

# Chapter 1:

## TWO WORLDS

*“Not until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves.”*

– Henry David Thoreau –

(1817–1862)

Philosopher

It was like visiting the home of a friend. We knocked on the door and were immediately invited in. We were expecting a guard out front or a large sign, but neither was present. Dozens of people dressed in white were moving about their daily tasks; the floor had been worn smooth by the footsteps of visitors. A ceiling fan was not sufficient to ward off the intense heat. We had heard so much about this place and the woman who had started it all. We were initially told she was not accepting visitors and we should come back tomorrow. Disappointed, we prepared to leave. However, at that moment, she entered the room.

She was much smaller in stature than we had expected. As she came our way, we saw that her features were plain, old, and wrinkled, but her face glowed. Her calloused fingers immediately reached out to us and we were surprised to feel their warmth and strength as she took our hands into hers. She smiled and looked into our eyes as if she were searching for our souls. In spite of her many responsibilities and busy schedule, she was in no hurry to leave; she took the time to meet with us—to be present.

Our meeting with this remarkable woman, named Agnes, taught us important lessons that were destined to help shape

## CHAPTER 1: Two Worlds

our lives. She was born in Skopje, Yugoslavia, now Macedonia, in Eastern Europe. At the age of 12, she decided to devote her life to her religious beliefs. Six years later, she was stationed to teach at a private school in one of the poorest cities in South Asia, where she would work for nearly two decades. Over the years, she often heard the desperate cries of hungry and sick people coming from the alleyways near the school. She could not help because she was ordered not to leave the compound where she taught.

One day, however, Agnes became seriously ill with tuberculosis. Like many people who are faced with illness and possible death, she began to reflect more deeply on the meaning of her life. On a fateful train ride to Darjeeling, where she was sent for rest and recuperation, she began to ask herself some questions. Who was she meant to be? What was her purpose? How did she want to live the rest of her life? She made life-changing decisions that day. She had reached a turning point, something that jolted her out of her reality and revealed a more meaningful path.

It wasn't long after returning home that Agnes was forced to put her resolution into action. She came across an elderly woman who was abandoned and dying on the street. Agnes picked the woman up and took her to the closest hospital for medical attention, but the facility refused to treat the dying woman because she had no money. Agnes took her to the next hospital, and the next, with no success in finding someone to help. So Agnes brought the woman back to her own home, laid her down in a warm bed, and stayed by her side, reassuring her and caring for her until, soon, afterwards, the woman passed away. At that point, Agnes made a conscious choice to dedicate her life to helping the poorest of the poor to live and die with dignity, respect, and love. She founded the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta, a new order of nuns whose purpose was to

care for those who had no one to care for them—the dying, the disabled, the destitute, and the orphaned. She became known around the world as Mother Teresa, the name she chose when she took her vows as a nun.

In 1969, a documentary focused the eyes of the world on her saintly work but she did not let the attention she received go to her head. She tore out the plush carpet donated for one of the homes of her sisters and gave it to the poor. She rejected the traditional elaborate banquet when she won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, and insisted that the money be used to feed the homeless. Her convent was a simple dwelling with only the barest of necessities, tucked away on an unassuming side street in Calcutta.

We spent precious moments with Mother Teresa that day. When we asked her how she maintained her hope surrounded by an overwhelming number of sick and dying people, she humbly responded: “They die one at a time, and so I save them one at a time.” She gently touched us on the shoulder and urged us never to lose hope. She told us that every day each one of us receives a calling to reach out and help others, and that we have a choice to help or not to help. “In our lives, we can do no great things,” she said, “only small things with great love.”

As we left the convent, the dismal streets took on a different, almost hopeful light. Mother Teresa’s message of steady and unyielding compassion seemed to open up a path through the poverty and sickness that characterized so much of the city. Her vision was compelling not only because of what she had accomplished for others, but also because of who she was as a person. She was proof that through small meaningful actions, one after another, people *can* change the world. It was a powerful lesson that would immensely affect our lives as we continued to move forward in our own work.

People sometimes question the idea of looking to Mother Teresa as a role model. “Our lives are different,” people often

## CHAPTER 1: Two Worlds

say. "We have other responsibilities." We live in a different reality. Some even speak of being paralyzed by a "Mother Teresa syndrome," a feeling that few could ever reach this level of service and goodness.

However, Mother Teresa was not simply a kind little old nun living in the slums of Calcutta. She was also a quintessential entrepreneur and leader who saw something wrong in her surroundings and took action to change the situation one step at a time. She built a huge organization in the most challenging of circumstances, formulated its constitution, and established more than 500 centers in 120 countries, including one of the first hospices for AIDS victims in New York City and others in Atlanta and San Francisco. The purpose of her organization was to care for those forgotten by society, and her message of simple service, small actions, and deep love resonated around the world.

After meeting Mother Teresa and other great leaders and social justice heroes over the past decade, we've realized that while they are extraordinary individuals, what matters more is that they are all human. They are flesh and blood, made of the same substance as all of us. Mother Teresa's journals reveal that even she went through periods of self-doubt and criticism. What set this woman apart was the way in which she sought to overcome her insecurities and improve her life, not by closing herself off from others, but by opening herself to them.

Coming home from the Calcutta slums, we wondered how Mother Teresa's life would be judged by the standards of our North American society. The values that guided her seem to stand in stark contrast to the goals set by much of today's Western culture, which focus on "getting ahead," "looking out for number one," and "helping yourself." Her life would fall short of the brand of "success" and "happiness" that is defined by these goals: she did not own many possessions; she was not wealthy and did not have a lot of political clout; she was not "beautiful"

in the way that beauty is depicted on the covers of fashion magazines. To many of us, Mother Teresa's selflessness seemed to strip her life of all of its pleasures and comforts. We wonder how she could possibly have been happy.

It all depends, of course, on how we define happiness. Today, North America is at its wealthiest point in history. According to the goals set by previous generations, millions of us have it made—with a car in (almost) every driveway, a chicken in (almost) every pot—most of us should now not only be happy, we should be downright ecstatic and dancing in the streets. But many of us are not putting on those dancing shoes quite yet. For great numbers of people, the quest for happiness and fulfillment often gets lost in the rush and daily details of our complex lives. We lose sight of our purpose and direction under the weight of in-boxes, bills, and day-planners. Sometimes, we prefer to leave the search for the meaning of life to philosophers or religious leaders. Focused on keeping our eyes on “the road,” “the ball,” or “the prize”—we forget to pause and ask ourselves what exactly we are chasing after. After a visit to North America, Mother Teresa once observed that she had never seen such an abundance of material things. But she had also never seen “such a poverty of the spirit, of loneliness, and of being unwanted.” In her eyes, this spiritual poverty was worse than the physical poverty of people in the Calcutta slums.

Like Mother Teresa, many of us find periods in our own lives when we question our existence and purpose. Who am I? Who do I want to become? What do I want to do with my life? Often we feel lost, uncertain, or stressed by the speed of life. The guidelines by which previous generations lived do not always match our current situation, and the social problems of our time have added to the breakdown of family and community support, leaving millions of us searching for greater meaning.

## I LOST MYSELF ON THE SHELF

*“We excel at making a living but often fail at making a life.  
We celebrate our prosperity but yearn for purpose.  
We cherish our freedoms but long for connection.  
In an age of plenty, we feel spiritual hunger.”<sup>1</sup>*

– David G. Myers –

(b. 1942)

Professor of Psychology

In their search for happiness, millions of people are turning to the self-help industry for guidance. Some believe that they will be happy if they have more—more money, more beauty, more popularity. Others search for more insight and inspiration. A never-ending quest for self-fulfillment has North Americans reaching for their credit cards. And there are legions of people offering to help them solve every conceivable problem in life. The Amazon.com website turns up 162,179 titles under the heading “Self-Help,” offering advice on everything from weight-loss to financial mastery, time management, memory improvement, self-hypnosis, personal transformation, finding your inner child, reviving your spirituality, and boosting your creativity and self-esteem. Motivational books, CDs, and self-growth seminars are an annual \$5.7 billion US business, with percentage growth in the double digits.<sup>2</sup>

In the industry’s greatest coup, the venerable *New York Times* added a new category to its best-seller list, “Advice.” The move was precipitated by the sheer numbers of new guides to fulfillment, happiness, and “The New You” muscling out the shelf space of traditional non-fiction books such as biographies, memoirs, and political commentaries.

In 1999, \$588 million worth of these books was sold in the United States, and more and more publishers are recognizing

the lucrative potential of the self-help market. A recent article in *The Economist* reported the launch of a new line of personal development books by a well-known international publishing house. Called “Momentum,” the series is being promoted as a “completely new publishing philosophy that revolves around one thing: you.”<sup>3</sup> The article suggests that even though a successful self-help industry should logically put itself out of business, based on the soaring popularity of these books, this is not likely to happen.

What is driving the demand for self-help literature? We believe that the breakdown of support systems we once had in our families and communities, along with the rise of our consumer-driven society, have left millions of us searching for meaning in our lives. The interest in self-help underlines the questions nagging at our souls, the issues deep in our hearts that we hide even from our friends, and the goals that we set for our society and ourselves. “Self-help books are fantastically important,” notes Peter York, social observer and author, “because they tell you what America or Britain is worrying about.”<sup>4</sup> It is often said that in order to understand an era, you must examine the literature of its time. Based on book sales, it is arguable that self-help has become the literature of our time. It represents the values and the concerns that occupy our minds.

No matter the type of self-help—whether it pertains to business, relationships, or physical well-being—we follow these programs because we seek happiness through an improved life. More than simply mirroring our priorities, self-help books serve as the maps and compasses that guide us toward success, happiness, and personal fulfillment. As such, they redefine how we understand these terms.

The problem is that many self-help books promote extrinsic goals such as money, power, and physical attractiveness as the keys to happiness, despite extensive psychological evidence that real happiness lies in establishing close relationships,

community-building, and the contribution one makes to society.<sup>5</sup> By promoting individualism and linking happiness and success to material possessions, much of the self-help industry only exacerbates the problems that lead people to look for help in the first place.

Many of the quick-fix schemes, plans, and parables for sale have one thing in common: what's good for "me"—and in most cases, only "me." This is the legacy of the "Me Generation" inspired by psychoanalyst Fritz Perls' doctrine of "I do my thing and you do yours."<sup>6</sup> The values of this era endure today, characterized by a desire to help only the self through an unbridled pursuit of wealth and a win-at-all-costs mentality. In today's world, many self-help manuals combine the components of "self" and "help," but ignore the other crucial element, namely, that the word "help" was once used primarily in relation to "others," and not solely for the self.

This is not to say that every self-help book on the market is unhelpful. There are some outstanding titles filled with seeds of truth, practical advice, and sound psychological insight on subjects such as healthy living, emotional health and maturity, parenting, or moral and spiritual renewal. However, more and more, it's becoming easier to distinguish between those books that are out to *help* and those that are out to *sell*.<sup>7</sup> Today, books featuring diet-fads, tips on how to snag a mate, and get-rich-quick schemes have come to dominate the self-help market. Amazon.com lists over 54,000 self-help diet books, 67,000 marriage advice books, and more than 90,000 money advice books. But when an estimated 65 percent of American adults are overweight or obese,<sup>8</sup> when the divorce rate has doubled since the 1960s,<sup>9</sup> and when the percentage of Americans living in poverty jumped from 11.7 percent in 2001 to 12.1 percent in 2002—representing nearly 34.6 million people, it seems that the advice may not be working.<sup>10</sup>

It's not simply that many self-help products do not deliver on their promises, but that they can be harmful to individuals and to society as a whole. The more we are encouraged to turn away from others in seeking our own path, the more isolated we become. In isolation, many of us choose products over people to help feel better about our lives but soon find ourselves searching for more. For a few individuals this might not seem to matter, but when people move this way en masse, it eats at the very soul of our society.

We believe that the self-help industry is contributing to the breeding of a self-help culture, in which the self is the only thing in focus, and individualism and material possessions are what millions have come to value above all else. We use the term "self-help culture" to describe these social trends for two reasons; firstly, because fundamental changes in family, community, and religious affiliations have pushed our society to become more self-focused and self-involved, and millions are now looking to help themselves, often at the expense of helping others; and secondly, because much of the self-help industry is the clearest manifestation of this phenomenon. This book uses the discussion of the self-help industry simply as a springboard to the broader argument of the failure of the modern western world's me-centered path to happiness. We will attempt not only to turn self-help on its head but also to question what makes us happy and what is best for society.

In order to achieve a true and lasting sense of success and happiness, it is necessary to deconstruct the many elements that have come to define our self-help culture and create a fundamental shift in our thinking. This may sound like a challenge, but it is one that will make us stronger. When we have the courage to question and move beyond what we know, we open ourselves up to new and more meaningful possibilities. For

## CHAPTER 1: Two Worlds

individuals and whole societies, this has always been the way of real progress and change.

We began this chapter by reflecting on our meeting with Mother Teresa who, according to the norms of our self-help culture, could never have lived a fulfilled and happy life. In our travels to the developing world we discovered that people of many other cultures, despite their lack of material wealth, are also very happy. We were very grateful for what they taught us, and our work over the past decade is a tribute to their courage and wisdom.

With this book, we wish to put forth an alternative path that we believe will transform your life. In the process, we will introduce you to a number of people who have already made this journey and who want to share their stories with you. You will find one of their reflections at the end of each chapter, starting with our friend, Kim.