



The Antidote
Thom Rutledge

The following critique is in response to the book, *The Secret*, edited by Rhonda Byrne (Beyond Words Publishing, 2006)

Let me tell you a secret about *The Secret*: it is dangerous. If that seems like an extreme statement, then I am certainly not alone. The authors contributing to *The Secret* are right there with me. The claims made in *The Secret* are nothing if not extreme.

It is not dangerous for everyone, but for some (many, actually) it really can be poison to their already compromised psychological immune systems. Specifically, with its gross oversimplifications of the power of positive thinking (that literally *everything* emanates from our thoughts), it confirms the erroneous notion that if things are not going well in your life, it is entirely your fault. See what I mean? Poison for people who are already desperate self-blammers.

For the rest of us, if we really stop and think this "secret" thing through, *The Secret* is an insult to our intelligence.

Already, after only three short paragraphs, I will have many of you judging me as some poor soul who just doesn't get it, some negativity-magnet destined to live my life out in misery, or maybe just a guy who, not embracing the belief that the "law of attraction" is the only universal law that really counts, will never see my full potential. The world is never short on fundamentalism, and now I have discovered that there are actually "Secret" fundamentalists.¹

If you are someone with no amount of healthy skepticism, with no inclination to look carefully at claims of absolute truth, and you are a "Secret" fundamentalist, then read no further. The points I am about to make will make no difference to you. They will only make you feel sorry for me. But if you are an independent thinker, and a person who can think in shades of gray, please read on, and consider what I have to say. (Hey, that rhymes.)

What I offer you here is an antidote for what is poisonous about the phenomenon of this mega-selling dvd and subsequent book, and an explanation for why I take such a strong stand against what Rhonda Byrne and her many co-authors are promoting so successfully.

Agreements

First, let me be very clear that I have no beef with the power of positive thinking, or even the “law of attraction,” as long as it is presented in realistic terms. As a psychotherapist and self-help author, I will speak out as emphatically as anyone that we --- individually and collectively --- can accomplish great things by examining and changing the content and the language or our thoughts. We live in a culture of victim-thinking; there is no doubt about that. We do not even come close to identifying, let alone manifesting, our full potential, as individuals, as families, as communities, as nations, as a world.

An essential part of my approach to psychotherapy is encouraging people to examine the kind of negative, self-defeating belief systems that *The Secret* addresses. In the name of fairness, here are some of the basic tenets of *The Secret* with which I strongly agree:

- It is important to see the potential and possibilities in ourselves, and in all things. I have even written a manuscript (soon to be available as an e-book), *The Greater Possibilities*, on this very subject.
- To achieve a genuine sense of satisfaction, including happiness and a sense of contribution, we must address our victim thinking. I teach that victim thinking is defining ourselves by what happens to us, the cards we are dealt by forces beyond us, and that non-victim thinking is understanding that we are ultimately defined, not by what happens to us, but how we respond to what happens. I often point to role models in the public eye, such as Christopher Reeve, Michael J. Fox, and Cindy Sheehan.
- Living with gratitude, focusing on all that is good and worthwhile in our lives, not only is a more pleasant way to live, but actually helps us to be more productive. Living with gratitude is about living in the moment, not dropping our anchors into the past, and not leaning so far forward into the future that we fall on our faces. In a nutshell, I teach: Learn from the past, then get the hell out of there!
- Being clear and precise in envisioning what we want is essential to achieving our goals. Basically, it goes like this: I can't get someplace if I don't know where it is. *The Secret* is very big on recommending that we be specific about what we want. The one thing I do tend to add here is that we also need to remain open minded and flexible enough to change course in midstream. We never know what might change our minds. Being unclear and vague is one thing, being flexible is another. And many times, there may be something better for me than what I think I want. To quote the

Rolling Stones: you don't always get what you want, but you just might get what you need. (And even that is not always true.)

- There is no area of our lives to which positive thinking cannot be effectively applied. For instance, when we believe that positive thinking is helpful in improving our self-esteem or becoming a better partner in relationship, but that our financial circumstances are beyond the reach of positive thinking, we are mistaken. Just after the terrorist attacks of 9/11/01, I began writing about what I call "positive opportunism." Positive Opportunism is the practice of living our lives according to the question, "How can I use this circumstance to become a better person?" The key, of course, is applying the question to the worst of days, as well as the best.
- Positive thinking can be transformative. *The Secret* is all about transformation based on a shift in our thinking. I agree with this, with the one addendum of a requirement for positive action to accompany the shift in thinking.

So let it be noted that I believe strongly in these babies and certainly am not advocating that we throw any of them out with bath water.

The Basis of Objection

When I first heard people talking about *The Secret*, it seemed to me that some terrific marketing was being done. No objection there. I am in the business of selling books too. The idea of calling something "secret" to increase readers' curiosity and to emphasize the power of the teaching is genius, no doubt. I wish I had thought of it.

Someone gave me a copy of the book for my birthday, but to tell you the truth, I never opened it. Only when I found myself in Melbourne, Australia, preparing for a television interview at the studio where Rhonda Byrne once worked, did I decide to take a look. Since Ms. Byrne is from Melbourne, I thought there might be some questions related to her very successful project.

As I began reading, I was not surprised by what I thought of as oversimplification of psychological principles. I had expected that much from the conversations about the dvd and book I had had with others. And oversimplification in the world of self-help publishing is hardly new. But something did surprise me, and it didn't take long for my surprise to turn to amazement and then to outrage. I began skimming through the book quickly, having trouble believing what I was reading. "This is dangerous," I said to myself, probably aloud.

What is dangerous about *The Secret* are not its oversimplifications. For the sake of clarity, I have learned that some amount of simplification is necessary in writing an accessible self-help book. What is dangerous about *The Secret* are the proclamations of absolute truth that appear throughout the book. I kept skipping back to the beginning, looking for some disclaimer, somewhere --- something on behalf of the many contributors, saying, "What follows are descriptions of our opinions, experiences and beliefs. Of course, none of us know with absolute certainty how this big vast universe works. We are as fallible as the next guy." As I write this, I pause to go back one more time to look for some kind of disclaimer, at least some acknowledgement of human fallibility, if not a statement of respect for the vast range of belief systems that exist throughout our culture and in other cultures. But no. Zip. Nada. There is no such disclaimer.

What I do find are statements claiming absolute knowledge of absolute truth. No fallibility here. And not a shred of complexity. At this point, I will let *The Secret* speak for itself. The following are direct quotations (underlining is mine, for emphasis on my objections):

"It doesn't matter who you are or where you are, the law of attraction is forming your entire life experience, and this all powerful law is doing that through your thoughts."

"When you think of the things that you want, and you focus on them with all your intention, then the law of attraction will give you exactly what you want, every time."

"Your thoughts are the primary cause of everything. Everything else you see and experience in this world is effect, and that includes your feelings. The cause is always your thoughts."

"Just like the law of gravity, the law of attraction never slips up."

"Remember that your thoughts are the primary cause of everything... When you are feeling good feelings, it is communicating back from the Universe saying, 'You are thinking good thoughts.' Likewise, when you are feeling bad, you are receiving communication from the Universe saying, 'You are thinking bad thoughts.'"

"Nothing can come into your experience unless you summon it through persistent thoughts."

"To lose weight, don't focus on 'losing weight.' Instead, focus on your perfect weight. Feel the feelings of your perfect weight, and you will summon it to you."

"It is impossible to feel bad and at the same time have good thoughts."

"Like Aladdin's Genie, the law of attraction grants our every command."

"It takes no time for the Universe to manifest what you want. It is as easy to manifest one dollar as it is to manifest one million dollars."

"Feeling happy now is the fastest way to bring money into your life."

"We've got a thousand different diagnoses and diseases out there. They're just the weak link. They're all the result of one thing: stress." [this from a medical doctor]

"When patients think and truly believe the tablet [placebo] is a cure, they will receive what they believe, and they will be cured." [again, from a medical doctor. Can someone say malpractice?]

"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... The news services and newspapers will change what they deliver to us when we emit a new signal and focus on what we want."

My Response

Where to start. Okay, for starters, let's take a look at what medical doctors have written here. First, I am concerned that one M.D. thinks there are only "a thousand" diseases. Not sure where he went to medical school. Of course, there is also the problem of that same physician making the completely unsupportable claim that stress is the cause of all disease. He doesn't say that he suspects that stress causes some disease and probably contributes to many more; he says that stress is *the cause of all disease*.

Read for the themes in *The Secret*, and one theme that emerges is that of blame: if you are unhappy, if you are in pain, if you are suffering, if you are ill, you are doing it to yourself. It is your fault. There is no place this is more outrageous than in these insultingly simple, global generalizations about health and disease. But, as they say in the TV infomercial, wait -- there's more. The authors make no effort to address, let alone explain, how this principle of blame applies to events like the Holocaust, or to terrorist attacks or to children with cancer. (This list goes on and on, of course.) Are all the victims of such things really attracting their deadly fate, or are these people somehow exceptions to the law of attraction? And if there are exceptions, by what criteria are these exceptions made? But who am I kidding --- *The Secret* clearly states numerous times that there are no exceptions. If you have been raped, then your negative thoughts are to blame.

Here is a quick one: *The Secret* tells us that its "law of attraction" is as reliable and predictable as the law of gravity. (These must be the same

people who give us the science that tells us the earth is 6,000 years old and that global warming is a conspiracy.) Since we are told that the law of attraction is as predictable as the law of gravity, and since we are told that it takes the universe no time to manifest what we request, I suggest the following experiment: One of the authors stand on top of a three story building, request of the universe that a big net catch him, and then jumps. Seems like a reasonable experiment, given this revelatory information.

The gross over-simplification of these statements (and there are plenty more where those came from) demonstrates either stupidity on the part of the authors (and this is unlikely; I don't think these guys are dumb), or a disrespect for their readers. The readers, they assume, will believe in the magic spell they are selling, without any evidence other than the anecdotal examples of the powerful Secret at work in their own lives and in the lives of people they know. Are we to believe that there are not countless other stories of people who have attempted to use the magical law of attraction and failed? Of course, to that, there is a fool-proof response from the authors: if you didn't succeed, then you weren't doing something right.

While we are on the subject of disrespect, these authors apparently have no respect for the scientific method, and consequently reject reason altogether, in favor of their own method of anecdotal evidence. If the "law of attraction" is, in fact, a fixed truth in our universe, there would be, as the authors claim, no exceptions. Scientific method holds that if there are circumstances under which the premise of a theory cannot be replicated, then the theory cannot be considered fact. If any reader believes that no exceptions to this "law of attraction" can be cited, I would ask you to consider the meaning of such a statement: among many other things, this would mean that everything bad that happens to people is the result of their own thinking/attracting. I am certainly not willing to go there, and I doubt that you are either.

Another quick one: Anyone who says that all that needs to be done to deal with weight problems is to focus on your "perfect weight," has never treated someone who has an eating disorder. Give this part of *The Secret* to someone with anorexia, and look out!

Look back over the short list of quotations I have shared above. See how we are told that absolutely everything emanates from our personal thoughts, and that for better or worse, this law of attraction is always true. Every wish is granted. Nothing can exist in our experience unless we specifically "summons" it. Whatever we believe will be true. Apparently we are to believe that the law of attraction trumps all other laws of nature. Or maybe we are being told that all other laws of nature are bullshit, that there is only their "secret" law.

Another quick one: one of the physicians, in describing the placebo effect, as it relates to *The Secret*, seems to believe that in scientific study, if someone believes a placebo is the real deal, that person will *always* respond as if they are being given the actual medication. Ask someone in the business of research about that one.

Which brings us to one of *The Secret's* fatal flaws: everything described implies that the nature of consciousness is singular, rather than multiple. We can't have any negative thoughts and still feel good, and we certainly can't have positive thoughts and feel bad. I don't know about you (now, there's a phrase you won't hear from the Secret-Givers), but I believe that the nature of my consciousness is multiple. Even when I am thinking positively about something, it is not unusual to simultaneously be aware of skeptical or even negative thoughts that are not in agreement with the positive thoughts. To be able to achieve the singular-mindedness, that these authors insist we have, is not humanly possible.

Another quick one: one of the authors doesn't like the state of the world (it doesn't make him feel good), so he stops listening to and reading news. This is a terrific idea given that we live in a time when people have become so disenfranchised from the political world, that effective representative democracy is dying. Excellent role model for the kids.

Whatever happened to stepping up, taking responsibility for ourselves, and the world we inhabit? Whatever happened to being part of community and not making everything about how we can magically make all of our dreams come true?

The Poison

The Secret is more than over-simplification. It is not just a harmless little book of magic spells. Certainly, the vast majority of its readers will not be harmed, and most will even benefit from the emphasis on positive thinking and personal empowerment. (Please reread the previous sentence; I really mean it.) I am not speaking out for those readers. I am speaking out for the other readers: the readers who are in danger of being poisoned by *The Secret*. I am speaking out for the person with low self-esteem who already believes everything is his fault, the person who has always believed that she is inherently bad. I am speaking out for the people who have considered suicide and who just might decide to act on those thoughts because *The Secret* validates his beliefs that other people may have what it takes, but not him.

I am speaking out for the readers who are desperate enough, vulnerable enough, and therefore gullible enough, to delay going to a physician, in the face of serious symptoms, because they believe that they need only correct their thinking in order to heal their bodies. This objection alone should be enough for us to shout our protests to the Secret-Givers.

I am speaking out for these readers and I am asking you to do so as well. Please help me object to this poisonous aspect of *The Secret*. Please join me in responding to this phenomenon by refusing to accept such an unrealistic, simplified, dumbed-down characterization of human beings, not to mention, the arrogant claim by these authors that they understand, with certainty, the nature of the universe. Move over, Stephen Hawkings.

The authors of this book may not even be aware of this --- they probably are not --- but their gigantic little project is, in and of itself, a symptom. The mega-success of this book is a symptom of the increasingly frightening loss of independent thought in our world. It is not a stretch at all to see that the very citizenry that has so easily accepted blatant deception by political leaders for their own gain, are the readers of, and believers in the magical thinking described in *The Secret*.

I think it may be a good time to dust off those old copies of Orwell's prophetic novel, 1984. Seriously.

The Antidote

Here is what I believe is at least a partial antidote to the poisonous Secret. The instructions for this prescription are to take daily, and encourage others to do the same.

THE ANTIDOTE:

- Know that the universe in which we live is, to say the least, a complex place. If someone claims to have solved this puzzle, look him or her straight in the eye and say, "You have got to be kidding."
- Respect the complexities of the human body (including the brain) and the human mind. Brilliant minds have been at work on these projects for some time now, and the best of them (and most of the worst of them, now that I think about it) will tell you we have a hell of a long, long way to go in understanding mind and body.

- Embrace and celebrate independent thought, and encourage others to do the same.
- Express genuine humility. I believe that humility and wisdom are closely linked. My definition for wisdom is this: *Wisdom is the accumulated knowledge of our ignorance.* The older I get, the more aware I become of all that I don't know and all that I don't control. Since I don't happen to believe that the meaning of my life revolves around knowing and controlling everything (I did when I was 20), this is perfectly okay with me.
- Look beyond your own Santa's little wish list of all the things you want to "manifest" in your life, and encourage others to do the same. Even if I could conjure up a Ferrari today, would that really be the best use of my magical powers?
- Don't focus so much on everything that you want, but instead on clarifying, and living in congruence with your personal value system. Doing this is not easy, but it is rewarding beyond measure. (Contrary to what *The Secret* tells us, just because something is difficult, or even painful, it does not mean we are doing something wrong. Sometimes it means we are doing something right.)
- Don't run from what scares you. And don't try to make what scares you go away by hiding your head in the sand or casting a magic spell in its direction. Instead, know that moving toward your fears, coming to grips with what really scares you, is part of learning what we need to learn, part of being a full grown, healthy adult.

One thing the authors of *The Secret* don't tell readers about the secret to their own successes is that every one of these people has been willing to do the hard work that is essential for success. Every one of these authors have faced and overcome many obstacles, both external and internal. And I would be willing to bet that most, if not all, of these authors, owe their successes to their own hard work, their willingness to take risks, including a willingness to fail. It is that kind of courage, that kind of nose-to-the-grindstone work ethic, that kind of relentless persistence that has the best shot at guaranteeing success. When I approach life with these things in mind, even if I fail to achieve my goals outwardly, my integrity remains in tact. I can say that I have given it my best. When I die, you can come to my wake and say one of two things: 1.) Thom accomplished everything he set out to accomplish, or 2.) Thom may not have accomplished everything he wanted to in this lifetime, but that son of a bitch never stopped trying.

A life well lived is far more valuable than success well accumulated.

In my reading of *The Secret*, I can find no reference to the necessity of hard work or persistence. In fact, in many ways, this is discouraged. We are told that we only need ask the universe one time for something and that as long as we believe it to be so, and as long as we are willing to receive it, it will be ours. Well, just in case I am wrong, and this secret-thing really works, I am humbly asking the universe to place this article in front of every single reader of *The Secret*, so that they might be challenged to consider *The Secret* with a reasonable amount of critical thinking. And I am asking --- just asking once --- that everyone who reads this send me five dollars.

FOOTNOTE:

¹Fundamentalist defined as someone who believes he has the truth and if you don't see it his way, you are not different, you are wrong.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Thom Rutledge is a psychotherapist and author of several books, including *Embracing Fear: How to Turn What Scares Us into Our Greatest Gift*. Thom is in the process of living a meaningful, and for the most part, enjoyable, life. Although he has been known to attribute some of that to the intangible thing called "grace," he credits none of it to the magical spells he has attempted to cast on the universe through the years. To learn more about Thom, his books, and his availability as a speaker, visit www.thomrutledge.com.

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Embracing Fear: How to Turn What Scares Us Into Our Greatest Gift (Harper Collins)
Available in bookstores, at Amazon.com, and other on line websites

Nutshell Essays: 52 Brief Lessons for Big Change (iUniverse.com)
Available only on line at iUniverse.com

The Greater Possibilities: Reflections on the Meaning of Genuine Success
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