



Self Help: \$10 Billion for What?

By Emily Wilson, AlterNet

Posted on February 26, 2008, Printed on February 26, 2008

<http://www.alternet.org/story/77756/>

When performer, rock musician and writer Beth Lisick woke up Jan. 1, 2006, and the only New Year's resolution she could think of was learning to do the splits, she decided to aim a little higher.

Instead, she spent the year availing herself of all the advice out there to better her character, physical fitness, parenting and sex life, along with her financial, organizational and time management skills. Lisick read *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, by Jack Canfield, and *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Stephen Covey; she went to seminars with John Gray of *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* fame and financial superstar Suze Orman; she consulted with Oprah Winfrey's organizational advisor; learned about giving her child time-outs from a book called *1-2-3 Magic*; gave Deepak Chopra (who she had previously considered 'spirituality lite') a chance, and went on a "Cruise to Lose" with fitness guru Richard Simmons.

During the year, Lisick tried to put aside her cynicism and refused to dismiss Covey for his Mormonism or Canfield for his love of golf and fast cars. Now she can always find her keys and ask for things in a direct way, and has embraced the concept of abundance instead of scarcity and negotiated a lower interest rate on her credit card.

Lisick chronicles her yearlong journey through the self-help world in her new book *Helping Me Help Myself: One Skeptic, Ten Self-Help Gurus, and a Year on the Brink of the Comfort Zone*. She recently shared that experience with AlterNet.

Emily Wilson: Do you think your life is better now after a year of helping yourself?

Beth Lisick: I actually do. Like I said in the book, I thought it would be funny, in a way, if nothing changed. I don't feel like I am a totally different person than I was before I started the book, but I think that if you immerse yourself in anything for a year, it's going to change you, and it definitely did change me for the better. I feel like I am more organized, and I do have a better grasp of time management and organization that I really didn't before. I started thinking about goals, and I had never had done that before in my life. And it was weird because it wasn't like I was a person who could never get anything done. I do a lot of stuff, but I just think I did so much stuff it was almost like I was spreading myself too thin. That was probably the big one. I feel like I'm more organized and more focused.

You talk about reviewing the day before you go to sleep at night, which is something Jack Canfield and Deepak Chopra do. What are some other concrete things you do now?

I'm a lot better at looking around my house and if I see something and I'm cleaning up, just saying, 'Where does that thing go?' Before, a lot of things in our house, we just didn't have a place for them, and we were always losing certain things like the digital camera, or my keys. Now when I'm cleaning up, I can say, 'Where does that thing go?' or if that thing doesn't have a home, then I have to sit there and think, 'OK, where can be a place for this thing that we just move from desk to table to couch?' So that's something I do differently. Those were my favorite things. Like the *I-2-3 Magic* thing with Gus -- the things where I could see immediate benefits. I could see immediate results with that.

You say early on in *Helping Me Help Myself* that you are a Godphobe. A lot of these books are very focused on God or a higher power. How did you deal with that?

I think the first thing I did was I realized the Godphobe part of me was really a holdover from adolescence. It was just when people would talk about their higher power and I would be like, "Can't you figure out another way to talk about it without saying that," and then as I was reading these books, and it was just everywhere; it was impossible to escape. Then when I started thinking of those synchronicities and things I thought were cool, I was like, "Well, I've known for a very long time people substitute the word God for something bigger than me, something I can't control, something that is mysterious and out there." And then I mention in the book a big thing for me is my friends who were recovering drug addicts or alcoholics, who, for so long, were unable to do the 12 steps because they could not accept the higher power part, and it just held them back for so long, and once they decided just to surrender that and say, "OK, I don't even know what that means, I don't understand, but I can think of it as this or that," then they were able to get sober and healthy, so I think about it in that way too.

You say you were surprised by how much you liked *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and that you have no interest in slamming Stephen Covey because he's Mormon.

Yeah, I'm over that. I mean, I don't think of myself as a journalist. I think my approach was to be like anybody else who reads the books and goes to the seminars and tries to figure out what it all means and how it all can work for them.

What am I going to do, go into some in-depth analysis of Mormonism? I felt like I don't want to be another person who has those two paragraphs that talk about all the ridiculous things about Mormonism. I feel like I've read those two paragraphs everywhere, you know, about the special underwear. It just seemed boring to me. I mean, when I read longer articles about Mormonism, I find it totally fascinating, but I didn't think anybody needed me to sum up the weird things about

Mormonism. That's kind of how I decided to start at the place where we all know these self-help people are cheesy. I mean, sometimes I couldn't help myself and had to point out things that were so weird or funny, but I think the idea of writing some sort of expose of how it's all a scam is just like, "Really? In 2008? I don't think so." There are people out there who do that and are researchers or want to expose everybody for how much they make per talk and what their credentials are, but I don't think that belongs in this book.

You had a hard time with John Gray and his whole Mars/Venus thing. Why was that?

I put my prejudices right out there because I was kind of a tomboy growing up, and maybe it was just the time and place, but there was never any moment in my entire life that I felt like there was anything I couldn't do because I was a girl. So, to me, that whole idea of gender stuff is so fluid, and the blatant stereotyping drives me nuts. I just can't get behind it -- that men's chemistry is one way and women's chemistry is another. I think all of our chemistry is all over the map and, yeah, there are two sides of it that he exploits for his purposes, but I think people really like to buy into it, and they think, "Oh, I do love my chocolate. and I do love to go shopping, and I do hate it when my man goes into his man cave." It's like we want to feel like individuals, but then there's the sense of belonging to something. It just made no sense with my relationship with my husband, and it was just confusing to me. ... It was almost not fair to choose him because I had such a huge prejudice, but I felt like I was cutting him slack the whole time.

Did you feel like a lot of these self-help movements are based on the personality of the leaders?

Yeah, the personality aspect is huge with the gurus because the ideas are very old and have been around forever, and so what it is is the personality of the guru and how they are putting their message across. You can say something like, 'Do unto others,' and we've all heard it a million times, but if somebody comes along and can say it in this way that is a little bit different and has a little bit of a different twist on it, all of a sudden it seems new and exciting again. Like, I was at a bookstore recently for one of my readings, and there's a new Montel Williams self-help book, and I picked it up and I swear to God, the first thing I read is, "Drink six six- to eight-ounce glasses of water every day." So here's this piece of advice that's in every issue of every women's magazine that ever comes out every single month. So it's all about the personality. I'm not saying that's a bad thing, because some people will listen to what Montel has to say because they're a fan of his show. But that's why it's perpetuated in so many different ways with so many faces and hairdos and teeth; selling this thing is all about personality in the commercial sense. It's not about the advice, because the advice has been around forever.

You're fairly indifferent to money. You do talk about wanting a dishwasher, and visualizing getting one, but how was it for you to read about people who talk about having hundreds of thousands of dollars or aspiring to have a mansion?

Jack Canfield had a lot in his book about visualizing yourself behind the wheel of a red convertible. Even go to a dealer and sit in it, visualize yourself on those golf courses around the world or having vacation homes. That was stuff like with the Mormonism or whatever that I had to let it go. Because I think once you're at the level those people are at -- you know, in Jack Canfield's defense, he's got those things, and I'm sure he can't imagine his life without them, so he's saying to these people, 'All right, you can come along.' But, for me, it's always been such an unattractive quality in a person when they wanted a lot of material things or a lot of money. So that was a hard one for me, and I think a lot has to do with my background of being raised without any want for money. Growing up, we had everything we needed. There were things we didn't get, but we lived a very solidly middle-class life. I think part of it too is being a writer; I just thought, I'm never going to have money. So yeah, money is a huge issue for me, and I have to really edit myself to not obsess over it.

It seemed like a hard year because you and your husband were really struggling with money and then there was this relentless self-examination. What was the hardest thing about the year?

I think the hardest thing when I first started reading these books was facing up to these faults and shortcomings that I had previously overlooked. Now that I'm aware of what they are, it's hard to imagine I wasn't paying attention. And I was perfectly happy not paying attention. I'm an optimistic person -- I'm a happy person -- and so there wasn't a huge struggle I was trying to get over. The hardest part reading some of these books was realizing some things. It wasn't like, "Oh I don't have the convertible and the mansion," it was, "Oh, I don't manage my money well and, wow, I don't always do what I say I'm going to do." So it was pointing out all these things in my personality that were kind of depressing.

What was the funnest thing about it?

I think the fun part for me was knowing your life can be an experiment and that you can just decide to do something and do it. I think, generally, in our lives, you want to walk around with that feeling that it's your life and you can do whatever you want, but it was cool to put it to the test. So even in the darkest hours I was like, all right, I'm doing this thing.

I also really enjoyed the people that I met. Because, in the Bay Area, when do you ever meet a person who's never had a cappuccino in their life? And you're sitting next to them the moment they decide to have their first cappuccino. That's so great. I mean, when I was at the FranklinCovey seminar and I was talking to the woman who is an event planner for industrial laundries, I was like, "God, what kind of events do you plan?" You're given the opportunity to talk to people from all over the place, and I really liked that. I think I just have fully admitted I love people so much, and I love being around them.

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Francisco.

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