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IMPROVING OURSELVES TO DEATH

What the self-help gurus and their critics reveal about our times.

By Alexandra Schwartz

Happy New Year, you! Now that the champagne has gone flat and the Christmas tree is off to be mulched, it's time to turn your thoughts to the months ahead. 2017 was a pustule of a year, politically and personally; the general anxiety around the degradation of American democracy made it hard to get much done. That's O.K., though, because you've made new resolutions for 2018, and the first one is not to make resolutions. Instead, you're going to "set goals," in the terminology of the productivity guru Tim Ferriss—preferably ones that are measurable and have timelines, so you can keep track of your success. Apps like Lifetick or Joe's Goals will help by keeping you organized and allowing you to share your progress on social media; a little gloating does wonders for self-motivation (unless, of course, one of your goals is to spend less time on social media). Once your goals are in place, it might be smart to design a methodology that will encourage you to accomplish them. Charles Duhigg, the author of "The Power of Habit," recommends a three-step self-conditioning process. You want to get to the gym more? Pick a cue (sneakers by the door); choose a reward that will motivate you to act on it (a piece of chocolate); execute. Bravo! You are now Pavlov *and* his dog.

But soon enough February will come, mid-winter doldrums will set in, and you'll start to slide. Not to worry. Jane McGonigal's "SuperBetter" tells you how to gamify your way back from the edge with the help of video-game-inspired techniques like finding "allies" and collecting motivational "power-ups"; and Angela Duckworth's "Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance" reminds you that persistence makes all the difference when the going gets rough. Duckworth doesn't think you need talent in order to become, as another of Duhigg's books puts it, "Smarter Better Faster," and neither do any of these other experts. According to their systems, anyone can learn to

be more efficient, more focussed, more effective in the pursuit of happiness and, that most hallowed of modern traits, productivity. And if you can't, well, that's on you.

Self-help advice tends to reflect the beliefs and priorities of the era that spawns it. A decade ago, the reigning champion of the genre was "The Secret," published in 2006 by an Australian, Rhonda Byrne. Like Norman Vincent Peale before her, Byrne combined a literal interpretation of select verses from the Christian Bible—notably Matthew 21:22, "Whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, ye shall receive"—with the acquisitive gospel of positive thinking. If you sent a wish out into the universe with enough faith, she told her readers, it could come to pass. Want to find a husband? Clean out a closet for the man of your dreams and imagine him hanging up his ties. Want to get rid of your glasses? Picture yourself acing your next vision exam and kiss those progressive lenses goodbye. In retrospect, "The Secret," which sold more than twenty million copies worldwide, seems a testament to the predatory optimism that characterized the years leading up to the financial crisis. People dreamed big, and, in a day of easy money, found that their dreams could come true. Then the global economy crashed, and we were shaken violently awake—at least for a time.

In our current era of non-stop technological innovation, fuzzy wishful thinking has yielded to the hard doctrine of personal optimization. Self-help gurus need not be charlatans peddling snake oil. Many are psychologists with impressive academic pedigrees and a commitment to scientific methodologies, or tech entrepreneurs with enviable records of success in life and business. What they're selling is metrics. It's no longer enough to imagine our way to a better state of body or mind. We must now chart our progress, count our steps, log our sleep rhythms, tweak our diets, record our negative thoughts—then analyze the data, recalibrate, and repeat.

Carl Cederström and André Spicer, business-school professors in a field called "organization studies," set out to do all that and more in their recent book, "Desperately Seeking Self-Improvement: A Year Inside the Optimization Movement" (OR Books), a comically committed exploration of current life-hacking wisdom in areas ranging from athletic and intellectual prowess to spirituality, creativity, wealth, and pleasure. Cederström, an enthusiastic Swede, and Spicer, a melancholy New Zealander, want to understand the lengths to which people will go to transform themselves into superior beings, and to examine the methods that they use. In their

previous book, "The Wellness Syndrome," the authors followed health nuts who were determined to meditate and exercise their way to enlightenment. This time, in the spirit of George Plimpton's brand of participatory journalism, they've become their own test cases, embarking on a yearlong program in which they target a new area of the self to improve each month. They bulk up at Cross Fit, go on the Master Cleanse liquid diet, try mindfulness and yoga, consult therapists and career coaches, sample prostate vibrators, attempt standup comedy, and attend a masculinity-boosting workshop that involves screaming and weeping naked in the woods. Even their book's format—entries of the diary that each keeps to record and reflect on his endeavors—is relevant to their mission, considering that daily journaling is recommended in Tim Ferriss's "Tools of Titans: The Tactics, Routines, and Habits of Billionaires, Icons, and World-Class Performers."

Many of the tasks that Cederström and Spicer assign themselves have a double-dare quality whose cost-benefit value seems questionable, like memorizing the first thousand digits of pi during Brain Month in order to improve mental acuity. But others inspire the same niggling whisper of self-doubt as Instagram posts of green juice: *Should I be doing that, too*? I confess to feeling a pang of jealousy when Cederström produces a complete book manuscript in a euphoric amphetamine rush induced by study drugs during Productivity Month—and a surge of Schadenfreude when it's rejected by his baffled publisher.

"In a consumerist society, we are not meant to buy one pair of jeans and then be satisfied," Cederström and Spicer write, and the same, they think, is true of self-improvement. We are being sold on the need to upgrade all parts of ourselves, all at once, including parts that we did not previously know needed upgrading. (This may explain Yoni eggs, stone vaginal inserts that purport to strengthen women's pelvic-floor muscles and take away "negative energy." Gwyneth Paltrow's Web site, Goop, offers them in both jade and rose quartz.) There is a great deal of money to be made by those who diagnose and treat our fears of inadequacy; Cederström and Spicer estimate that the self-improvement industry takes in ten billion dollars a year. (They report that they each spent more than ten thousand dollars, not to mention thousands of hours, on their own quests.) The good life may have sufficed for Plato and Aristotle, but it is no longer enough. "We are under pressure to show that we know how to lead the perfect life," Cederström and Spicer write.

Where success can be measured with increasing accuracy, so, too, can failure. On the other side of self-improvement, Cederström and Spicer have discovered, is a sense not simply of inadequacy but of fraudulence. In December, with the end of their project approaching, Spicer reflects that he has spent the year focussing on himself to the exclusion of everything, and everyone, else in his life. His wife is due to give birth to their second child in a few days; their relationship is not at its best. And yet, he writes, "I could not think of another year I spent more of my time doing things that were *not* me at all." He doesn't feel like a better version of himself. He doesn't even feel like himself. He has been like a man possessed: "If it wasn't me, who was it then?"

The desire to achieve and to demonstrate perfection is not simply stressful; it can also be fatal, according to the British journalist Will Storr. His forthcoming book, "Selfie: How We Became So Self-Obsessed and What It's Doing to Us" (Overlook), opens, alarmingly, with a chapter on suicide. Storr is disturbed by the prevalence of suicide in the United States and Britain, and blames the horror and shame of failing to meet the sky-high expectations we set for ourselves. He cites surveys that show that

adolescent girls are increasingly unhappy with their bodies, and that a growing number of men are suffering from muscle dysmorphia; he interviews psychologists and professors who describe an epidemic of crippling anxiety among university students yoked to the phenomenon of "perfectionist presentation"—the tendency, especially on social media, to make life look like a string of enviable triumphs. Storr confesses that he, too, is dogged by self-loathing and suicidal thoughts. "We're living in an age of perfectionism, and perfection is the idea that kills," he writes. "People are suffering and dying under the torture of the fantasy self they're failing to become."

Storr's explanation for how we got into this predicament has three strands. First, there is nature. "Because of the way our brains function, our sense of 'me' naturally runs in narrative mode," he writes; studies show that we are hardwired to see life as a story in which we star. At the same time, he says, we are tribal creatures, evolved during our hunter-gatherer years to value coöperation and, at the same time, to respect hierarchy and covet status—"to get along *and* get ahead."

Next comes culture—a trajectory that wends its way from the ancient Greeks, with their idea that humans are rational creatures who must strive in order to fulfill their highest potential, to Christianity, with its doctrine of a sinful self that requires salvation, to Freud, who's "just a self-hating, sex-afeared, secular reinvention" of the same, and, finally, to the perilous American pursuit of happiness. Storr has conflicted feelings about the American view that the self is fundamentally good, and thus worthy of comfort and satisfaction. On the one hand, it's a nice change from Christian guilt. On the other, it has "infected" the rest of the world with aspirational narcissism. Storr has harsh words for positive psychology, and for the self-esteem movement. He reserves special scorn for the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, which pioneered the Human Potential Movement back in the nineteen-sixties and has recently gained popularity with the Silicon Valley crowd.

Finally, there's the economy. Survival in the hypercompetitive, globalized economy, where workers have fewer protections and are more disposable than ever, requires that we try to become faster, smarter, and more creative. (To this list of marketable qualities I'd add one with a softer edge: niceness, which the gig economy and its five-star rating system have made indispensable to everyone from cabdrivers to plumbers.) Anything less than our best won't cut it.

After a while, Storr says, this rational response to economic pressures became instinctive habit: "Neoliberalism beams at us from many corners of our culture and we absorb it back into ourselves like radiation." Like reality television before it, social media frames human relationships as a constant competition for popularity and approval. Donald Trump, with his greed-is-good hucksterism and his obsessive talk of "winners" and "losers," is in the White House. ("Selfie" was published in England last year; Storr is adding a chapter about the President for the American edition.) Meanwhile, parents continue to feed their children the loving, well-intentioned lie that there are "no limits" and they can "be anything," which leaves the kids blaming themselves, rather than the market's brutality, when they inevitably come up short.

All told, this is a bleak picture. If the ideal of the optimized self isn't simply a fad, or even a preference, but an economic necessity, how can any of us choose to live otherwise? Storr insists that there is a way. "This isn't a message of hopelessness," he writes. "On the contrary, what it actually leads us towards is a better way of finding happiness. Once you realize that it's all just an act of coercion, that it's your culture trying to turn you into someone you can't really be, you can begin to free yourself from your demands."

This sounds suspiciously like self-help-speak, Storr acknowledges. He is quick to say that he isn't encouraging anything quite as clichéd as self-acceptance. At the same time, he reports that he has, in fact, come to accept himself. "Since I learned that low agreeableness and high neuroticism are relatively stable facets of my personality, rather than signs of some shameful psychological impurity, I've stopped berating myself so frequently," he writes. Instead, he now apologizes to those whom his disagreeableness and his neuroticism have offended. This seems like good, common sense, but Storr has another, more radical suggestion to make. Since it is our environment that is causing us to feel inferior, it is our environment that we must change: "The things we're doing with our lives, the people we're sharing it with, the goals we have. We should find projects to pursue which are not only meaningful to us, but over which we have efficacy." Storr means to be helpful, but changing every aspect of the world we inhabit is a daunting prospect. No wonder people try to change themselves instead.

Sarah Knight has advice of a more specific kind to offer. Her latest book, "You Do You: How to Be Who You Are and Use What You've Got to Get What You

Want" (Little, Brown), is the third she has published in two years, after "The Life-Changing Magic of Not Giving a F*ck: How to Stop Spending Time You Don't Have with People You Don't Like Doing Things You Don't Want to Do" and "Get Your Sh*t Together: How to Stop Worrying About What You Should Do So You Can Finish What You Need to Do and Start Doing What You Want to Do." Knight's books belong to what Storr sniffily calls the "this is me, being real, deal with it" school of self-help guides, which tend to share a skepticism toward the usual self-improvement bromides and a taste for cheerful profanity. Other recent titles include "The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck," by Mark Manson, and "F*ck Feelings," by Michael I. Bennett, a practicing psychiatrist, and Sarah Bennett, his daughter.

Knight, who favors the shouty, super-caffeinated tone of a spin-class instructor, calls herself a "bestselling anti-guru." She is particularly proud of the best-selling part, and it's easy to see why her approach appeals. The phrase THERE IS NOTHING WRONG WITH YOU takes up two full pages of her first chapter. She agrees with Storr that what is wrong is society, or, rather, the "random, stupid obligations set forth by society—whether to be nice or thin or to act submissive or sane." Sanity seems not to be an entirely random or stupid social obligation, but never mind. Knight's point is to encourage her readers to embrace themselves as they are, warts and all, and to help them do so she proposes strategies like "mental redecorating" (recasting one's weaknesses as strengths), embracing pessimism (to be pragmatic and set realistic expectations), being selfish (advocating for one's needs), dwelling on the thought of death (to maximize happiness while alive), and "breaking free from the Cult of Nice." Knight is happy to demonstrate the latter. "You have to stop giving a fuck about what other people think," she tells us.

Much of the advice in "You Do You" is geared toward helping readers confront the workplace dissatisfactions of the daily grind. Generally, the idea is to be more assertive. "If a boss doesn't like the way I operate, she can fire me," Knight writes. "If a client thinks my unconventional ways aren't for him, he doesn't have to hire me." This is curiously cavalier. Where Storr is concerned with the precarity of modern-day work, Knight is preoccupied with the tedium endured by the office-bound class: pointless morning meetings, irritating group projects. She gives her readers permission not to care too much about always doing their best on the job, because, as she reveals, she knows what it is to be a perfectionist. As an adolescent, she suffered from eating

disorders. After graduating from Harvard, she made a career as a book editor at a big publishing house. She was successful, but stressed. Knight describes experiencing panic attacks that required medical attention; to stay calm at work, she kept a kitty-litter box full of sand under her desk so that she could plunge her toes into a simulated beach. In 2016, when she was thirty-six, she left her job and her home in Brooklyn and moved with her husband to the Dominican Republic.

"The difference between me and a lot of condescending bozos out there is that I don't give a Fig Newton whether anyone chooses to do it the same, differently, or wearing a gold lamé unitard," Knight writes. In other words, she is not advocating that all of us quit our day jobs and "step off the motherfucking ledge," as she did. Still, it comes as something of a shock to realize that the person who has been advising us to push against the lean-in mores of contemporary office culture leaned so far out that she escaped altogether. Many readers will undoubtedly find this inspiring. Others may feel betrayed. What about those who can't afford to take the risk of stepping away from their lives, as much as they may want to? While they are stuck in their cubicles, mentally redecorating and meditating on death, Knight is sipping piña coladas and writing her next best-selling "No F*cks Given" guide.

Those for whom the imperative to "do you" feels like an unaffordable luxury may take some solace from Svend Brinkmann's book "Stand Firm: Resisting the Self-Improvement Craze" (Polity), first published in his native Denmark, in 2014, and now available in an English translation by Tam McTurk. Before "Stand Firm" came out, the author's note tells us, Brinkmann lived "the relatively sedate life of a professor of psychology at Aalborg University." Then the book became a best-selling sensation. Brinkmann now lives the life of a successful European public intellectual, appearing on TV and radio and travelling the world to lecture "on the big questions of modern life."

The big question that Brinkmann addresses in "Stand Firm" is speed. The pace of life is accelerating, he says. We succumb to fleeting trends in food, fashion, and health. Technology has eroded the boundary between work and private life; we are expected to be constantly on call, to do more, "do it better and do it for longer, with scant regard for the content or the meaning of what we are doing." Like Storr, Brinkmann condemns self-improvement as both a symptom and a tool of a relentless economy. But where Storr sees a health crisis, Brinkmann sees a spiritual one. His rhetoric is that of a

prophet counselling against false idols. “In our secular world, we no longer see eternal paradise as a carrot at the end of the stick of life, but try to cram as much as possible into our relatively short time on the planet instead,” he writes. “If you stand still while everyone else is moving forwards, you fall behind. Doing so these days is tantamount to going backwards.”

Yet, as Brinkmann’s title makes clear, standing still is precisely what he proposes that we do. Enough of our mania to be the best and the most, he says. It’s time to content ourselves with being average. With pride, he tells us that, when he and his colleagues at Aalborg University were asked to propose institutional development goals, he suggested “that we should strive to become a mediocre institute.” (“I thought it was a realistic goal worth pursuing for a small university,” he explains. His colleagues did not agree.) And enough of self-acceptance, too—in fact, enough of the self! “Being yourself has no intrinsic value whatsoever,” Brinkmann tells us. Maybe the Norwegian nationalist Anders Breivik felt that he was being “true to himself” when he went on his murderous rampage; maybe Mother Teresa did not. What difference does it make? If you must engage in soul-searching or self-analysis, Brinkmann advises limiting it to once a year, preferably during summer vacation.

After Knight’s can-do cheerleading, this is like having a glass of ice water poured over your head. It’s harsh, but bracing. In cheeky deference to the self-help genre, Brinkmann has structured “Stand Firm” as a seven-step guide of the type that he abhors. Chapter titles include “Focus on the negative in your life,” “Put on your No hat,” and “Suppress your feelings.” The goal is to accept, with calm resolve, the fact that we are mortal, and irreparably flawed. He is big on the Stoics, with their focus on the transience of worldly things. (So, for that matter, is Tim Ferriss.) And he finds wisdom in other, more surprising sources. “I might not be an expert in Jewish culture (my main source of knowledge is Woody Allen’s films),” he writes, in a section in praise of “kvetching,” “but I get the impression that a general acceptance of griping about things both big and small is actually a cultural conduit that fosters collective happiness and satisfaction.” I can assure Brinkmann that the concepts of collective happiness and satisfaction are all but alien to the Jewish people, but if kvetching works for him he is welcome to it.

The important thing, in any case, is the word "collective." Brinkmann doesn't care so much how we feel about ourselves. He cares how we act toward others. His book is concerned with morality, which tends to get short shrift in the self-improvement literature. He likes old-fashioned concepts: integrity, self-control, character, dignity, loyalty, rootedness, obligation, tradition. Above all, he exhorts us to do our duty. By this, I think he means that we are supposed to carry on with life's unpleasant demands even when we don't feel particularly well served by them, not run off to the Dominican Republic.

All of this gives "Stand Firm" a somewhat conservative cast. Even the phrase "stand firm" may sound pretty fogyish. Brinkmann can come off like a parent telling his tetchy teen-ager to tough it out, and sometimes, like the teen-ager, you want to talk back. Much of his advice is contradictory. How are we supposed to both suppress our feelings and emphasize the negative? And doesn't "dwelling on the past," the corrective that Brinkmann advises, lead to the kind of maudlin nostalgia for the good old days that got us Brexit and Trump? "I would contend that, in a culture where everything else is accelerating, some form of conservatism may actually be the truly progressive approach," Brinkmann writes. He acknowledges that this is paradoxical. His advice, like all advice, is imperfect, and limited. He, too, is only human. That's part of his charm.

The biggest paradox of "Stand Firm," as Brinkmann is well aware, is that it calls for an individual solution to a collective problem. There's good reason to fear being left behind by an accelerating society, especially a society, like ours, that is not kind to those who don't, or can't, keep up. Brinkmann at least has the Danish welfare state to fall back on. Still, you don't need to agree with everything he says to recognize that there is value in reading his book. Mainly, you come away with the comforting sense that there are other people out there struggling with the same pressures and frustrations, who experience similar dissatisfactions and worry about their own inadequacies. That feeling—solidarity—is another Brinkmann value. We may be blundering forward, but we are not blundering alone.

And Brinkmann does offer some advice that seems immediately worth taking. Go for a walk in the woods, he says, and think about the vastness of the cosmos. Go to a museum and look at art, secure in the knowledge that it will not improve you in any

measurable way. Things don't need to be of concrete use in order to have value. Put away your self-help guides, and read a novel instead. Don't mind if I do. ♦

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Video

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