

Advice and Consent:
The Threat of "How-To" Books

There was a time, I've been told, when America was the land of rugged individualists, of sturdy independence, when self-reliance was a national credo. Not any more. Today Americans seem unable to do anything without first checking with their lawyer and then consulting with a panel of experts. We still like to do things for ourselves, no doubt. But we seem to need advisors now to assure us that we are doing them in the quickest, most acceptable, most profitable, or most successful way. Rube Goldberg, it seems, has ceased to be an amusing figure; he is now simply cost-inefficient.

Take sex, for instance. It used to be assumed that sex came "naturally," so naturally, in fact, that no amount of secrecy could prevent teenagers from finding out about it. Nowadays, the American virgin requires at least five sex manuals, a Masters (& Johnson) in sex education, and the advice of three reputable talk show hosts before he or she feels prepared to join the ranks of the initiated.

Perhaps the clearest indication of this national addiction to advice, however, is the best-seller list, overwhelmingly populated with how-to books. In better days this cultural barometer was dominated by histories and biographies. If there were lessons to be learned from the past, they were left for the individual reader to discover for himself. But, alas, those were more leisurely times. Restaurants still cooked with heat, not microwaves, and people had time to digest ideas as well as their meals. If ours is the age of convenience foods, it

is also, it seems, the age of pre-packaged advice and experience. Why waste your time on trial and error, these books seem to say, when we can show you the best way to handle all your problems without any waste, effort, or inconvenience. Simply follow the easy directions....

What has happened to transform us from rough riders to reflex readers, from declaring our independence to announcing our inadequacy in every list of non-fiction best-sellers? One explanation might suggest that the change is more apparent than real. People have always needed and asked for help. The real change is where they are seeking it. Forty years ago the family and neighborhood were stable and enduring institutions, a network of physical and psychological support. If you needed help or advice, there was always some cousin Mary, Uncle Joe, or big Frank in the plumbing business to relieve your anxieties, loan you some money, or stop the leak. Today, with that network in shreds, we are likely to turn to more public kinds of advice to satisfy our need for help or assurance.

But though urbanization may help to suggest why books, radio, and television have replaced the family guru, it does not explain either the extent or the peculiarities of our current infatuation with instant advice. For "how-to" books are less a phenomenon than an industry. The recent edition of Books in Print, for instance, lists not hundreds but *thousands* of such "self-help" books. And this number includes only titles beginning with the magic words: "How To...." Thousands more cry

out their services under such banners as "The Complete Guide to....," "Everything You Wanted to Know About....," and "The Master Plan for...." Not surprisingly, given the extent of this industry born of inability, there are even books explaining how to write "how-to" books.

Much of our reliance upon these instant managers is probably based upon a touching but misguided faith in science and technology. In this age of artificial hearts and shuttles into space, it is hard to resist the feeling that every obstacle to our material comfort can be surmounted, demolished, or side-stepped by the application of the right tool or the right method. The new credo is not "Ask and you shall receive," but "Insert the right key and all doors shall be open unto you." Indeed, it did not surprise me to find such obviously "religious" books as How to Be Sure of Crowns in Heaven and How to Know When God Speaks rubbing metaphorical shoulders (or at least book spines) with more "secular" titles such as How To Be Young, Rich, and Free All Your Life and How To Build a One Hundred Million Dollar Agency in 5 Years or Less. Faith seemed to be at least as much a pre-requisite for one as for the other.

But it is not simply because such books often hold out false hopes for the meek at heart--the promise of instant wealth, irresistible charm, complete happiness, a batting average over .300--that I find them disturbing. They also seem, mistakenly, to suggest that the joy of such goals is in their possession rather than in their pursuit, that the businessman's delight is solely in having money rather than

building a business. Like much of our culture in the 80's, they seem too goal-oriented.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the recent crop of best-sellers devoted to the solution of the Rubik's cube. To the more self-reliant among us, reading the solution to a puzzle would seem to be as destructive of authentic enjoyment as being informed of the killer in a whodunit. Both result in rather empty triumphs. But in this approach, the Rubik's books are merely symptomatic. The aim of all the "how-to" books seems to be a solution without problem solving, a product without productive initiative, the attainment of knowledge without experience.

There is no doubt that the fruits of the scientific method have been an enormous boon to humanity. But with every major advance in technology have come recurrent problems of technological alienation--the dissociation of the laborer from the product of his labor by mass production, the dislocation of man and nature by the encroachment of the city. In each case, the price of progress has been the loss of some precious intimacy.

Today, however, we may be facing a new form of technological threat. For in relying upon the advice of "how-to" experts, upon formalized procedures for obtaining predictable results, we are yielding to a form of alienation all the more insidious for its seeming benignity--the alienation from individual experience itself.

I have no desire to sound like a prophet of doom, nor do I

intend to exaggerate the significance of a fad. But when we rely more upon ourselves and less upon the programmatic advice of such "self-help" books, when we begin again to engage our problems directly in all their human complexity, we may discover that life is worth living for its pains as well as its pleasures, for its journeys as well as its arrivals. And that would be helpful indeed.