

GUEST ESSAY

400 Years Ago, They Would Be Witches. Today, They Can Be Your Coach.

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By Molly Worthen

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Erica Carrico suspects that if she'd lived 400 years ago, she would have been accused of witchcraft. "Women who were healers, who were connected to the moon cycle and nature, they were considered witches," she told me. "I love following the moon. I feel divinely guided by my intuition. I've done the new moon and the full moon ceremony. I've practiced with crystals quite a bit and sage, sweat lodges. I've done so many things, just trying to find my way, what feels right."

Ms. Carrico is "all about the woo," as her website puts it, but she also trains women to be hard-driving entrepreneurs. She is a spiritual coach, a relatively new occupation that is dominated by women and appears to be growing, although hard numbers are elusive (to further confuse things, some practitioners refer to themselves as business coaches, albeit ones with a generous helping of New Age ritual on the side). At a time when more and more Americans call themselves spiritual but not religious, these coaches give us a glimpse of the allure and the hazards of 21st-century D.I.Y. religion.

Spiritual coaches are a new chapter in the long history of female religious entrepreneurship in America — a tradition that runs from Boston in the 1630s, when Anne Hutchinson's packed religious meetings outraged Puritan ministers, to today's evangelical conference circuit, dominated by demure yet forceful female evangelists who are not ordained but whose books and podcasts constitute major media empires. By blending eclectic religious practices with the gospel of entrepreneurship, spiritual coaches pitch their clients (who, like the coaches, are mostly women) the things that religion has always promised. They offer a path to meaning in the midst of suffering and tools to recover a sense of agency in a world that flings us around by our heels.

If we are tempted to dismiss their taste for crystals and energy healing as New Age flimflam, it's partly because they face up to something that many modern Westerners struggle to admit: Neither total submission to a traditional religious institution nor atheistic materialism feels right. We kind of do want the universe to hold our hand — without bossing us around too much.

A few years after college, Ms. Carrico had a lucrative job in corporate recruitment but felt depressed and unfulfilled. She backpacked through Asia and Africa, married and found another great job running a nonprofit, but it didn't help. She "had that restless feeling that I was still building someone else's dream," she said.

Shortly after giving birth to her second child, she sensed that something was wrong with her body. She had no symptoms but began dreaming about cancer and spotting references to it everywhere, from social media to highway billboards. She says doctors initially dismissed her concerns, but tests eventually revealed a tumor on her kidney. Surgery was successful, then doctors recommended chemotherapy and radiation. Ms. Carrico refused.

"I knew my body had created the tumor for a reason," she said. "There were things I was doing in my life that led me to have that diagnosis. My doctors said that wasn't the best idea, but it was a real spiritual calling at that point." Five years later, she is cancer-free and busy helping clients revamp careers and rethink life priorities in programs she calls "Awaken

Your Purpose” and the “Soul Business Accelerator.”

Her clients, it seems, are not put off by Ms. Carrico’s decision to ignore medical experts’ advice. They come to her precisely because of her story. (She told me that her coaching revenue passed \$1 million for the first time in 2021.) She sells the art of personal resolve and trust in the universe’s unseen powers — especially to women who have not found all the answers in traditional medicine, psychotherapy or career consulting.

Spiritual coaches are part of the life-coaching industry, which emerged in the 1970s and matured as a self-aware profession in the 1990s by combining self-help psychology, positive thinking and insights from the business-school world of leadership studies. “Early in my career, we defined coaching by what it was not: not therapy, not counseling, not mentoring,” Magdalena Mook, the chief executive of the International Coaching Federation, told me.

Coaches tend to focus on a client’s future rather than psychoanalyze the past. They stress a more holistic evaluation of the client’s life than a business consultant might offer. In theory, if they encounter a client with serious mental health problems, they refer the person to a medical professional, but the line between coaching and therapy is not always distinct, and the industry is essentially unregulated. Professional associations like the International Coaching Federation offer accreditation and oversight. But anyone can call herself a life coach and — following the model of yoga studios, which have long drawn significant income from certification courses for new instructors — offer a pricey training program to make you a life coach, too. (Life coaching is like any new, unregulated profession, with its share of peddlers of false promises.)

Over the past generation, life coaching has split into a dozen subdisciplines, almost all of them dominated by women. Women account for 75 percent of coach practitioners in North America, according to a 2019 study by the federation. One reason for the demographic imbalance, Ms. Mook speculated, is that early on, many coaches came from the worlds of counseling, nursing and other caring professions that also employ many women. And as gender disparities in pay and professional advancement persist in many fields, women let down by traditional support systems may find the sustenance they need in a coach. “This may be a way that women are finding support in their lives,” she said. Spiritual coaching seems to feature the starkest gender imbalance of any coaching field.

Typically, spiritual coaches offer a mix of one-on-one counseling and group coaching, as well as certification programs for aspiring coaches. “Some people say, ‘You’re just a coach that coaches coaches,’” Drea Guinto, who runs Soul Flow Co., based in Central California, told me. “My response is, maybe coaching is an emerging trade that is filling a true need in the population, and that is the reason why people are saying, I see there is profitability in this.” She offers a lifetime-access group coaching program for \$3,333, aimed at, according to her website, “soul-preneurs” who are “ambitious” yet “also spiritual” and seeking to launch their own businesses. “I see my clients as healers of different modalities, and my premise is that the world needs more healing,” she said.

Spiritual coaches face an extra dose of mistrust because they base their claim to transform lives and careers not just on self-taught psychology and dubious certifications but also on supernatural beliefs and rituals that they swear have worked for them. Coaches I interviewed told me that trusting the universe can replace chemotherapy, that healing prayers drive away chronic bladder infections, that a professional clairvoyant can read a client’s future in the universe’s “nonphysical, vibrational library,” as a recent Goop article put it, of past lives and future events called the Akashic records.

How should a skeptic think about such claims? “It would surely be pedantic and overscrupulous for those who can get their savage and primitive philosophy of mental healing verified in such experimental ways as this, to give them up at a word of command for more scientific therapeutics,” wrote the pragmatist philosopher William James when he considered testimonies of healing through supernatural “mind cure” more than a century ago. “What are we to think of all this? Has science made too wide a claim?” Perhaps such experiences “show the universe to be a more many-sided affair than any sect, even the scientific sect, allows for.”

Attention to unseen forces in the universe — especially the divine feminine — is partly a means for these coaches to counter the machismo that dominates American entrepreneurial culture. Many spiritual coaches target female would-be entrepreneurs with spiritual business accelerator programs that promise to help you find fulfillment while you make

money. “Part of it is strategy, but I come more from the point of view of consciousness — what wants to be birthed through me — versus a more capitalistic, masculine approach to business,” Ms. Guinto said. “Of course we love profit, but the point is unleashing that soul purpose.”

In American culture, entrepreneurship is the highest spiritual discipline. A successful start-up requires the self-abnegation that a monastic vocation used to demand: little sleep, coming to terms with your own failure and sacrificing bodily comforts in the service of a higher cause. The gig economy is an ersatz way to open this vocation to lesser souls, but it seems to fail many seekers. Spiritual coaches are responding to this failure. And in a culture where the feeling of truthiness is more important than scientifically verified facts, it’s natural to embrace a mishmash of spiritual healing practices that just feel right.

These coaches are religious pragmatists, consuming any product or practice that might offer existential comfort. “I identify as a Christian, but I’m very open to other ideas and opinions,” Krystal Vernee’, a coach in Maryland, told me. She became a coach after her business experience founding a pole-dancing studio prompted her to look for ways to draw on her life lessons to help others — with energy healing, if a client is interested. “If people are receptive, I let them know I’m a Reiki master. We might do some exercises, balancing your chakras,” she said. Her reflections on energy healing flowed right into comments on starting a business. “Your business is your body; your brand is your soul. That’s how I describe it to clients,” she said. “When you’re building a brand community, you’re building the people who will resonate with you, because like attracts like.”

When Kelly Ramos decided to found a business selling healing crystals, she signed up for a group coaching program and was relieved to find women who “were cut from the same cloth,” she told me. “I’m into astrology, tarot. I do guided meditations, full moon rituals. All of those things are part of my spiritual practices. I didn’t have to come into a space and explain myself or feel I couldn’t share because I didn’t want people to judge me.”

Spiritual coaches temper their approach to religion with the ideas of the great psychologists of self-empowerment: James on religious ideas as tools for living, Carl Rogers on authentic self-actualization, Carl Jung’s concept of the shadow, the dark side of every person, which we cannot eradicate but must learn to accept. What spiritual coaches call shadow work, Ms. Ramos said, “gives grace to the parts of us that are human. In an organized religion like Catholicism, it’s ‘Repent. You should be ashamed that’s a part of you. Go do 10 Hail Marys,’ whereas in this space, that’s a part of who you are — how do you change that or make peace with that?”

A 2018 Pew survey found that 62 percent of Americans subscribe to some kind of New Age belief, like reincarnation or the reliability of astrology and psychics. If such ideas are so common, why is it that mocking New Age spiritual beliefs is one of the last acceptable prejudices in modern America? Are these ideas really any wackier than believing that Moses heard God talking in a burning bush or that a first-century Galilean rose from the dead?

As a historian of religion, I’m trained to stay as neutral as possible in my teaching and writing on spiritual practices. But I admit, I often have the instinct to smirk or roll my eyes when someone mentions Reiki or crystal healing. Talking to these coaches pushed me to interrogate that impulse. Once you know their stories, it is impossible to make fun of them.

Ms. Carrico and Ms. Guinto survived cancer in their 30s. Ms. Ramos is the mother of a pediatric cancer survivor. Ms. Vernee’ made it through a harrowing divorce. All felt let down by mainstream medicine, mental health care and traditional religion. They have done what they needed to do in order to find meaning in immense suffering.

Theirs is hardly the only worldview that pleads with supernatural forces to intercede in earthly life, that attempts to assert control while taking comfort in divine will or fate written in the stars. And if the core of their practices are visualization and positive thinking — manifesting, as many coaches put it, the good thing you want — such psychological disciplines are a mainstay of some mainstream Christian ministries, Eastern traditions and self-help manuals, reinforced by social science studies claiming that they actually work pretty well.

Spiritual coaches provoke a raised eyebrow, in part, because secular people still believe in the ghosts of Christendom — including the idea that religion should be hard and not particularly democratic. It shouldn’t be something that a frustrated woman can just assemble for herself; it should require submission to some venerable institution with ancient traditions. I’m not sure those ghosts are entirely make-believe. Self-made liberation can turn into an existential hamster wheel:

Manifest one accolade, and then you're breathlessly onto the next. What's the point? Perhaps true freedom "is not the absence of limitations and constraints but it is finding the right ones, those that fit our nature and liberate us," the Protestant theologian Timothy Keller wrote in his book "The Reason for God."

As church attendance and other marks of the authority of traditional religion continue to decline, American hunger for a sense of transcendent meaning isn't going away. Instead, it is fusing with a longstanding civil religion that worships the entrepreneur as a guru and mixes and matches ideas that help us to imagine our way to a better life, to pretend that making up our own rules will bring true freedom. Centuries ago, spiritual coaches would have been heretics — because, like most heretics throughout church history, they are not prophets of an alien faith. They take familiar ideas to an extreme conclusion and confront the fears that most of us try to ignore.

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