

The Road Is Heavily Traveled Now

By CHRISTINE B. WHELAN

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Page W13

Americans have never lacked for advice. From 17th-century Puritan treatises on avoiding the wrath of God to 21st-century paperbacks on breaking the cycle of codependency, pushy prose has told them what to do and how to do it. In the process, it has shaped the norms of American culture, sometimes even to the good. Most self-help books are markers of short-lived fads, but some, like M. Scott Peck's "The Road Less Traveled," are credited with inspiring millions. The book spent more than 13 years -- years, not weeks -- on the New York Times best-seller list.

Dr. Peck, who died last week at the age of 69, was the last of the 20th-century self-help giants. Like Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale, earlier advice-giving legends, Dr. Peck, a psychiatrist and a religious speaker, encouraged his readers to take responsibility for their problems and face the unglamorous facts about what life really demands.

In his 1978 guide, Dr. Peck told his readers that delaying gratification -- scheduling pain first and pleasure later -- was "the only decent way to live." The human desire to avoid difficulties and suffering is the root of all mental illness, he argued, and since most of us try to avoid our problems, "most of us are mentally ill to a greater or lesser degree."

This argument struck a chord, especially in a culture that was, at the time, even more me- and now-focused than usual: More than a

decade after the book's publication, a survey by the Library of Congress and the Book of the Month Club ranked "The Road Less Traveled" No. 3 on a list of books that had made a difference in the lives of their readers -- just behind the Bible and "Atlas Shrugged."

The advice of "The Road Less Traveled" was a combination of religious inspiration, applied psychiatry and blunt pragmatism. There were no new ideas in Dr. Peck's book, but his timing was perfect: It had been decades since a popular self-help book had linked those often conflicting points of view.

Early 20th-century advice books mixed pseudo-science with religion: Franz Mesmer wrote about "mind cures," and Mary Baker Eddy's texts aided in the foundation of Christian Science. Both writers embraced the notion that prayer could heal the body. But by the 1930s, popular advice veered away from religion to strike a more practical tone. Carnegie's "How to Win Friends and Influence People" (1936) and Dr. Spock's "Baby and Child Care" (1946) gave readers step-by-step advice for how to take control of their lives and, in Spock's case, those of their children, all but ignoring spirituality and faith.

Self-help books of the 1950s, including Peale's best seller "The Power of Positive Thinking," (1952), once again blended biblical teachings with practical modern advice, but by the 1960s the focus had turned inward -- and stayed navel-directed for the next three decades. Eric Berne's "Games People Play" (1964), Thomas Harris's "I'm OK, You're OK" (1967) and Robert Ringer's "Looking Out for #1" (1977) characterized the early, aggressive wave of self-focus, while Melody Beattie's "Codependent No More" (1986) and John Bradshaw's "Homecoming" (1990) focused the reader's gaze on their inner child in need of release.

It was just as this wave of self-centered and pleasure-focused advice was cresting that "The Road" became a surprise best seller. Dr. Peck wrote about sacrifice, pain and suffering -- and why they were all good for you. He described life as a "series of problems" where each person's job was to figure out if he wants to complain or do something productive to cope. Section headings include "The Myth of Romantic Love" and "The Healthiness of Depression."

"The Road" and its spin-off books, for instance "Further Along the Road Less Traveled" (1993), sold millions of copies throughout the 1980s, laying the groundwork for the next generation of '90s no-nonsense advice: Dr. Phil and Dr. Laura told America's whiney inner child to grow up. Today's best-selling self-help books -- like Rick Warren's "The Purpose Driven Life" -- are once again returning readers to practical religious teachings, a trend Dr. Peck would applaud.

As a sort of minister, Dr. Peck wove church teachings into his psychological-improvement methods. Laziness was the original sin, and God's grace was the cure. Yet he was critical enough of fundamentalist Christianity to focus on "spirituality" rather than any specific organized religion. Among other things, it has to be said, Dr. Peck's big-tent attitude maximized book sales.

But not everyone was happy about it. His Christianity-lite offended traditionalists, and in 1995 religion journalist Richard Abanes and theologian H. Wayne House wrote an entire book critiquing Dr. Peck's "heretical" scriptural interpretations -- including his pantheism and his less-than-literal interpretation of the Bible. Of Dr. Peck's idea that the unconscious is God, Mr. Abanes says: "This is New Age spirituality, not Christianity."

Undeniably, though, "The Road Less Traveled" made many people feel better -- at least temporarily. As a genre, self-help taps into American optimism. It is also a first step toward change: Walking out of the bookstore with the newest inspirational text makes you feel as if you have already accomplished something. But simply buying the book doesn't do much, and it's impossible to know how many self-help books go straight to the living-room bookshelf unread.

Even people who make an honest effort to follow a self-help book's advice aren't very likely to achieve personal change. Surveys show that private, individual commitments are less effective than public or group-based ones -- and reading a self-help book is a solitary act. Academic studies have even pointed to Dr. Peck's work as the kind of "inspirational" text that should not be used for self-administered treatment of depression or other

psychological ailments. The efficacy of such books is questionable, and more importantly, they may isolate a person who could be in need of serious counseling.

Dr. Peck described psychological disorders as merely "disorders of thinking" to be cured with a more positive and constructive attitude, but he probably wouldn't have disagreed with those who argue that it takes more than a book to change a life: "The Road Less Traveled" encouraged readers to get involved with their communities and local churches, as a way of providing and receiving support.

A self-help guide may be valuable as a tool for reassurance and reinforcement, but it is only a first step toward improving a marriage, losing weight or overcoming depression. Support groups, like Weight Watchers and Alcoholics Anonymous, are a more effective way to achieve change. Groups force members to make an open, public promise, impose constant monitoring and offer rewards for achieving goals -- all of which increase the odds of success.

More than a quarter-century after "The Road"'s publication, Dr. Peck's messages have migrated into numerous best-selling advice books. Over time, of course, the self-help trend will take a different tack. But readers will ultimately return to Dr. Peck's message because it is true: Life is difficult. That's why we have an advice industry in the first place.

Ms. Whelan, who recently received a doctorate from Oxford in modern history, is writing a book about high-achieving women and marriage.