promotion was a tactic that I think she was using to try to prove her validity as group leader. However, the tactic ultimately positioned her as dominating, and thus she was unable to perform her role as mediator and leader. Once initiated, this pattern brought out the dominance and competitive spirit of the other entrepreneur types in the group, and soon the actual function of the group—which was to learn about how to apply the Law of Attraction to our lives—was lost.

Lisa's subversive self-promotion comments were usually repetitive and consistent. She frequently inserted statements that were irrelevant to the conversation or context but served to bolster her self-image. Common phrases included things such as, "I read a book a day," to prove that she is educated (though she did not graduate from college). Or, "I used to make more than the number 40 guy on the *Forbes* list," presumably to show that she has power and perhaps she also equates this with proof of class. Although who this "number 40 guy was," or how much either of them was earning was never disclosed.

Although she was not the only member who participated in subversive self-promotion, she did enact it most frequently to solidify her role as leader (though this tactic ultimately alienated other group members). In Stohl and Schell's (1991) study on small-group dysfunction they identified a prototype of a member who would be likely to disrupt group communication. In this disruptive communicative style, "issues are

redefined against the backdrop of the member,” (92) a method that was constantly employed in subversive interactions. The researchers also noted that members of the group, “Become so worn out dealing with issues related to this one member that they often fail to deal with task issues and priorities become confused” (92). The lack of focus and accomplishment in the group then was perpetuated by these confounding statements. Because there was more than one of these agents in the group, it compounded group isolation and frustration even more and led to the eventual dissipation of group membership.

#### Group Leadership and Message Confusion

During the time that we were not talking about personal experiences and actually discussing the theory, Lisa attempted to recycle direct quotes from the literature on the topic. Therefore, if you had read the literature or watched the movies on the Law of Attraction, it was clear that she was reiterating the catchy phrases she encountered in the material. Her overuse of this maneuver eventually caused group members to lose faith that they were learning something new each week. She often made references to “hit the reset button” when you’re having a bad day; “be your own cheerleader”; or would repeat quotes that she favored, “never doubt that a group of committed people can change the world.” Yet, she did not always cite where these phrases came from, so it seemed as if she were passing them off as her own, thus creating distrust among group members, or simply creating a lack of tolerance for listening to the same repetitive messages week after week. Her overuse of these phrases as well as her use of cliché rendered her ineffective as a leader. According to McGlone, Beck and Pfiester (264) “Cliché density

correlates negatively with people's reported interest in a text or speech, as well as their inferences about the author's interest in the subject matter (Gibbs 2002; Jones, Kanouse, & Kelley 1987; Lindauer 1968). Due to her business track record, which she made clear to the group, it seemed difficult at times to not question her motivation for holding these meetings. Her use of cliché not only created alienation but further raised suspicions about her knowledge and investment in the topic.

In "The Goose That Laid the Golden Egg?: A Rhetorical Critique of Stephen Covey and the Effectiveness Movement," Bradley (1999) discusses the shift in management style to a guru-theory. This type of management style favored by self-help gurus, is centered upon a particular leadership method that Lisa was hoping to emanate to make her own business successful. She frequently referenced these self-help gurus and also frequently spoke of the importance of self-promotion. Central to the success of guru-management is the perception of the leader. They must be dynamic, appear to possess a wealth of knowledge, and I would argue must come up with original material. "Clark and Salaman (1998) suggest one facet to being a successful guru is not their expert knowledge, but 'their ability to convey they are knowledgeable' or their rhetorical skills," (Bradley 356). Lisa was attempting to employ rhetoric and convey knowledge through personal narrative and cliché however, she was not successful at making group members feel at ease or promoting herself in a non-confrontational way.

Although the Law of Attraction and other New Age movements appear to buck the title of organized religion, and tend to attract individuals who do not want to align themselves with traditional conceptions of spirituality; the irony is that instead of being disciplined by the laws of the church, the followers of this theory engage in self-



discipline. Thus, they do not escape regimentation at all they merely lose the compulsion to heed the tenet of “love thy neighbor,” (and the requisite guilt that accompanies what that involves) yet conveniently are still implored to “love themselves” in order to manifest what they want in their lives. They essentially are asked to put themselves first, and participate in community later. This ideal appeals to the cultural trend of consumerism that embraces hard work yet also encourages hedonism.

Not only does the theory conveniently reinforce the existing economic framework; it also disseminates a socially conservative stance which was reflected in Lisa’s opinions of socially marginalized groups. One of the most unbelievable facets of the theory is that you are supposed to believe that individuals are constantly manifesting things in their life (including negative events such as illness and death). When I ask her if people could manifest their own death or tragedies (outside of suicide), she says she believes they can. Shockingly, she uses an example of how rape and murder victims can bring these events upon themselves:

My brother and I put on a rape prevention self-defense seminar years ago...and one of things that- and this is in my book as well, one of the things that really shocked me is that these women all had a victim mindset... bad guys look for that. That’s what they look for. Is that ever going to happen to me? No, I’ll kick their butt. And they know that because I don’t have a victim mindset. I don’t look like I’m afraid, I don’t act like I’m afraid. Um, but yeah, he’d have to be really stupid to pick somebody that doesn’t have a victim mindset, and people that do have victim mindsets are absolutely manifesting those type of things in their life cause they’re so afraid.

When I pressed her a little more and asked her if she then believed that nothing happened by chance, she said that it did not. Her caveat was that even if the individual was not manifesting their own harm, because the idea was out there and part of the collective unconscious, the unconscious was then manifesting it. Although she offers this loophole, leaving open the possibility that a rape victim can be blamed for an attack contains dangerous social messages that reinforce the marginalization of victims.

Her views on the homeless are similarly disturbing. She tells me that the homeless have no excuse do be displaced and that she does not feel sorry for them:

The people in this country that are homeless have absolutely no reason to be. There are plenty of jobs in this country despite what anyone says. There are plenty of shelters and there's no reason for them to be on the street. It's their choice and that's what it comes down to. Everything is an individual's choice, moment to moment.

This approach clearly oversimplifies the problem, and coincides with the language of the theory, which neatly packages social problems and writes them off as elements of choice. This stance echoes the conservative position that circumstance does not affect reality, and that if one only tries hard enough they are sure to succeed.

Not only are these ideas socially conservative, but immediately following this statement she adds a suggestion of understanding this idea through a consumerist lens. She asks me if I have seen the *Pursuit of Happyness* (which I have not) but I know that it is about a man (played by Will Smith) who is homeless and is able to make his way in the business world by sheer determination and become a millionaire. It is based on a true story, and embodies a Hollywood version of a commodified narrative of perseverance

and personal strength (the American dream) that undermines the thousands of others who have no voice or cannot overcome their circumstances. This view is bought and sold as a commodity that reflects capitalist values and subversively de-values social responsibility. Therefore, her opinion on homelessness is not only informed by socially conservative values inherent in the theory, but by the consumer imperative to purchase the flashy DVD version of how homelessness should be enacted.

### Group Reflections

Crossing the bridge is beautiful and reflective today. There are pelicans and seagulls flying beside me as if guiding me to my destination. The sun glints off the tips of the waves like tiny flakes of gold and a ship in the distance sails with me. I see the smooth curve of a fin, as soon as I glimpse it; it slides seamlessly into the water. The essence of life teeming around me made me feel positive about the meeting and better prepared for the inevitable negativity that awaited me on the other side of the bridge. I inhale deeply and am at peace.

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I am supposed to interview Chloe tonight after the meeting. I became interested in her during the first session because she asked hard questions and really seemed to want to know how to use the Law of Attraction to improve her life. Chloe is fair-skinned with a healthy flush, and a plump pretty face. She moved here from South Africa seven years ago and is working with computers at a graphic design company. I am looking forward to the interview, but I am also a bit nervous. When I first e-mailed her to see if she was willing to do the interview, she sent me a couple of e-mails back inquiring about my

purpose and what exactly I was studying. I am hoping she will not be holding back information.

During the introductions, a thin, tan woman in her early 40s with light blonde hair wearing board shorts comes in. Chloe introduces her, “This is my friend, Cheryl.” I am startled. Is she planning on bringing this woman to the interview? I would have been fine with it; I just wasn’t prepared for a third party. As we are leaving, Chloe asks me if she can come along, “Of course, I say.” The presence of this new woman makes me even more apprehensive about the interview. Does she really not trust me that much? I think. But then check myself, she doesn’t really know me and I hope it will not hinder the interview.

We arrive at the restaurant that she has designated as the meeting place. It is an upscale pub where her boyfriend, Randy works at night. I begin by asking her about her life story and learn that she received an accounting degree in South Africa and was married young, at 24, and helped her now ex-husband to build a courier business. She says she never put her needs first and was always working for other people. She seems to want to focus on her goals now. I feel it is refreshing to have this conversation with someone who seems more interested in finding herself than making money. As the conversation progresses Randy sits down with us for a moment and starts talking about his perception of the group:

The whole meeting of the group and talking about it... I was like just freaking do it. I mean I do it. I know I can do it and from being around Chloe I've learned to do it but not talk about it. So, I'm like why does anybody need to go to a freaking meeting? Either you want to do it or you don't want to do it. Do you really need

to go to a group about it? That was my initial...and I wrote Lisa a letter about it and we kind of got in a little argument about it (laughing) a tiny one.

We all laugh, knowing Lisa indeed would argue this point. His comments verify my perception that his type, the entrepreneurial type, indeed does not find much value in group meetings. His stance, "Either you want to do it or you don't want to do it," perfectly reflect the black and white world that embodies the theory: either you are manifesting something or you're not.

After he leaves, his comments help me segue into asking Chloe her opinion on the group. Apparently, she had tried one other group that was not the right fit because the people were "odd." She says she feels that the people in Lisa's group are more like her, more "normal." "So, has Lisa's group helped you with the theory?" I ask. She hesitates and I hold my breath. I am wondering if she will say something about the disarray of the group:

I get a little bit frustrated though in the group. I would like to see us doing more actual work than chatting. In fact, last week it really bothered me. I do want to talk to her about it but I'm a little apprehensive, I don't want to offend her, y'know? But I really think that we could do a lot more talking about where it's working in your life, and where hasn't it worked, and when hasn't it worked. She's also not really talking about it, and she can't help get the group back on track.

She quickly adds that she thinks Lisa is amazing and she is planning on sharing her concerns with her when she feels more comfortable. She continues: And I mean people aren't there that used to be there, y'know? And I think it's a reflection of how our group

is led. I nod in agreement and keep listening closely:

Yeah, we get off topic very easily and we tell stories. And there's a difference between telling a story and how something works in your life. My mind keeps saying your being so critical! (laughs) and I really want us to get something out of it. No one really does their allowing statements, so they're not going to see it impact their lives. And if it's not impacting their lives, they're likely to give up.

I agree: Yeah, I mean it seems like there's times when things could be more clarified. I mean I don't want to say anything cause I don't want to.. She finishes my thought, "Rock the boat?" "Yeah," we both laugh. She continues:

And I'm sure everybody else feels that way. When Dave [a group member who tends to dominate conversations] started telling the story last week, I thought I can't do this anymore. I love the group, I like everything but it's just the storytelling, and that's not why I'm there, y'know?

I wholeheartedly agree, and am glad she is so willing to talk about this. I comment:

Right. And I think that has a lot to do with like you said, being able to manage it in a way that's not rude. And that's a hard thing to do too, because you don't want to interrupt anybody's story, but just be able to say lets move it along, in a way that's nice.

Chloe closes the topic, and says, "So I will share it with Lisa." I wonder if she will.

Maybe it would help, although given the nature of the other group members I'm not sure how much it would matter. I leave the restaurant feeling invigorated.

My conversation with Chloe led to an unstructured spontaneous discussion about the group that was illuminating. I saw how someone who was dedicated to the idea of the

theory and the group felt negatively about the leadership and the personal narrative themes. Even though she clearly felt uncomfortable to a certain extent that she was “bad-mouthing” Lisa, it was clear that she did not feel like she was up to par as a group leader. Randy’s minimal contribution also confirmed to me that the type of people that the Law of Attraction draws-namely entrepreneurs, do not feel the need to participate in a group, or do not have the necessary communication skills that would facilitate successful group interaction.

### Conclusion

In my analysis, I found not only that the group was unable to function due to the individuals who were drawn to it, but that the communicative patterns that emerged hindered group progress and efficiency. The negative corrections that were characteristic of the group undoubtedly made the non-competitive group members uncomfortable causing them to leave, and the competitive members felt dominated and as if they were losing face to Lisa, which in turn made them resent her role as leader. Her use of subversive self-promotion and cliché simultaneously harbored group aggression, as well as disinterest in the lessons she was trying to teach.

This theory has emerged at a time in history that values consumerism and conservative capitalistic values. This combination of ideals is unsettling because it neglects marginalized groups and perpetuates a “blame the victim” mentality for social ills. In essence, it combines the most damaging socially conservative values with the modern trend of materialism and ends up isolating individuals from community by encouraging autonomous self-fulfillment and disengagement. Although the theory

purports that helping others and loving others is good, it is difficult to reconcile this statement of community with what the true goal of many who follow this theory is--the accumulation of material goods. Varying subjectivities and alternative social positions are thus ignored, and the mantra becomes not just about self-realization but about each person for themselves.

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As I make my final drive over the bridge that leads to St. Petersburg, I breathe a sigh of relief. Although occupied with my own thoughts, I try to focus on the beauty of the gray blue choppy waves, like a million shark fins bobbing up and down, and the opening in the sky, where rays of sunlight hit the ocean as if God had blessed that spot. The ritual of the drive always makes me feel calm. The water and the sunset eases my mind before entering the stressful communicative environment of the group. Although I am distracted by personal matters, and for the first time actually consider not going, I ultimately decide it would probably be best to go. Lisa sent out an e-mail the night before saying there were going to be plenty of people there so we should RSVP. I felt guilty and like I would miss important work if I didn't show up.

When I arrive, I realize that only one other person, John, a retired business owner from New York (who came for the first time the week before) is there. It remains that way the rest of the evening, and the uncomfortable absence of others, in addition to Lisa's e-mail claiming there would be several people, made me feel a little sad for her. Every week attendees have steadily declined, but she cheerily declares that "this is the Law of Attraction, this is how it is supposed to be tonight, and that's O.K." I wonder if she really believes that or if she does get upset at the apparent diminution of her project. I



think back of what she has told me of her life. It was a hard life, she was a single mother who had her first child at 21, cervical cancer at 23, three marriages, and a multitude of odd jobs, yet she is unceasingly confident, apparently happy, and seemingly unable to be discouraged. I wonder to myself if maybe therein lies a small bit of value in this theory—the aptitude to be unflinchingly positive in the face of despair.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Although the Law of Attraction tries to position itself as non-dominant, non-secular, and ultimately, the “secret” of life, it contains disturbing implications for marginalized groups and promotes a conservative, individualistic, capitalist ideology that offers up a zero sum proposition of perpetual validation because it blames the individual’s mental power if the theory is not working for them. When the choice of issues addressed are closely analyzed, and the beliefs presented are taken to their logical extension, it is clear that insurmountable contradictions and problematic assumptions about race, class, gender, and other marginalized groups arise.

This movement is important to study because it is a cultural phenomenon that was able to gain success on a highly viewed mainstream talk show, enjoyed wild success on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and overall seems to be symptomatic of a general cultural trend towards positive psychology and self-actualization. It appears to supporters to embody New Age progressive ideals, yet the root of the theory actually supports individualistic nationalism and conservative social ideals. This is problematic because individuals who might perceive of themselves as liberal (because they are open-minded about spirituality) are being manipulated by conservative ideology.

Further research needs to be conducted to analyze the phenomenon more fully. The other self- help literature that discusses The Law of Attraction should be fully investigated and the instructional films that use rhetorical visual devices should be deconstructed as a separate communicative mediation of the messages. It would also be valuable to learn more about the cultural and racial demographics of The Secret’s

adherents and how they make sense of the theory from a marginalized position.

The tensions that exist between the contradictions that are offered to the reader characterize the book and mark it as apparently postmodern yet markedly modernist by adhering to master narratives that constitute capitalism, spirituality, and individualism. These principles combined make the theory unsustainable as a moral theory or religious code. The use of science as a rhetorical strategy to validate its beliefs opens up not only logical fallacies, but an appeal to ignorance and a conflation of science with faith. As Parsons (223) notes, conformity and deviation are inextricably linked, so the more that a group conforms to a host society, the more it also deviates from it. (Dawson 146). In the same way, although *The Secret* wants to appear revolutionary it is in fact mainstream because it still adheres to familiar ideas of conformity in terms of religious figures and social positions, not to mention capitalist and staunchly American ideals.

As noted earlier, the transcendental movements that paved the way for movements like the Law of Attraction also enjoyed faddish enthusiasm in the 1830s-1850s. They too had a plethora of marketing materials to pander to the masses, and they too capitalized off of scientific rhetoric to sell the theory. However, this New Age spirituality trend that was spawned from the transcendental movement did subside after a while, perhaps in part due to the scams that some of the practitioners were running (which indeed all movements such as this are susceptible to) or perhaps because it was not assimilated into the mainstream. Yet it is clear by the resurgence of this movement that some of the narratives and ideas that marked that era have survived to the present day.

I believe that the ethnography of the group added an important element that

should not be disregarded but also cannot stand in for a long-term multi-group study that incorporates more than just this case. Although the group was clearly dysfunctional, whether this was an outsource of the type of people the theory attracts or the dynamics of the leadership is not fully clear. A separate analysis would be needed to disengage them from each other. It is also important to note that not all of the group members adhered to the principles of The Law of Attraction fully. Many were looking to improve specific area of their lives and were reading the text selectively. This analysis is not meant to critique individuals who subscribe to the theory selectively or wholeheartedly, rather it is analysis of the rhetoric that is used to circumscribe contradictions and make it appealing to a mainstream audience.

The Secret has been a modern cultural phenomenon that has made millions of dollars off of marketing and advertising materials. Although, like New Thought before it, the theory has received criticism and may fade into the background after a few years, inevitably the ideology of mind as omnipotent and wealth as signifying the ultimate symbol of transcendence—is sure to emerge again in the future, re-named, re-vamped and re-sold in a different package. When it does resurface it will be important to note the social trends that accompany its emergence and critically interrogate its purpose in the cultural milieu.

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