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The American Dream
The Real Secret
 Michael Shermer 10.09.07, 6:00 PM ET

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According to that sage dispenser of pop philosophy, Yogi Berra, "In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is."

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This is sound advice for anyone contemplating plunking down \$23.95 for one of the hottest-selling books in America today, *The Secret* (also a DVD at \$34.95), by Rhonda Byrne and a cadre of self-help gurus. Thanks to Oprah Winfrey's endorsement, the series has sold over 3 million copies combined.

The Secret is a self-help book in the tradition of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* and Anthony Robbins' *Awaken the Giant Within*. But *The Secret* makes claims that go well beyond such prosaic self-help advice as writing down your goals, keeping a daily success journal and tackling your fears head-on. *The Secret* claims that science has discovered mysterious forces at work in the cosmos that when properly tapped can unleash unimaginable wealth, happiness and success.

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That force is called the "law of attraction." Like attracts like. Positive thoughts sally forth from your body as magnetic energy, then return in the form of whatever it was you were thinking about. Like money. Byrne and her success sycophants think a lot about money. "The only reason any person does not have enough money is because they are blocking money from coming to them with their thoughts," we are told. The film's promotional trailer is filled with such vainglorious money mantras as: "Everything I touch turns to gold." "I am a money magnet." And my favorite: "There is more money being printed for me right now." Where? At the U.S. Mint?

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A parade of shiny, happy people repeat *The Secret's* secret. "Everything that is coming into your life you are attracting into your life. It is attracted to you by the images you are holding in your mind," says Bob Proctor, a self-proclaimed philosopher. "You attract what you think about most," proclaims entrepreneur John Assaraf. A writer named Mike Dooley says the principle can be reduced to three words: "Thoughts become things." Author Lisa Nicols declares, "The law of attraction is obedient. It will give you what you want every time. You draw everything to yourself. You draw them to you like a magnet."

It is magnetism where *The Secret* shifts from nonfiction to nonsense. "Every thought has a frequency," *The Secret's* narrator explains. "We can measure a thought. If you are thinking that thought over and over again, you are emitting that frequency."

Not exactly.

The brain does produce electrical activity. Ion currents flow among neurons during synaptic transmission, and in accordance with Maxwell's equations, any electrical current produces a magnetic field (and vice versa--think of a power generator turbine being turned by flowing water and generating electricity from the spinning magnets). But these fields are minuscule and can only be measured using an extremely sensitive Superconducting Quantum Interference Device, in a room heavily shielded against outside magnetic sources.

Plus, remember the inverse square law: The intensity of an energy wave radiating from a source is inversely proportional to the square of the distance from the source. An object twice as far away from the energy source receives only one-fourth the energy.

In other words, the brain's magnetic field quickly dissipates away from the skull, and is promptly swamped by other magnetic sources--radios, televisions, cellphones and the Earth's magnetic field, which overpowers it by 10 orders of magnitude. And don't forget that in magnets opposites attract--positive is attracted to negative--so logically, positive thoughts should attract negative things into your life.

You don't need science to prove *The Secret* is codswallop--just a modicum of thinking. If wealth and poverty are the result of nothing more than our thoughts, should we blame those poor starving Zimbabweans for being just a bunch of pessimistic sourpusses? And what about the victims of Auschwitz? If the law of attraction is true, then every oppressed, enslaved or exterminated group in history had it coming. That idea is beyond wrongheaded--it's evil.

Is there anything we can do that works for success? That depends on what you mean by "work" and "success." I once attended a convention whose keynote speaker was Mark Victor Hansen, now well known as the co-author of the wildly popular *Chicken Soup for the Soul* book series. One of his more memorable lines from his inspirational speech was "This stuff works when you work it," by which he meant that the real secret to success was working hard toward success.

That speech was in 1980. I didn't hear about Hansen again until the late 1990s, when his books went platinum. Hansen proved that if you try enough things over and over you stand a better chance of success.

The "over and over" part is the key to understanding how such self-help programs actually work. According to the investigative journalist Steve Salerno, in his 2006 book *Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless*, the various self-help talks and tapes offer a momentary boost of inspiration that fades after a few weeks. Salerno should know, for he was once the self-help book editor for Rodale Press. It turns out that market surveys reveal that "the most likely customer for a book on any given topic was someone who had bought a similar book within the preceding 18 months."

The irony of "the 18-month rule" for this genre, says Salerno, is this: "If what we sold worked, one would expect lives to improve. One would not expect people to need further help from us--at least not in that same problem area, and certainly not time and time again."

Such self-help and success programs contain a shield that protects them from skeptical scrutiny. If you try one and your life does not improve, it is your fault--your thoughts were not positive enough. The solution? More of the same, or at least the same message repackaged into new products and programs.

Do they work? No one knows. According to Salerno, no scientific evidence indicates that any of the countless self-help success programs--from fire-walking to 12-stepping--work better than doing something else, or even doing nothing.

But the law of large numbers means that given the millions of people who have tried such programs, it is inevitable that some will improve. And we only ever hear about the success stories, not the failures. Here's an episode of Oprah Winfrey's show that you will never see: "Next on Oprah, we'll introduce you to a dozen people who tried out a brand new money-making method, and not one of them got rich. Stay tuned. You won't want to miss today's special show."

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