How to Become an Advice Guru:  
The New Age Spirit of Entrepreneurial Selfhood

by

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Abstract

This dissertation updates Max Weber’s (1904-05) celebrated thesis on the relationship between Protestantism and modern capitalism through an analysis of the interplay between the economic ethics of New Age spiritualism and the economic spirit of online entrepreneurialism. It extends Boltanski and Chiapello’s (1999) discussion of different mutations in the spirit of capitalism by analyzing 21st century religious and entrepreneurial texts, in addition to ethnographic data generated through participant observation and qualitative interviews with 28 professionals who are reinventing their identities as entrepreneurial “advice gurus” at a self-help seminar in the United States. The core argument of this dissertation is that beginning in the mid-1990s, a new spirit of capitalism emerged in the United States that stems from and finds resolution through New Age spiritual movements that blend Eastern and Western religious traditions. To this end, I examine how the calling of the entrepreneur has been supplemented by and transformed into the dharma of the advice guru through a thematic analysis of the manifest and latent content of two self-help texts that display the economic ethics of New Age spiritualism. I also demonstrate how New Age entrepreneurs blend the American ideal of self-invention with a certain popular interpretation of the Hindu principle of reincarnation to construct a relationship between spiritual transformation and upward social mobility. The charismatic form of leadership and sectarian characteristics of the self-help seminar are discussed for how they provide an ideal-typical portrait of the “network capital” (Elliott & Urry 2010) that is required to access this global community. To supplement my analysis of the economics ethics of New Age spiritualism, I draw on principles of poststructuralist theory to reveal the interpretive repertoires of entrepreneurial selfhood that participants use to construct ‘expert’ identities. I conclude with a discussion of how the rational pursuit of self-fulfillment emerges as a key spiritual and economic imperative that distinguishes the New Age spirit of capitalism in the early 21st century.
Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished work by the author, C. Forsey. The fieldwork reported in Chapters 1-4 was covered by UBC Ethics Certificate number H12-02407.
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When I was 9 years old my synchronized swimming team organized a fundraiser for our club. We asked family members and friends to donate money for every 25 meter lap we could swim up to a maximum of 100 laps. It was around the 75th lap that my father approached the side of the pool and told me I could stop if I wanted to. According to his recollection, I was the last one in the pool and could barely maintain a doggy paddle. Despite feeling exhausted, I declined the offer and continued to swim. At some point, a senior member of my team jumped into the pool and began swimming next to me. I remember her smiling, nodding and encouraging me underwater until I completed the 100th lap. Jon Franklin stationed me in his office, gently inquired about my progress, and swam next to me while I wrote this entire dissertation and for that I will always be grateful.

My trip to Ireland with Pat Burnett and Francois LaChapelle solidified the importance of having brilliant and trustworthy friends during graduate school. I will never forget our fiercely animated and inebriated debates about relational sociology and Pierre Bourdieu. The Department of Criminal Justice at the University of Winnipeg deserves enormous recognition for the different ways they continue to support me – employment, office space, parking stalls, writing tips, venting sessions, scholarly debates, inappropriate humour, work parties, and good wine. I especially want to thank Jane Murray and Harry Rosenbaum for their unwavering support during my transition back to Winnipeg.

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Introduction

Spirits at Work

As a young and aspiring sociologist studying at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, I became interested in career change and professional renewal during the second year of my doctoral studies. At the time, I was attending the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) as a visiting research student and working on a comprehensive examination in sociological theory. The decision to spend some time abroad was inspired by my co-supervisor’s suggestion that it would be good for my professional development to broaden my horizons and gain some research experience elsewhere, especially since I had stayed at UBC for both of my graduate degrees.

While the experience of relocating to a new country was exciting and my success in securing funding for the trip relieved some financial pressures, my overall experience of studying in the Gender Institute at LSE did not go as planned. The faculty member who was responsible for overseeing my progress showed little interest in my work and would not allow me to register for the discussion groups which were part of the graduate course she taught on Gender and Media. As an auditor who nonetheless paid $25,000 in international student fees, I was only allowed to attend the lectures, a disappointing outcome given all the intellectual benefits I gained from graduate seminars at UBC. Office space was also very limited at LSE and priority was given to doctoral students who were based in the Gender Institute, meaning I often worked in the library or in my dorm room at Good Enough College in isolation from other students.
In retrospect, there were two issues that collided during my six month stay in London and which nearly culminated in the decision to quit my PhD. On the one hand, I despised writing comprehensive exams and could not appreciate how they contributed to the advancement of my doctoral research. My colleagues at the Gender Institute were not required to write comprehensive exams and exchanged looks of disgust when I explained the process. While they devoured readings that spoke directly to their research interests, I was lost in a reading list that no longer reflected mine. Combined with the lack of support I received from my supervisor at the Gender Institute, I felt isolated, discouraged, and bored. I avoided the work, wasted hours on the Internet, and spent days strolling through the streets of London asking myself whether I felt passionately enough about sociology to make it through the next phase of my degree.

The second issue arose alongside and perhaps even fed into my discontent with completing the exam requirements for my doctoral degree. Several conversations with professors at LSE, a workshop on the downsides of a doctoral degree from the perspective of future employers, the disenchantment I shared with other students about prospective job opportunities, and the obvious saturation of PhD graduates in the job market began to niggle at my confidence. Contemplating my experience on the sociology hiring committee at UBC where over 300 applicants were considered for one position, the growing ubiquity of doctoral degrees in Canada, and the earning potential of a PhD graduate, I began to explore other options and to think of my career in sociology as “plan b”.

Who would I become if I abandoned my career in sociology? A series of failed thought experiments in which I considered some entrepreneurial options led me to the advice literature on business and marketing. In June 2012, I contacted a trusted friend about a
program she mentioned during a recent conversation about her transition out of the corporate world:

Hi Valerie,

I was just doing a bit of research on Brendon Burchard and was hoping you could direct me to the weblink for the seminar you attended. Have you read any of his books?

Thanks,
Caitlin

Later that day, Valerie responded with the following message:

Hi Caitlin!

Yes, he’s truly brilliant.

Anna, myself, Erica, Lynn, Kendall, Fiona, and Melanie – we all attended his online and in-person Experts Academy this May – it’s phenomenal, life changing really. Anna and I are planning to go “out there” as experts and are now in product development…very exciting. His next event for Experts Academy is in early September (4 day event in Santa Clara). And you get to do it online as well.

I will say this: it drives you to your destiny. Have fun watching: Love, Valerie

Cut and paste this link:

https://burchardgroup.infusionsoft.com/go/ea1/Valerie

When I clicked on the email link, I was immediately redirected to a website that solicits opt-in email addresses from prospective subscribers. In the field of internet marketing, this web page is known as a “squeeze page” because its sole purpose is to “squeeze” contact information out of visitors for the purpose of marketing products and services through email. Online marketers devote significant time and money to creating a

1 The names of all research participants have been changed to ensure confidentiality.
subscriber list to which they can send regular email messages. The goal of sending regular emails is to acquire new customers, enhance relationships with current or previous customers, encourage repeat business, and convince consumers to purchase new products and services. Advanced marketers will also use video messages to communicate success stories that prospective consumers can relate to when making buying decisions and present visitors with multiple incentives in exchange for their contact information. In this case, the squeeze page offered a free training video in exchange for my first name and a valid email address:

FREE training video shows how to monetize your passions and expertise online in 10 simple steps. The world's highest-paid authors, speakers, coaches, marketers, and online thought leaders use these exact strategies. In this first FREE VIDEO, famed marketing trainer and #1 New York Times bestselling author Brendon Burchard reveals his million-dollar plan for monetizing who you are and what you know online. These secret positioning and promotion strategies helped Brendon start from scratch and earn $4.6 million online in 18 months. Enter your info for access:

When I entered my personal information and clicked “Watch Video Now”, I immediately received a series of videos in which a 35 year old man named Brendon Burchard was explaining how to build a lucrative business and a meaningful life by sharing “how to” information with others. The video lasted approximately 60 minutes and offered advice on how to become a highly-paid expert through books, speeches, seminars, life coaching, and online marketing. Professionally, this appealed to me since I have long valued mentor-apprentice relationships and often receive requests for guidance from fellow students who are struggling with statistics, essay writing, and research proposals. By the end of the fourth video, I was ready to accept Burchard’s offer to purchase the Experts Academy Home Study System for the discounted price of $995, a good deal considering Valerie paid the regular price of $1995.
The following week, I received a large box that contained a book titled *The Millionaire Messenger: Make a Difference and a Fortune Selling Your Advice*, twenty DVDs, six audio CDs, two large binders of notes, and two tickets to a live seminar. I spent the summer reading the book, watching the DVDs, and perusing a members-only site where Burchard periodically posted additional videos and marketing materials. In September 2012, I travelled to Santa Clara, California and joined over 900 people for the live event. Over the course of four days, we were asked to turn off our cell phones, disengage from the online world and immerse ourselves in the process of reinventing our professional identities as “advice gurus”.

The word “guru” is a Sanskrit term for “master” or “teacher” and the traditional etymology of the term is based on the interplay between darkness and light; the syllable *gu* means “darkness” or “shadow” and the syllable *ru* means “to push away” or “he who disperses” (Grimes 1996: 133). Whereas Indian religions use the term “guru” to describe a master/teacher who has achieved spiritual enlightenment, Americans generally use the term to describe a person with extensive knowledge or expertise. As a teacher, lifelong learner and professional sociologist, I was drawn to Burchard’s portrayal of the stable, lucrative and meaningful career path of the advice guru. Not only did it resonate with my sense of self as an expert and teacher, but it also promised to address the spiritual and economic challenges I was experiencing as a disenchanted PhD candidate on the academic job market.

When Burchard asked the crowd how many people were in search of a meaningful life and career, nearly everyone raised their hand. Although the gathering resembled a congregation of faithful devotees assembled to hear a touring evangelist, the main goal of this self-help seminar was to help people become advice experts and develop businesses
online. Participants were advised to think of their life story as the basis for creating products, brands, and messages they wanted to share with the world. Even people without formal education or work experience were told they could position themselves as experts in a given field, so long as they followed a strict set of prescriptive guidelines for becoming an entrepreneurial advice guru.

What I observed and experienced at the event completely astounded me: middle-aged professionals jumping, dancing and clapping to Top 40 radio hits; group work that encouraged sharing stories of personal crisis with complete strangers; hugs, high-fives and other intimate exchanges between new acquaintances; group meditations, positive affirmations, and visualization strategies designed to clear “blocked energy”; psychics, mystics and other spiritual teachers claiming expertise in divine law; self-help publishers seated at small round tables with dozens of aspiring authors waiting to pitch their ideas in hopes of securing a book deal; and a self-made millionaire who was claiming legitimacy as the world’s foremost expert on how to become an advice guru in what still remains a poorly defined and largely unregulated industry.

This figure rose steadily from $5.7 billion in 2000 to $8.56 billion in 2005, and was projected to exceed $12 billion by 2008 (Salerno 2008). The appeal of this literature is understandable; the tremendous growth in self-help publishing parallels an overall North American trend of secularization, destabilized job opportunities, stable rates of divorce, high rates of depression, and a general push towards New Age philosophies grounded in motivational psychology, quantum physics, and holistic health. Not surprisingly, some of the most popular topics in the advice industry include personal motivation, health, leadership, finance, business, marketing, relationships, spirituality, personal style, and productivity (McGee 2005).

A number of historians and sociologists who study self-help literature have reported that study participants frequently cite the Bible as their most important self-help book (e.g. Simonds 1992; Lichterman 1992; Starker 2008). This raises important questions about whether “self-help” should be a category defined by the reader’s use of a text or the particular characteristics of the text itself. If self-help literature is defined as a mode of reading, then nearly any publication could fall within that category since many people have turned to poetry, fiction, and religious texts for guidance and inspiration. McGee (2005) argues that while defining self-help texts in terms of its social use enables the analyst to consider how self-help texts are tied to historical times and places, categories can become vast and untenable since the reader’s imaginative use of the text is not subject to direct observation.

Within the broad category of non-fiction self-help books, Starker (2008) maintains that the characteristics most critical to the definition of contemporary self-help are intended audience and presumed utility. Self-help books are accessible, inexpensive and portable sources of advice which are clearly addressed to lay readers (Rimke 2000). They attempt to
communicate in an interesting, readable and simplified manner and make few demands on 
readers in terms of prior knowledge or educational background. With respect to content, self-
help books are assumed to be of immediate and practical use to the reader and usually offer 
instructions on some aspect of everyday life.

Whereas some self-help books are *anecdotal* and use interesting, amusing, or 
thought-provoking incidents as a basis for offering advice, others are far more *informational* 
and rely explicitly on empirical research to support their directives to readers (Starker 2008). 
Self-help authors tend to incorporate both types of content, though analysts usually 
characterize a given text as leaning in one direction or the other, with a few located at the 
extremes. *The Millionaire Messenger*, for instance, is an example of a self-help book that 
relies primarily on anecdotal evidence. As I detail in Chapters 1 and 2, the anecdotal quality 
of Burchard’s book is evident in the account of the car accident he survived while working in 
the Dominican Republic and the steps he took to transform his unfulfilling life and career 
into a meaningful and lucrative online business. The anecdotal quality of the book continues 
as Burchard reveals the informal way through which he gathered, documented and 
synthesized the works of previous advice gurus in the self-improvement industry including 
Deepak Chopra, Wayne Dyer, Stephen Covey, David Bach, John Gray and John Maxwell.

Unlike professional research articles which are scrutinized by knowledgeable 
reviewers prior to acceptance for publication, self-help books are unregulated except for the 
limitations imposed by production and distribution schedules, profit margins, and 
supply/demand ratios (Starker 2008). According to Stine (1997), there are two primary 
objectives in selling a successful self-help book: *message* and *publicity*. A clever message 
means a catchy title, a relevant topic, and promises of successes. A self-help book must
captivate the reader’s attention and then offer some kind of help people perceive that they need. To convince readers that a book is effective, self-help publishers will print promises and money back guarantees on the front and back of covers. One study found that among 232 self-help books published between 1970 and 1983, the vast majority advertised their message with words and phrases such as ‘new’, ‘unique’, ‘revolutionary’, ‘proven and effective’, and ‘easy to learn and use’ (Forest 1988). The study also found that authors made a total of 2,200 promises of specific types of cures or improvements – an average of just under 10 promises per book.

In the end, the popularity of a self-help book has little to do with the content itself and more to do with marketing and publicity. Book publishers will use a variety of marketing strategies to ensure potential consumers view their products, including author appearances on television and radio shows, book reviews, newspaper and magazine articles, online Q&A sessions, public lectures, and book tours. Authors and publishers also know that positive recommendations are very powerful. The importance of word of mouth is largely attributable to the evangelical effect of self-help books; when readers feel a self-help book has affected their lives, they usually want to share the book with others. Within the self-help publishing industry, word of mouth usually means endorsements from other experts or celebrities who are solicited by the author and/or the publishing company. While expert endorsements do not always translate into higher sales among consumers, celebrity endorsements can increase the number of copies a national bookstore chain is willing to purchase.

The author’s gender and educational credentials can also affect the status and success of a self-help book. With respect to gender, approximately 85% of all the top 10 bestsellers listed on Publishers Weekly from 1950-2000 are written by men (Whelan 2004). Among this
sample, it is interesting to note the interaction between gender and expert status; among female authors, the majority are “survivors” writing about their personal experiences, whereas the majority of male authors are “experts” who draw on their educational backgrounds and experiences in the field. Author credentials support the validity of statements and may come in the form of life experience or an advanced degree. The self-help editors that Whelan (2004) interviewed report that while educational credentials are still very important, they are giving way to the value of personal experience and inspirational stories. Despite this trend, most self-help books are still written by experts. Approximately 80% of the bestselling self-help titles published between 1950 and 2000, for instance, were written by a self-help professional with an advanced degree such as an MD or a PhD (Whelan 2004). Although publishers prefer authors who have a professional degree or who have written extensively within a particular field (Stine 1997), self-help consumers tend to define expertise more broadly. Self-help authors who interview people and who are able to recognize patterns among their experiences, for example, are considered experts among people who regularly purchase self-help (Grodin 1991).

The Experts Academy live event also drew my attention to the phenomenon of self-invention, an ideal that has long infused American culture with a sense of endless possibility. Nowhere is this ideal more evident than in the growing literature on self-improvement where Americans are encouraged to engage in life-long learning, maintain a youthful appearance, and search for their “true calling” in an effort to stay (re)employable. In an economy where opportunity, insecurity, flexibility and uncertainty coexist, McGee (2005) observes a marked increase in the number of self-help titles that advise readers on how to invest in themselves, manage themselves, and continuously improve themselves. While the ideal of self-invention
and individual success epitomized in entrepreneurial figures such as Brendon Burchard may serve to encourage American workers during challenging economic times, it also provides an interesting opportunity to explore why people who are struggling to secure stable and meaningful work reinvent their professional identities as entrepreneurial “advice gurus”.

**Locating Spirits of Capitalism: Theoretical Influences**

Within the scholarly literature on self-employment, there is an emphasis on “push” and “pull” factors, with conditions in local labour markets and religious affiliation playing a key role in self-employment decisions (Minns & Rizov 2005). For the large number of American middle-class professionals who were coping with unexpected changes in their material fortunes as a result of the “Great Recession” that began in December 2007, Experts Academy offered a venue for exploring an entrepreneurial career at a time when the U.S. economy lost more than 8 million jobs and witnessed the national unemployment rate nearly double to 10 percent (Fairlie 2011).

Recessions can have a negative effect on the formation rate of new businesses insofar as consumer demand for products and services decreases and banks are less inclined to approve business loans; however, they can also push individuals into “necessity” entrepreneurship due to job loss and reduced labour market opportunities (see Newman 1999). Between 1996 and 2010, for instance, Fairlie (2011: 34) observes the entrepreneurship rate follows the same cyclical pattern as the unemployment rate (Figure 1)\(^2\). Both were high in 1996 and then declined steadily during the strong economic growth period of Internet-based companies in the late 1990s; both rates increased in the early 2000s when the dotcom

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\(^2\) Adapted from Fairlie (2011: 34).
bubble burst and investors lost substantial sums of money; and both declined again in 2004 until the most recent recession when they both increased very rapidly between 2007 and 2009.

![Graph showing U.S. Rates of Entrepreneurship and Unemployment 1996-2010](image)

**Figure 1 – U.S. Rates of Entrepreneurship and Unemployment 1996-2010**

Although the industry distribution of new businesses created during recessionary and non-recessionary periods is quite similar (Fairlie 2011), entrepreneurial ventures categorized as “professional and business services” represent the largest proportion of new businesses created in the post-recession era (28%). This trend is not surprising given the demand for professional expertise in societies where economic growth is increasingly based on creating, evaluating, and trading knowledge. The term “knowledge economy” is often used to describe the latest stage of capitalist development, a transition marked by upheavals in communication technology and the intensification of global networks beginning in the late 1990s (Elliot & Urry 2011).
Economic conditions and the downsizing/outsourcing strategies that business firms use to recover costs may “push” individuals into self-employment; however, there are noneconomic ways of looking at self-employment decisions as well. The theoretical tradition that links religious affiliation to entrepreneurship owes much to the work of German sociologist Max Weber and his celebrated work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* originally published in 1904 and 1905. Unlike Marxist approaches which emphasize economic factors and class-based interests, Weber argues that ideas play a central role in shaping how material interests are realized. According to Weber, people may also be “pulled” into entrepreneurship by their desire for religious salvation, status and honour as they are for money and private property. On these grounds, Weber (1985: 27) incorporates Marx’s argument into his own work while offering what he sees as a necessary corrective: “the influence of certain religious ideas on the development of an economic spirit”. This argument sparked one of the most important and enduring sociological debates concerning the relationship between capitalism and religion, a debate that continues to hold sway given the emergence of contemporary figures such as the entrepreneurial “advice guru”.

Although the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was written shortly after Weber’s recovery from a depressive illness, it skillfully captures Weber’s career-long preoccupation with the relationship between the economic ethics of a religious tradition and the economic spirit of modern capitalism. By “economic ethics”, Weber (1958a: 267) points to the “practical impulses for action which are founded in the psychological and pragmatic contexts of religion”. For instance, there are (at least) two set of evaluative attitudes that constitute the economic ethics of a religious tradition and which have practical implications with respect to work and profit-making. The first set of attitudes center on the meaning of
work, in addition to the types of work that are either sanctioned or forbidden. Work, for example, can be viewed as a vocation; however, it can also be viewed with indifference or with disdain (Swedberg 1999). Relatedly, some types of work may be forbidden for moral reasons (e.g. sex work), while others may be sanctioned due to heredity (e.g. taking over the family business). The second set of attitudes center on profit-making and wealth. Some religions, for instance, may disapprove of accumulating and flaunting possessions, while others may encourage individuals to indulge in luxuries. Most religious traditions consider wealth acceptable if it is acquired through war, inheritance or work; however, some religions disapprove of lending money for profit and consider loan interest to be usurious or sinful (Swedberg 1999).

In contrast to standard sociological concepts of correlation and causality, Weber (1985) is not positing an invariant and necessary relationship between the economic ethics of a religious tradition and the economic spirit of capitalism. Weber’s notion of causality is different from conventional scientific usage insofar as he describes causality as an attempt to establish the probability that a series of ideas and events are related or have an ‘elective affinity’. Weber’s use of ideal types as a method for framing his analyses of the elective affinities between the economic ethics of Protestantism and the economic spirit of modern capitalism is significant for it is through the construction of ideal-types that the evaluative ideas of the researcher are united into a conceptual whole. The ideal typical construct emerges through research and exposition, though it is never corresponds perfectly with reality. As a method of perspectival understanding that is “indispensable for heuristic as well as expository purposes” (Weber 1949: 89), the construction of ideal types is essential for determining the cultural relevance of events and for tracing concrete relationships.
In order to fully appreciate how Weber relates the Protestant ethic to the economic spirit of capitalism, it is worth taking a closer look at the documentary sources upon which his entire argument rests. Kemple’s (2014) schematic representation of Weber’s thesis provides a useful starting point as it effectively illustrates Weber’s use of historical figures and monumental texts in developing an account of the relationship between Protestantism and modern capitalism (Figure 2). Using the shape of bifocals – one of Benjamin Franklin’s many celebrated inventions – Kemple (2014: 77-78) schematizes certain aspects of the “ocular and acoustic metaphors” which Weber (1985) uses to develop a provisional description rather than a conceptual definition of the spirit of capitalism.

![Figure 2 – Weber’s Bifocals 1.0](image)

Whereas Franklin’s invention was designed to “enhance the ability to see things more clearly which are both near and far away” (Kemple 2014: 78, original italics), Weber’s
bifocal approach suggests that the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism offer contrasting yet coordinated viewpoints on *rational asceticism* that can be examined from different angles and distances. With respect to the spirit of capitalism, for Weber this entails a close-up view of the personal life and writings of Benjamin Franklin, an important historical figure who can be viewed as “an assemblage of such counter-factual, anti-realistic, and even fictional, exaggerated, or distorted viewpoints (*Gesichtspunkte*) that highlight certain features of the spirit of capitalism” (Kemple 2014: 76). Although Franklin is widely known as an author, politician, scientist, inventor, printer, musician, civic activist, and founding figure of the United States, Weber (1985: 48-49) is primarily interested in the entrepreneurial ethic Franklin expounds in his *Advice to a Young Tradesman*:

**[On industry]:**

Remember that *time is money*. He that can earn ten shillings a day by his labour, and goes abroad, or sits idle, one half of that day, though he spends but sixpence during his diversion or idleness, ought not to reckon that the only expense; he has really spent or rather thrown away, five shillings besides.

**[On frugality]:**

Beware of thinking all your own that you possess and of living accordingly. It is a mistake that many people who have credit fall into. To prevent this, keep an exact account for some time both of your expenses and your income…you will discover how wonderfully small, trifling expenses mount up to large sums.

The virtues of industry and frugality are important features of the modern spirit of capitalism because they combine secular values with ruthless acquisition. In this sense, the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is not about the rise of modern capitalism *per se*, but about the origin of a peculiar spirit that eventually led modern rational capitalism to expand throughout the national and global economy. While the rational and systematic
pursuit of wealth is at the core of the spirit of capitalism (i.e. “time is money”), the peculiarity of its modern incarnation centers on the moral attitude of the capitalist entrepreneur and the virtuous acquisition of wealth as an indication of proficiency in a calling.

Along these lines, Weber (1985) argues that religious ideas play a central role in shaping how material interests are realized and uses the historical example of the Protestant Reformation to trace how the fulfilment of worldly duties became the highest form of moral activity an individual could assume. As one of the first and most important results of the Protestant Reformation, Luther’s notion of the “calling” provides a moral justification for performing worldly duties and challenges the Roman Catholic church’s insistence that renunciation of worldly affairs through monastic life is ultimately the most acceptable way of serving God. Later, John Calvin’s doctrine of “predestination” became important because it deals with the question of how an individual’s fate in the world is determined at birth. This idea was very powerful among English and American Puritans, leading believers to seek out and rely on external “signs” that they were either part of the elect or the damned. People were advised that economic success was the principle sign that a person would achieve salvation. Devotees were also urged to engage in intense worldly activity – especially business activities – as a way to appease concerns they were part of the damned.

The effect of Luther’s idea of the “calling” and Calvin’s doctrine of “predestination” became widespread in the decades and centuries following the Protestant Reformation and created a deep sense of anxiety and uncertainty among devotees. From this psychologically distressing situation emerged the Protestant work ethic, a religious perspective that frames sobriety, financial prudence, deferred gratification and hard work in one’s calling as moral
obligations and material success as a sure sign that one will be rewarded in the afterlife. The strong sense of asceticism and deferred gratification contained within the Protestant work ethic meant that leisure, spontaneity, socializing, luxurious living and even excessive sleep were considered sinful. Moreover, the Protestant ethic discouraged people from flaunting their wealth through the purchase of frivolous personal pleasures which meant that it was typically saved or reinvested.

In order to further clarify the connection between the religious ideas of ascetic Protestantism and its principles for everyday economic conduct, Weber uses the life and writings of Richard Baxter, an ideal-typical representative of English Puritanism whose views are famously expressed in a collection of popular sermons titled *Saint’s Everlasting Rest* (1651). Baxter’s work is dominated by a relentless preaching of continuous physical or mental labor in an increasingly secular calling, as evidenced by the following passage from a book based on his sermons:

> Be wholly taken up in diligent business of your lawful callings when you are not exercised in the more immediate service of God…*Work hard in your calling*…See that you have a calling which will find you employment for all the time which God’s immediate service spareth (cited in Weber 1985: 159, 262).

The spirit of ascetic Protestantism gave birth to a new form of economic rationalism because it placed a premium on ascetic rational motives. Labor was an approved ascetic technique because every hour spent laboring in one’s calling was an hour dedicated to the glory of God. Moreover, the value placed on systematic work in a worldly calling as the highest means to asceticism and the surest path to salvation meant that any form of enjoyment that led people away from religion or work in their calling was considered sinful.
in the eyes of God. In this sense, the Puritan idea of the calling combined with the premium placed on ascetic conduct in the form of continuous labor and rejection of worldly pleasures supported the development of a capitalist way of life. This “attitude towards life” is what Weber (1985: 162) means by the spirit of capitalism, and it is through the constraints imposed by the expectation that devotees will curtail consumption through the ascetic compulsion to work hard, save and reinvest that Weber observes an elective affinity between the Protestant work ethic and the spirit of modern capitalism.

As a distinct method for unearthing spirits of capitalism, Weber’s close examination of both monumental and minor texts, in addition to a wide variety of ideal-typical figures has influenced more recent efforts to trace mutations in the spirit of capitalism over time and in different geographical locations. Boltanski and Chiapello (1999), for instance, use the Weberian notion of the “spirit of capitalism” to trace a series of ideological and structural changes that accompanied transformations to capitalism, beginning in mid–20th century France. Their use of the term “ideology” is significant for it does not refer to a “moralizing discourse, intended to conceal material interests, which is constantly contradicted by practice” but rather to a “set of shared beliefs, inscribed in institutions, bound up with actions, and hence anchored in reality” (Boltanski & Chiapello 1999: 3). In this case, the spirit of capitalism refers to the ideology that justifies people’s commitment to capitalism and which renders this commitment attractive.

Whereas Weber was concerned with the relationship between practical ethics and religious beliefs, Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) are primarily interested in the concrete expression of the spirit of capitalism along three dimensions: stimulation, security and justice. In order to successfully commit people to the absurdities of the capitalist system (e.g.
alienating labor conditions for wage-earners and a never-ending and insatiable accumulation process for capitalists), the ideology that justifies and legitimizes capitalism must furnish individual justifications that provide grounds for people to engage in capitalist enterprise, in addition to general justifications that demonstrate how engagement in capitalist enterprise serves the common good. To this end, Boltanski and Chiapello depart from Weber’s in-depth analysis of religious and entrepreneurial texts and perform a computer-assisted content analysis of a wide selection of management articles, books and brochures. Sixty of the texts they examine were published between 1959 and 1969, and the remaining sixty-six were published between 1989 and 1994. Both samples deal with the question of French “cadres” (managers, consultants, executives, directors) and make specific recommendations to firms with respect to the way cadres should be treated, what type of cadres they should employ, and the type of work cadres can reasonably be expected to perform. Based on the results generated by the software program “Prospero@” and combined with the literature on the evolution of capitalism in Western Europe, Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) sketch at least three spirits of capitalism that have appeared since the late 19th century (Figure 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Spirit</th>
<th>Second Spirit</th>
<th>Third Spirit</th>
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<tr>
<td>(late 1800s)</td>
<td>(1940-1970)</td>
<td>(Since 1980)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stimulation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Freedom from local</td>
<td>Career opportunities</td>
<td>No more authoritarian chiefs</td>
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<tr>
<td>communities</td>
<td>Power positions</td>
<td>Fuzzy organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Progress</td>
<td>Effectiveness possible in ‘free’</td>
<td>Innovation and creativity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>countries</td>
<td>Permanent change</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fairness</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mix of domestic and</td>
<td>Meritocracy valuing mobility</td>
<td>Meritocracy valuing mobility</td>
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<td>market fairness</td>
<td>and ability to nourish a network</td>
<td>and ability to nourish a network</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Management by objectives</td>
<td>Each project helps develop one’s</td>
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<td><strong>Security</strong></td>
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<td>Personal property</td>
<td>Long-term planning</td>
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<td>Personal relationships</td>
<td>Careers</td>
<td>who can manage themselves</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charity</td>
<td>Welfare state</td>
<td>Companies provide self-help resources</td>
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<td>Paternalism</td>
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**Figure 3 – Three Spirits of Capitalism**
In contrast to the materials from the 1960s which emphasize efficiency, career stability, meritocracy and the pursuit of institutionally recognized credentials, the materials from the 1990s stress innovation, creativity, mobility, adaptability and self-development. Boltanski and Chiapello’s (1999: 114) description of “connexionist man [sic]” is especially illuminating for it sketches the emergence of a new ideal-typical entrepreneur beginning in the 1990s. Whereas the entrepreneurial self Weber describes through the figure of Benjamin Franklin is more concerned with the pursuit of wealth and the regulation of work-time, the “connexionist man [sic]” of the 1990s is more concerned with nurturing relationships and extending networks:

Connexionist man [sic] relies on his communication skills, his convivial temperament, his open and inquiring mind. But he knows also how to give of himself; to be there as and when appropriate, to exploit his presence in personal relations, in face-to-face encounters: he is always available, even-tempered, self-assured without being arrogant, familiar without overstepping the limits, obliging, with more to offer than he expects in return…he possesses a strategy for conducting relationships, a kind of self-monitoring that results in an aptitude for producing signs which can facilitate contacts (Boltanski & Chiapello 1999: 114, original italics).

In a connexionist world, entrepreneurs who embody the new spirit of capitalism do not rely on a stable career or even a single source of income. Instead, they immerse themselves into a series of concurrent projects which emerge from and are continuously displaced through their social networks. The ideal-typical portrait of this entrepreneur is marked by a series of ordeals, project-dependent shifts in identity, and the preservation of a stable personality that is capable of recognizing and capitalizing on opportunities (Boltanski & Chiapello 1999). Because each project is temporary in nature, successful entrepreneurs must be able to extricate themselves and to engage in new projects and relationships. Furthermore, connexionist entrepreneurs must inspire trust by honoring their commitments.
while being sufficiently available should their networks generate more profitable opportunities. This steady string of projects generates “happiness” and “self-fulfillment” insofar as it provides autonomy rather than security. It also enables entrepreneurs to “discover the potential he [sic] harboured within himself…and to reveal something more of his essence to himself at each step” (Boltanski & Chiapello 1999: 462).

In light of these arguments, we can see how the emergence of modern capitalism beginning in the mid–18th century required a new relationship between human beings and their work. For Weber, the notion of work as Beruf – a religious vocation demanding fulfillment – furnished a psychological motivation for the tireless dedication to work and the relentless pursuit of profit as a sign of success in fulfilling a divinely ordained calling. Kemple’s (2014) diagram illustrates how the secular dimension of an overwhelmingly religious calling was further secularized in Benjamin Franklin’s Advice to a Young Tradesmen and Boltanski and Chiapello continue the story by examining how the emancipatory discourses of social justice and self-fulfillment that emerged from mid-20th century countercultural movements were later transformed into an economic ethic that provided individual and general justifications for engaging in capitalist enterprise until the early 1990s.

This research updates Max Weber’s (1904-05) celebrated thesis on the relationship between Protestantism and modern capitalism through an analysis of the elective affinities between the economic ethics of New Age spiritualism and the economic spirit of online entrepreneurialism. The core argument of this dissertation is that beginning in the mid-1990s, a new spirit of capitalism emerged in the United States that stems from and finds resolution through a New Age spiritual movement that blends the Eastern and Western religious
traditions of Hinduism and Protestantism. My research extends Boltanski and Chiapello’s (1999) discussion into the 21st century, but uses Weber’s method of analyzing religious and entrepreneurial texts, in addition to the lived experiences of 28 professionals who are reinventing their identities as entrepreneurial “advice gurus” at a self-help seminar in the United States. Just as Smith (1990) and Currie (1999) caution against viewing texts as static “specimens” that can be gleaned for information about people’s lives, I maintain that the “advice guru” comes into existence under particular historical conditions and through specific interpersonal relations. As such, two key questions guide this research: 1) How does the advice guru emerge as a contemporary entrepreneurial figure?; and 2) What is distinct about the New Age spirit of capitalism in the early 21st century?

The Sociologist as Entrepreneur: Methodological Approach

Whereas other social scientists might be concerned with the macro-economic or statistical contours of business formation and religious belief, the Weberian sociologist searches for the underlying cultural architecture that shapes entrepreneurial conduct. One key site where the New Age spirit of capitalism finds expression in the United States is in the range of books, seminars and online forums that vie for a piece of the self-help consumer market. I discovered this through my own experience of becoming an entrepreneurial sociologist, a transformation that involved reading self-help books, attending business seminars, and networking with other entrepreneurs. Methodologically, my ethnographic approach to studying the New Age spirit of capitalism is similar to Weber’s (1985) insofar as it involves participant observation, document analysis, and informal interviews. I also share
Weber’s interest in the meaning that individuals ascribe to their actions in an effort “to understand” (Verstehen) rather than predict or even prescribe how individuals (should) construct meaningful lines of action. My approach differs from Weber (1985) and Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) in that I tape-recorded in-depth interviews conducted online and travelled to the United States in search of my own professional transformation. This allowed me to study the experience of becoming an advice guru reflexively and to trace the emergence of a new spirit of capitalism as it unfolds on a global scale.

The transformation of my professional identity, the interactions I had with aspiring entrepreneurs, and the insights I developed with respect to how the New Age spirit of capitalism is internalized and acted upon would not have been possible without an ethnographic approach to studying career change and professional renewal. Feminist sociologists have long argued that any sustained investigation into everyday life should be viewed as a “problematic” where the everyday world “is the place from within which the consciousness of the knower begins” (Smith 1987: 88). Rather than assuming reality is knowable from beyond or ‘outside’ the world in which the researcher is located physically and socially, this approach frames the everyday world as the site where knowledge is created. As such, the purpose of this study is to situate the experience of changing careers within the discourses, practices, and meaning systems of everyday life in order to investigate how professional renewal is mediated by advice texts and sustained through participation in self-help seminars in the United States.

My methodology is informed by an ontological position that understands people’s worldviews, interpretations, experiences, and interactions as meaningful properties of the social reality which my research is designed to explore (Mason 2002). This ontological
position also sees actions and interactions, in addition to the way people interpret these phenomena and act on them, as central to understanding the “reality” of career change and professional renewal. Ultimately, this means my epistemology is informed by the guiding notion that knowledge about the social world can be generated by talking to people, observing people, and participating in real life settings where social interaction takes place (Mason 2002).

My focus on the discourses, practices, and meaning systems that individuals use to make sense of the everyday world in which they are changing careers, in addition to the consequences these meanings have for their entrepreneurial conduct and identities attends to my Weberian theoretical framework insofar as interpretive understanding (Verstehen) is the primary goal. Field research is an appropriate methodology for achieving this goal because it enables the researcher “to see the world from the subject’s own frame of reference” (Singleton and Straits 2005: 307). To call this approach “participant observation” is a bit limiting since any evidence that provides firsthand information about research participants can supplement observational data, including direct experience, semi-structured interviewing, and document analysis, all of which fall under the broad umbrella of “field research”.

Exploring the social world as it occurs from the ‘inside’ without succumbing to the wholly subjective is achieved through the idea of “standpoint”. Smith’s (1990) version of standpoint identifies a subject position for the field researcher that is open to anyone because it begins in the bodily existence and local actualities of the knower’s everyday world. In this case, my standpoint as a feminist sociologist, credentialed expert, and aspiring entrepreneur enabled me to transform personal doubts about my career path into a research tool and working premise for entering the field. As such, I felt well-equipped to study career change
and professional renewal through fieldwork conducted at the Experts Academy live event from September 6th-9th, 2012 and May 2nd-5th, 2013.

The first stage involved attending the live seminar as a regular attendee. During this phase, I was primarily interested in assessing the feasibility of the live event for studying career change and professional renewal. The second phase involved attending the live event as a VIP guest. The upgrade from regular to VIP status was the result of a guest pass I received from a contact I made during my trip to Experts Academy in September 2012. Over the course of four days, I divided my time between the hotel lobby where other participants gathered during breaks, the hotel restaurant where participants ate lunch and dinner, a private lounge where VIP members ate breakfast and drank coffee, the lineups outside the hotel ballroom where the seminar took place, the actual seminar which lasted nine hours per day, and a separate conference room where drinks and snacks were available for VIPs. As a result of my VIP status, I was able to mingle among a range of participants, some of whom were first time participants while others had previously attended the event and were back to learn new business strategies.

Feminist sociologists also share a long tradition of using interviews as a means of generating data about everyday life (Smith 2005). While it would be misleading to suggest that all feminist researchers adhere to the same political, epistemological and methodological principles in their work, it is nonetheless possible to distinguish feminist research from androcentric science through its concern with the relationship between researchers and participants. This concern led Pamela Cotterill (1992: 594) to develop a participatory model of interviewing that aims to “produce non-hierarchical, non-manipulative research relationships which have the potential to overcome the separation between the researcher and
the researched”. Central to this method of interviewing are the principles of intimacy, self-disclosure and reciprocity originally advocated by Anne Oakley (1981) in her research on housework. Oakley (1981) maintains that non-hierarchal relationships are best established when researchers are prepared to invest their own personal identity into the researcher/participant relationship. This is achieved by sharing experiences and giving advice; revealing personal details; stating research goals; opening up spaces for reflection and interpretation; providing the opportunity for long term contact through the creation of friendships; and establishing conversations in a comfortable environment.

Cotterill’s (1992) participant-centered model of interviewing relies on similar principles of genuineness and transparency, but with an emphasis on the importance of personal satisfaction for the interviewee in order to increase the likelihood of repeat interviews. In Cotterill’s (1992) version of feminist interviewing, the researcher is a “sympathetic listener” who aims to equalize power imbalances between researchers and interviewees by demonstrating care and concern for participants in ways that border on friendship. In this sense, Cotterill (1992) advocates for levels of intimacy, vulnerability and trust not usually encouraged within traditional models of qualitative interviewing. Feminist researchers also refrain from treating participants as passive objects of study and strive for ongoing contact with interviewees that reveals more about their personal lives than ordinary forms of interaction.

Stating research goals and revealing personal details are two examples of how feminist researchers rework the object/subject divide that characterizes research relationships within androcentric science. During my second trip to Experts Academy, for instance, I used my sincere participation in the group work and writing activities described in Chapter 3 as
opportunities to discuss my personal struggles and research goals with other seminar participants. I also used these intimate exchanges as opportunities to recruit interviewees by asking fellow seminar participants who gave me their business cards if they were interested in doing an interview for my research on professional renewal. I recruited additional interviewees through referrals from seminar participants who completed an interview and chose people on the basis of attending Experts Academy and their willingness to participate in a study on how people reinvent their careers as entrepreneurial advice gurus.

As a result of my recruiting efforts, I conducted 28 semi-structured qualitative interviews with seminar participants residing in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia. The decision to conduct the majority of my interviews online was one of practical consideration since my research participants were geographically dispersed around the globe. In one of the few comprehensive discussions on virtual interviewing, Berg (2009) distinguishes between synchronous and asynchronous interviews. The former refers to chat rooms, instant messaging, videoconferencing, and other forms of communication that simulate face-to-face interaction insofar as they involve a back-and-forth exchange of questions and answers in (almost) real time. The latter refers to email, message boards, and privately hosted membership sites which are commonly used by investigators undertaking survey research. In this study, I conducted synchronous (Skype videoconferencing) and asynchronous (email) interviews with twenty-six participants, while the remaining two were conducted over the phone. The interviews lasted 60-90 minutes and focused on topics related to career change, self-help consumption habits, spiritual/religious worldviews, attitudes towards work, experiences at Experts Academy, and the general transition towards becoming an entrepreneurial advice guru.
I interviewed twenty-two women and eight men. Their ages ranged from 33 to 68 years old, with a mean age of 46 years. Of the twenty-five people who provided demographic information, one self-identified as Black, another as Middle-Eastern, a third as Asian and the remaining twenty-two as Caucasian. With the exception of one participant who completed high school, the remaining twenty-four were highly educated: five had college degrees, eleven had university degrees, six had Master’s degrees, two had PhDs, and one had an MD. In terms of relationship status, fifteen were married, three were single, three were in relationships but not living together, two were divorced, and one was in a common law relationship. My participants were also quite diverse in terms of self-reported religious affiliation; seven identified as Christian, six did not identify with any particular religious tradition, five described themselves as spiritual but not religious, two identified as Catholic, and the rest described themselves as some combination of Eastern and Western religious traditions such as Hindu/Christian/Buddhist. The network of participant recruitment is depicted in Appendix A and the general characteristics of study participants are listed in Appendix B.

To supplement these findings, I analyzed the manifest and latent content of two advice texts that display the new spirit of capitalism: *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success: A Practical Guide to the Fulfillment of Your Dreams* by Deepak Chopra and *The Millionaire Messenger: Make a Difference and a Fortune Selling Your Advice* by Brendon Burchard. The selection criteria for Chopra and Burchard were quite simple. As I detail in Chapter 1, Chopra is a former disciple of a Hindu American yogi named Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and is responsible for disseminating Hindu practices and beliefs which are now part of the highly

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[^3]: Three respondents did not return their biographical questionnaires and were categorized as “Refusals”. One respondent refused to comment on her relationship status.
eclectic structure of the New Age movement. Chopra’s influence on American culture is evident in the multi-million dollar empire he created by transforming Hindu values and beliefs into spiritual laws that can be activated in the pursuit of health, wealth and upward social mobility. My research participants were also very familiar with Chopra’s brand of New Age spirituality and several owned copies of his books.

*The Millionaire Messenger* was selected on the grounds that Burchard embodies the characteristics of Boltanski and Chiapello’s “connexionist man” and is a leading figure in the post–2000 shift towards online entrepreneurship within the self-improvement industry (LaRosa 2012). My research participants were also well-versed in Burchard’s self-help philosophy because they all received a copy of *The Millionaire Messenger* as part of the Home Study Program they consulted prior to attending the live event. Most importantly, there is a passage from *The Millionaire Messenger* where Burchard cites Chopra as a key influence on his own personal development. This reference functions as an entry point into my analysis of the elective affinities between Chopra and Burchard that allows me to avoid attributing causality in favor of tracing semantic patterns contained within documentary evidence that link Protestantism, Hinduism, and New Age spiritualism.

I also consulted the workbooks and registration forms that were part of the welcome package at the Experts Academy live event, in addition to the Home Study Program which participants were expected to review prior to attending the seminar portion of Experts Academy. The Home Study Program includes access to an online membership site where aspiring advice gurus can review video recordings of the 2011 Experts Academy live event, fifteen instructional videos on the basics of marketing, twenty-one interviews with other industry gurus, five audio recordings of Burchard coaching individual clients, and an “Ask
Anything” forum where Burchard responds to questions posted by members. Although I was primarily interested in participants’ experiences of becoming advice gurus, I used these data sources to cross-check my findings in the fieldnotes and interviews.

While attending Experts Academy and avidly consuming self-help literature were arguably the most deep-seated commonalities among the research participants I interviewed, they were all in different stages of transition and were thus difficult to compare. The different stages that constitute the becoming process emerged as important themes in the prescriptive guidelines and the stories participants told about their career trajectories in the advice industry. Although I have organized each chapter around a recognizable stage as a way to communicate my findings coherently, I am not suggesting that professional renewal is an orderly and linear process, though participants sometimes described it as such. In the end, my efforts to establish coherence while also acknowledging inconsistencies emerged as both a practical and a theoretical dilemma, a point which I revisit throughout the dissertation.

The New Age spirit of capitalism that emerged in the mid-1990s is intimately tied to the history of American self-help and the diffusion of Hindu philosophy throughout the United States. In Chapter 1, I examine how the calling of the entrepreneur has been transformed into the dharma of the advice guru through a bifocal analysis of the manifest and latent content of *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* by Deepak Chopra and *The Millionaire Messenger* by Brendon Burchard. In doing so, I demonstrate how the economic ethics of New Age spiritualism consist of attitudes about profit-making and work that draw on the Hindu doctrines of karma and dharma, and how the economic spirit of 21st century entrepreneurialism consists of attitudes about profit-making and work that draw on the virtues of service and generosity.
In Chapter 2, I use narrative analysis to examine the storyline that participants use to explain their career trajectories and elaborate on the co-constructed quality of these stories through a reflexive account of my feminist approach to online interviewing. I also demonstrate how New Age entrepreneurs blend the American ideal of self-invention with the Hindu principle of reincarnation to construct a relationship between spiritual transformation and upward social mobility. In Chapter 3, I illustrate how Burchard’s personal qualities and extraordinary accomplishments inspire loyalty and obedience from followers. I also discuss the sectarian characteristics of Expert Academy and provide an ideal-typical portrait of the “network capital” (Elliott & Urry 2010) that is required to access this global community. Chapter 4 supplements my Weberian analysis of the New Age spirit of capitalism by drawing on principles of poststructuralist theory to reveal how research participants (re)invent their identities as entrepreneurial ‘experts’ through different forms of reflexive and interactive positioning. The concluding chapter revisits themes I raised throughout the dissertation and clarifies what is distinct about the New Age spirit of capitalism in the early 21st century.

This analysis is by no means exhaustive and the findings presented throughout this work hardly represent the volumes of data I generated over the course of this research. Each chapter is written to stand alone, though a more complete picture of how to become an “advice guru” and what this means for the New Age spirit of capitalism in the early 21st century is gained from reading the entire dissertation. What follows, then, is a provocation rather than a prescription – an intellectual venture structured around loose themes that do not add up to a unified account but which open up a series of enticing vistas. They should be seen as pieces of the same puzzle, each explaining and intertwining with the other to unleash what we might call the New Age spirit of entrepreneurial selfhood.
Enter the New Age

Over a century after the publication of Max Weber’s celebrated thesis, the idea of having a “calling” or central purpose in life remains fundamental to the American culture of work and entrepreneurship. Bestselling titles such as *The Purpose Driven Life*, *Spirituality at Work* and *Business as Calling* suggest that many people are searching for meaning and purpose in their lives, most notably in their professional careers. Indeed, Gallup and Jones (2000) note that in addition to feelings of insecurity and stress among the workforce, there is a growing sense of wanting more from the work experience. Some employees, for instance, report a greater desire to express their spirituality in the workplace (Conlin 1999) while others stress the importance of meaning, self-fulfillment and personal growth over benefits and remuneration (Galen & West 1995).

The discourse of workplace spirituality is intimately tied to the rise of American self-help, in addition to the “pick and mix” approach to religion and psychology that is characteristic of the New Age movement (Bell & Taylor 2003). In this chapter, I demonstrate how the meaning of work is constructed in relation to a divine purpose by tracing the historical links between self-help culture, New Age spirituality, and entrepreneurialism in the United States. I show how much of what Weber (1985) observes with respect to Protestantism and the rapid expansion of capitalism can be updated and supplemented by his own ethnographic work in the United States, in addition to his comparative sociology of Eastern and Western religious traditions. To this end, I perform a careful analysis of two texts that display contemporary New Age attitudes towards work and profit-making: *The
Seven Spiritual Laws of Success (Chopra 1994) and The Millionaire Messenger: Make a Difference and a Fortune Sharing Your Advice (Burchard 2011). My aim is to illustrate how the calling of the entrepreneur has been transformed into the dharma of the advice guru and to discuss how participants make sense of their entrepreneurial careers in spiritual, religious and secular terms.

A Brief History of American Self-Help

Historical accounts of the rise and expansion of American self-help divide more than two centuries of advice literature in several different ways. Moskowitz (2001), for instance, examines self-help books in conjunction with other social trends including marriage, war, and social protest. Whelan (2004) divides the history of 20th century American self-help into four periods (religious, pragmatic, inner-directed recovery, personal action) and their corresponding efforts to assist readers in achieving self-control. In the introduction to his own best-selling book, Stephen Covey (1999: 18-19) describes the history of self-help literature in terms of the “Character Ethic” (integrity, humility, fidelity, courage, patience) that informed advice patterns between 1776 and World War II and the “Personality Ethic” (public image, skills, attitudes, behaviours) that underpins advice literature in the second half of the 20th century.

Despite these different approaches, there is a consensus in the academic literature that the roots of American self-help are found among the traditions and values of Protestant New England (Wyllie 1954; Cawelti 1965; Weiss 1969; Whelan 2004; Starker 2008). Some of the earliest prescriptive guidelines for living a devout Puritan life were codified in books such as
The Practice of Piety (1611), Guide to Heaven (1673) and Bonifacius: Essays to do Good (1710). According to Cawelti (1965) clergymen were the original spokespeople for the traditional gospel of self-improvement and their books were primarily modeled on sermons. In fact, many of the early self-help texts were published versions of successful sermons that detailed the virtues of pursuing a worldly calling together with instructions on how to resist the temptations of idleness and extravagance.

Although this early self-improvement literature provided an anchor point for the Puritan values of work, diligence and thrift, it was not until Benjamin Franklin’s Poor Richard’s Almanac (1732-1757) that self-help literature offered practical advice for upward social mobility. Franklin advocated living according to similar virtues as his seventeenth century Puritan predecessors (frugality, prudence, order, moderation, hard work); however, Franklin also secularized his advice by renouncing the sinfulness of personal ambition and advocating for upward social mobility via entrepreneurialism. In this case, social mobility was presented as an attainable and worthwhile goal and Franklin himself served as an excellent example of how a person of humble origins could achieve material success.

Whelan (2004: 24) refers to Franklin as the “patron saint” of American self-help due to his enormous influence on Dale Carnegie (1888-1955), a man often described as the ‘grandfather’ of self-help. In his biography of Franklin, Isaacson (2004) describes how Carnegie studied Franklin’s Autobiography (1793) when writing the 1937 self-help classic How to Win Friends and Influence People. Born into poverty on a Missouri farm in 1888, Carnegie was educated at the state teachers college in Warrentsburg and held a number of different sales positions before he began teaching public speaking at the YMCA in New York City. By 1914, Carnegie was earning $500 per week speaking to large audiences and by 1916
he was lecturing in Carnegie Hall, a large concert venue built by philanthropist and prototypical symbol of the “rags-to-riches” dream, Andrew Carnegie. Starker (2008) surmises that Dale Carnegie changed his name from Carnegey to Carnegie around the same time he began speaking at Carnegie Hall as a way to imply kinship with the Scottish-American industrialist and famed millionaire. For the next two decades, Dale Carnegie hired a research assistant to investigate the business practices and lifestyles of successful men and began standardizing his classes and transforming his ideas into pamphlets and books. In 1937, Simon and Schuster published *How to Win Friends and Influence People* as a more popular version of his lectures and public speaking texts. According to *Publishers Weekly*, the book was listed as the number one bestseller and sold more than 729,000 hardbound copies in 1937 alone (Starker 2008). In the years since, it has been reprinted dozens of times and has sold more than 30 million copies worldwide (Whelan 2004).

Franklin’s influence on American self-help is also evident among more modern self-help moguls. Steven Covey (1932-2012), for example, incorporates Franklin’s time-management system in his *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, a highly successful book on the topic of productivity that has sold over 25 million copies and been translated into 28 languages in more than 35 countries (Thrift 2005; Kemple 2007). The audio version of Covey’s *7 Habits* also became the first non-fiction audiobook in American publishing history to sell more than one million copies. Moreover, FranklinCovey Inc. – the product of a merger between Franklin Quest and the Covey Leadership Center – estimates that 15 million people have purchased a *FranklinCovey* day planner since 1984. Today, FranklinCovey is a global consulting firm that specializes in strategy execution, customer loyalty, leadership and individual productivity. Prior to his death in 2012, Covey launched a career development
webinar series to help people affected by the U.S. recession. The initiative consists of several online courses and social networking opportunities through the *Stephen Covey Online Community*, all of which his son Stephen Covey Jr. currently manages as the new CEO of his late father’s company.

The continued success of Covey’s *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* illustrates how the secularization of self-help has broadened its appeal to laypeople. Beginning in the mid-19th century, however, a powerful new philosophy gained momentum in the United States that resulted in an outpouring of new self-help books and spiritually-inspired recovery movements that have reverberated throughout the 20th century (Whelan 2004). The term “New Thought” is often used to describe a popular psycho-religious movement that transcends traditional religious denominations and includes such groups as: Harmony, Unity, Mental Science, Metaphysical Healing, Divine Science, Church of Religious Science, among others. With their emphasis on “thought power” (the idea that one’s mind and will control the world) and “mind cure” (the idea that through prayer, hypnotism and other therapeutic techniques a person can heal erroneous thinking), New Thought proponents castigate religion for its role in creating anxiety and embrace a more gentle view of God as an ever-present helper (McGee 2005).

New Thought proponents encourage people to harness their inner psychic energy or “thought power” in order to co-create their universe with the help of a divine spiritual force. McGee (2005), Starker (2008) and Moskowitz (2001) attribute the rise of New Thought during the 19th century to many of the social and economic changes that took place during the Jacksonian period of American politics: industrialization, urbanization and a growing national preoccupation with the pursuit of wealth. As one consequence of these social and
economic changes, many new fortunes were established and the “millionaire” became a prominent figure on the American social scene. McGee (2005) argues that early New Thought enthusiasts provided an explanation for the unprecedented accumulation of wealth created by unregulated industrialization, in addition to growing disparities between the rich and poor. As human labor power was increasingly replaced by mechanization, the link between hard work and wealth was becoming less apparent and the early mind-cure movement offered magical explanations for wealth accumulation when hard labor was no longer a reliable means of securing prosperity.

For New Thought advocates, the problem that threatens to overwhelm American society is not material poverty stemming from exploitive relationships and competing interests between classes, but a poverty of the mind. Napoleon Hill’s (1883-1970) bestselling title *Think and Grow Rich* (1937) is a direct descendent from this tradition of New Thought that has enjoyed 28 printings and sold more than 70 million copies worldwide (Starker 2008). At Andrew Carnegie’s bidding, Hill spent two decades interviewing over 500 wealthy men and women and summarizing their characteristics into 16 “laws of success” which could be applied to any person in any line of work. Hill postulates a universal ether carrying “vibrations” of poverty, misery and failure; but also those of health, wealth, happiness and success. Through the persistent repetition of healthy, happy and wealthy thoughts a person’s subconscious mind harmonizes with the corresponding vibrations of the universe to produce unlimited wealth. In fact, readers are advised to close their eyes once a day and concentrate their thoughts on money until it actually begins to materialize in their lives.

Although New Thought ideals are often communicated in advice literature concerned with economic prosperity, Moskowitz (2001) and Whelan (2004) also observe principles of
New Thought deployed in recovery movements such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). The emphasis on spiritual power and personal responsibility is a core feature of AA, a self-help group based on faith in God “through the acceptance of weakness and the need for prayer to overcome it, and faith in modern medicine, using the language of addiction to define alcoholism as disease” (Whelan 2004: 26). AA was founded in 1935 by a stockbroker named Bill Wilson (1895-1971) and a physician named Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith (1879-1950), both of whom battled with chronic drinking problems. The history of AA is notable because its famous “Twelve Step” recovery program highlights the intersection between religion and science within the model of self-help. Indeed, Valverde (1998) and Vrecko (2002) argue convincingly that within the discourse of AA, alcoholism is constructed as a condition that is physiological, psychological and spiritual. As such, many of the techniques of governance which are touted as methods of self-improvement and self-transformation seek not to govern the consumption of alcohol per se, but to “govern the soul of the AA member” (Vrecko 2002: 19).

Framing alcoholism within a discourse of spiritual and mental health also demonstrates how “practices for the interpretation and improvement of the Self in advanced liberal societies have achieved a psychological coloration, operating according to psychological norms and in relation to psychological truths” (Rose 1998: 95). The relationship between “psy” discourse and self-help texts is increasingly recognized in the academic literature (Rimke 2000), especially among scholars who link the emergence of inner-directed advice texts in the 1960s to the rise of humanistic psychology, the popularity of Abraham Maslow’s theory of self-actualization, and the corresponding growth of the Human Potential Movement (HPM). In fact, Whelan (2004) argues that HPM ideas – with
their emphasis on cultivating the extraordinary potential that lies within all people – seeped into virtually all bestselling self-help titles published in the post-1960s era and thus represents one of the most influential “psy” discourses to shape contemporary self-help.

During the mid-1980s and throughout the early 1990s, for instance, one self-improvement author and vocal proponent of HPM ideas found his way onto the New York Times bestseller list with the assistance of the same book agent who helped Steven Covey market his brand of self-improvement. Anthony “Tony” Robbins is well-known for his infomercials and bestselling titles Unlimited Power (1986) and Awaken the Giant Within (1991), though it is his near-mythical proportions (six-foot-seven) that have become a metaphor for his success and his ideas on human potential and personal greatness. In 1978, Robbins began supplementing his income as a nutritional supplement salesman by offering $470 “Mind Revolution” seminars in which graduates completed a twelve-foot long “firewalk” across a bed of hot coals. Within a few years, Robbins left his sales position to establish a worldwide motivational empire that generates $80 million per year (Salerno 2008).

While Robbins’ paperback sales are considerably more modest than other self-help gurus (Unlimited Power sold under a million copies between 1986-1994), his annual sales from seminars and audiotapes far exceed other gurus in the industry. McGee (2005) attributes Tony’s success to the late-night infomercials he used during the late 1980s to market his audiotapes and compact discs. Taking full advantage of the 1984 Federal Communications Commission’s ruling that deregulated television advertising, Tony reportedly claims “there has never been a thirty-minute interval since April 1989 when one of my spots wasn’t on TV somewhere” (cited in Salerno 2008: 76). Today, Robbins hosts a variety of daylong seminars
in San Juan, Palm Springs, Chicago, New York City and other international locations which regularly draw audiences of 10,000 people or more. For $12,000 (excluding airfare and accommodations) self-help enthusiasts can join the famed guru for a weeklong “Date with Destiny” on his private island in Fiji where they will learn about “the inner forces which shape all human emotions and behaviours” (Robbins 2014).

Another reason why Tony Robbins has experienced such unusual success is attributable to his relationship with television mogul and self-help enthusiast, Oprah Winfrey. Travis (2009) and Crowley (2011) position Oprah within the women’s recovery movement that saturated American self-help during the late 1980s and which gained popularity through daytime television programming geared directly towards women. Although Oprah featured her share of addicts (sober or otherwise) and codependents through monthly shows dedicated to addiction, it was Oprah’s personal connection to recovery that distinguished her from other daytime talk show hosts such as Ricki Lake and Sally Jessy Raphael. Oprah has never formally identified as a member of a 12 step group, but she does embrace recovery as a result of her experiences with childhood sexual abuse and compulsive overeating, two issues she reportedly battled for years before “hitting bottom” and reordering her life according to spiritual principles during the early 1990s.

Oprah has transformed her spiritually-inspired recovery ideals into a $2.9 billion empire that spans twenty years of television shows, hundreds of magazines, a handful of feature films, dozens of documentaries, and countless web pages which are constantly updated by her tentacular multimedia corporation (Illouz 2003). Oprah’s weight, diet, and exercise “issues” feature prominently in her numerous exposés on self-help, and in 1996 she co-authored a bestselling diet and nutrition book with her personal trainer titled Make the
“Connection.” Just as “Bill’s Story” opens the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, “Oprah’s Story” narrates her lifelong struggle with unhealthy eating using the classic account of “what I was like, what happened, and what I am like now”. The conclusion to “Oprah’s Story” is a familiar blend of traditional 12-Step rhetoric and New Age therapy that includes “Ten Steps to a Better Body” and a daily practice of journaling, meditation, affirmations and other rituals.

Like many feminist recovery advocates, Oprah attributes her food addiction to low self-esteem; however, her solution is less about consciousness-raising or conventional psychotherapy and more about increasing her connection to the spiritual realm. Oprah’s commitment to esoteric spirituality became apparent to her growing audience of white middle-class women when Marianne Williamson appeared twice on The Oprah Winfrey Show in 1992. At the time, Williamson was a pastor in Detroit’s Church of Today, an outpost of Unity Church that is part of the wider New Thought movement. Like Oprah, Williamson does not identify as an addict, but she does acknowledge that her turn to a Higher Power was shaped by Alcoholics Anonymous. Williamson’s teachings are synthesized in A Return to Love, a book that urges readers towards a spiritual way of life by substituting thought systems based on fear with thought systems based on love. The following season, this idealism was brought more sharply into focus through a series of “Conversations with Oprah” in which Winfrey interviewed a handful of enlightened poets, thinkers and crusaders including author Maya Angelou and mind-body healer Deepak Chopra.
The New Age Spirit of Capitalism

The history of American self-help is also influenced by a period of intense spiritual and religious revival known as the “New Age”. The New Age movement is best described as a large and loosely structured network of individuals and organizations that draw heavily upon Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, holistic medicine, mysticism, metaphysics, quantum physics and humanistic psychology. While the New Age movement lacks a foundational figure and a unified system of beliefs, some spiritual practices and philosophical tenets feature prominently among those commonly deemed “New Agers”. Drury (2004) argues that New Age spiritualism is characterized by a more general and abstract idea of God, a rejection of religious dogma, and a belief that mind/body/soul are formed from and reducible to the same universal intelligence, divine source, or ultimate principle of being. Many New Agers also share an enthusiasm for the arrival of a new era (sometimes called the Age of Aquarius) marked by heightened spiritual consciousness, inner tranquility, harmony, wellness, unity, self-realization and the eradication of violence, hunger, disease, sexism, racism, poverty and war. Another unifying theme is that individuals can achieve enlightenment through personal transformation and growth using different objects, tools and practices such as acupuncture, shiatsu, herbal therapy, organic food, meditation, yoga, Tarot cards, psychic readings, astrology and Reiki⁴, to name few (York 1995).

Although the Eastern practices and beliefs associated with the New Age movement have existed in various forms for centuries, they grew in popularity throughout the United States beginning in the late 19th century. The diffusion of Hindu philosophy in America is

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⁴ Reiki is a Japanese technique for stress reduction and relaxation. It is based on the idea that an unseen life force flows through human beings that is capable of providing the recipient with physical, mental, emotional and spiritual healing (Stein 1995).
often attributed to the World’s Parliament of Religions (1893), a global conference held in Chicago for the purpose of creating dialogue between religious faiths. Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) was invited to represent India and is credited for disseminating tenets of Hindu philosophy through public and private lectures he delivered during his extensive travels in the United States (Goldberg 2010). In 1920, an Indian yogi named Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952) established the world headquarters of his “Self-Realization Fellowship” in Los Angeles and used radio and direct mail to disseminate his brand of Kriya Yoga. Nearly four decades later, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918-2008) rose to fame when the Beatles experienced his Transcendental Meditation (TM) technique during one of his annual trips to the United States. Goldberg (2010) traces the spread of TM among the burgeoning counterculture to the widespread media attention that was given to the Beatles for joining the famous guru in India. Goldberg (2010) also links the subsequent mainstream appropriation of TM to Maharishi’s appearances on the Merv Griffin talk show and to the growing number of celebrities who openly supported his method including Clint Eastwood and Mary Tyler Moore.

Although Swami Vivekananda and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi were both Hindu monks, they were also well-educated, fluent in English, knowledgeable about science, and pragmatically entrepreneurial. For these reasons, I would like to introduce another Indian “guru” who is commonly associated with the New Age. In the past two decades, Deepak Chopra has emerged as one of the most prominent figures of the New Age movement to have parlayed his professional career into an entrepreneurial venture that reportedly generates millions of dollars each year. He is also one of the best known proponents of Indian philosophy, selling more than 20 million books, producing dozens of CDs and DVDs,
delivering keynote speeches to audiences worldwide, and appearing on virtually every major American television network and radio talk show.

Chopra was born in 1947 to a prominent cardiologist in India and he graduated from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences as a bio-medically trained physician in 1968. Two years later, Chopra left New Delhi and immigrated to New Jersey where he began his residency as an endocrinologist. Upon returning to New Delhi in 1981, Chopra met an Ayurvedic doctor who encouraged him to abandon Western mainstream medicine and to concentrate on the Eastern medical practices codified in two Sanskrit texts known as Ayurveda (“life-knowledge”). Chopra’s growing discontentment with biomedicine combined with his conversion to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s TM technique prompted a radical shift in his life and career. Shortly after meeting Maharishi in 1985, Chopra followed his guru’s instructions and established the Maharishi Ayurveda Health Center for Stress Management in Lancaster, Massachusetts. He also reportedly stopped drinking and smoking within two weeks of using Maharishi’s meditation technique (Baer 2003).

For the next eight years, Chopra drew heavily on Ayurvedic medicine and published extensively on health, healing and the mind/body connection. However, in 1993 he joined a long tradition of American prosperity gurus when he began issuing advice on the topic of material abundance through his bestselling book Creating Affluence: Wealth Consciousness in the Field of All Possibilities. The following year, Chopra wrote a more distilled and practical guide for applying spiritual principles to wealth acquisition titled Creating Affluence and published an accompaniment titled The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success: A Practical Guide to the Fulfillment of Your Dreams. Like many authors associated with the New Age, Chopra links Hindu doctrines, scriptures and poems to contemporary Western life
through a watered down and culturally disembodied interpretation of how ‘spiritual laws’ can be activated for the purpose of material success and upward social mobility.

There are two sets of practical and evaluative attitudes that make up the economic ethics of New Age spiritualism. The first is a set of attitudes about profit-making that draws on the Hindu doctrine of karma. The principle of karma is a Hindu doctrine of compensation that links good and evil deeds to the more or less honorable rebirth of an individual into the caste system. As Weber (1958b: 119) notes, the idea of compensation “was linked to the individual’s social fate in the societal organization…it was believed that each single ethically relevant act has inevitable consequences for the fate of the actor”. To demonstrate how the law of karma can be activated in the pursuit of affluence, Chopra (1994: 39) cites a passage by Swami Vivekananda and offers a solution for transforming past karma into future material success:

**Swami Vivekananda:** *Karma is the eternal assertion of human freedom...Our thoughts, our words, and deeds are the threads of the net which we throw around ourselves* (original italics).

**Deepak Chopra:** You can use the *Law of Karma* to create money and affluence, and the flow of all good things to you, any time you want...[to transform negative Karma] ask yourself as you’re paying your karmic debt, “What can I learn from this experience? Why is this happening and what is the message that the universe is giving to me? How can I make this experience useful to my fellow human beings? By doing this, you look for the seed of opportunity and then tie that seed of opportunity with your *dharma*, with your purpose in life...For example, if you break your leg while playing sports, you might ask, “What can I learn from this experience? What is the message that the universe is giving me?”...if your dharma is to teach others what you know, then by asking, “How can I make this experience useful to my fellow human beings?” you may decide to share what you learned by writing a book about playing sports safely. Or you may design a special shoe or leg support that prevents the kind of injury you experienced (original italics).
According to Chopra’s third spiritual law of success, the universe operates according to a perfect accounting system in which everything is in constant exchange. Every person is born with karmic debt that must be paid through different life experiences. The trick to paying karmic debt (which everyone must do) without succumbing to its income-threatening capabilities is to convert any adversity into a benefit that will bring wealth and fulfillment (in this case, a book or prosthetic device). For Chopra, the goal is not to eliminate karma, but to take a karmic episode and create a more positive cause and effect experience. So long as karma is evolutionary for the individual and society, then the outcome of a karmic experience will necessarily be happiness and success.

The second set of attitudes that constitute the economic ethics of New Age spiritualism center on the meaning of work. As the above passage from Chopra’s book reveals, the transformation of a negative karmic episode into a seed of opportunity is also tied to the Hindu concept of “dharma”. In Hinduism, the concept of dharma refers to ethical conduct and caste-specific occupational duties which depend on sacred tradition and support a divine order (Weber 1958b). The word “dharma” comes from the Sanskrit root dhri which means to “uphold” or “sustain” (Brodd 2003). The idea of dharma is frequently used among New Age authors to describe how a person’s calling or life purpose is designed to support and sustain a harmonious cosmic order:

The third component of the Law of Dharma is service to humanity – to serve your fellow human beings and to ask yourself the questions, “How can I help? How can I help all those who I come into contact with?” When you combine the ability to express your unique talent with service to humanity, then you make full use of the Law of Dharma (Chopra 1994: 95-103, original italics).
Chopra’s third spiritual law of success assumes that every person originates from a formless, invisible world of energy and becomes a human being in order to fulfill a worldly purpose. In other words, humans exist *because* they have a higher purpose to fulfill and everyone’s purpose is intimately tied to their ‘natural’ abilities and the corresponding needs of others which those abilities are meant to serve. For Chopra (1994: 94), correct action in accordance with dharma is understood as service and dedication to humanity which is discovered by asking “How can I help?” rather than “What’s in it for me?”. By entering the domain of spirit through daily meditation, performing unique talents which incite a “state of bliss” and serving the needs of others, Chopra (1994: 101) assures readers they can generate unlimited personal wealth: “Discover your divinity, find your unique talent, serve humanity with it, and you can generate all the wealth that you want”.

The *Millionaire Messenger* is not unlike other bestselling titles which draw explicit links between capitalist profit and New Age spiritualism. Just as Weber (1958b: 320, original italics) observes the disciple “turn to his *guru* for advice in all life situations”, Burchard (2011: 2) maintains that an advice guru (himself included) is capable of offering guidance on virtually any aspect of social life: “You can become a highly influential and highly paid expert on almost any topic you wish, and in this book I will show you how to do just that”. While every faith tradition relies on some form of guru/disciple relationship for the transmission of spiritual knowledge and advice, Burchard’s appropriation and elaboration of the term has a distinctly Hindu flavour that echoes Chopra’s discussion of the seven spiritual laws of success. Consider Burchard’s (2011: 19-20) views on entrepreneurship as spiritual service:
It is a calling because I deeply believe it is part of our life’s purpose to learn and experience the world and then turn and lend a hand to others who are also trying to get ahead. If you have struggled through something and survived, you should help those now struggling… I believe that coming from a place of service is not only a strong spiritual practice but also good business (Burchard 2011: 19-20).

There are two sets of practical and evaluative attitudes that make up the economic spirit of 21st century entrepreneurialism. The first is a set of attitudes about the meaning of work that center on the virtue of service. Here, Burchard is arguing that advice gurus have a civic responsibility to educate the masses with products, services and messages that make a positive difference in people’s lives. To this end, Burchard uses the Protestant idea of the “calling” to provide a moral justification for the entrepreneurial career path of the advice guru, but shifts the meaning of the term in such a way that it more closely parallels Chopra’s advice to transform karmic experiences into goods and services that help other people. As a distinct feature of Chopra’s law of dharma and a core theme in the Millionaire Messenger, both Chopra and Burchard advise readers to commodify their karma as a way to live their dharma or higher spiritual calling to help others. Indeed, Burchard dedicates the first chapter of the Millionaire Messenger to a drawn out account of a car accident he survived while working in the Dominican Republic. Although Burchard alludes to this incident as a drinking and driving accident in previous works (see Burchard 2008), the reference to alcohol consumption is replaced with a narrative of how Burchard was a passenger in a vehicle that rounded an unmarked corner at 85 miles per hour. Burchard describes the accident as a “blessing” that became a “turning point” in his life because it forced him to face the extent to which his “soul felt dead” due to a recent break up with his college girlfriend.
Burchard’s account of what happened when the vehicle finally settled and he pulled himself from the wreckage is perhaps the best example of how he exploits Hindu spiritual themes to promote the path of the advice guru as the ultimate spiritual calling:

I felt lifted from the wreckage of my life and deeply connected with the heavens and the waves of blue streaking across in the night sky. There was no pain, no feeling, a nothingness of silence for a moment that I will never forget. And then, slowly, a feeling of centeredness. I was not having an out-of-body experience; in fact, I had never felt more connected to who I was. I felt a steadiness in my body, and a sense of gratitude washed over me, an appreciation for life that today I still cannot describe. It was as if, in that moment, I looked up to the sky and God had reached down, comforted me, and handed me life’s golden ticket – a second chance at life. “Here you go, kid,” the moment seemed to say. “You’re still alive, you can love again, you can matter”…And for the first time in months, my soul sang (Burchard 2011: 8).

Within ascetic Protestantism, the loyal fulfillment of a worldly calling combined with rational, sober and systematized conduct is considered the surest path to salvation. This type of inner-worldly asceticism (Weber 1922) does not command followers to avoid work within the secular world; instead, it actively urges members to work in the world so they can find evidence of salvation. In contrast, the path of the advice guru involves a subjective experience of mystical illumination which is achieved through other-worldly union with the divine. Indeed, Burchard’s contemplative flight from the world transcends feeling, pain and sound in a manner reminiscent of Weber’s (1922: 168) observation that within Eastern contemplative traditions “God can speak within one’s soul only when the creaturely element in man is altogether silent”.

That Burchard rejects the idea of having an “out-of-body experience” is important because during this state of transcendence the soul is believed to hover over and observe efforts to resuscitate the human form. Other-worldly mysticism is more akin to contemplative
efforts which result in a deeper understanding of the meaning of the world. Weber (1922: 171) describes contemplative illumination as “a unique quality of feeling or, more concretely, in the felt emotional unity of knowledge and volitional mood which provides the mystic with decisive assurance of his religious state of grace”. To New Age advice gurus such as Deepak Chopra, Burchard’s feelings of “centeredness”, “connected[ness]”, “steadiness”, “gratitude”, and “appreciation” are states of spiritual grace which result from communion with a larger cosmic force rooted in divine love.

Burchard’s recollection that “I had never felt more connected to who I was” also echoes Weber’s (1946: 325) observation that instead of becoming a tool of God who seeks to tame “what is creatural and wicked through work in a worldly vocation”, the contemplative mystic aims to “achieve rest in god and in him [sic] alone” (Weber 1922: 169). Within the Vedanta school of Hinduism, for instance, deep contemplation and union (yoga) with the personal soul (Atman) and its cosmic counterpart (Brahman) is considered the surest path to liberation (Moksha). In the above passage, Burchard describes a similar experience insofar as he communes with the Atman/essential self (“I had never felt more connected to who I was”) and the Brahman/supreme being (“God had reached down [and] comforted me”) in such a way that he momentarily ceases to identify with the outside world, is granted another opportunity to “love” and “matter”, and thus achieves liberation (“my soul sang”) from the cycle of pain and sorrow associated with his recent breakup.

To emphasize this point, Burchard dedicates a substantial portion of The Millionaire Messenger to explaining how he transformed his “second chance” into a lucrative entrepreneurial career as an advice guru. Burchard (2011: 9) reportedly asked himself three questions as his vehicle collided with a retaining wall and began to flip: “Did I live? Did I
love? Did I matter?” His dissatisfaction with the answers to those questions and the stirring to share his message – Live, Love, Matter – were apparently so profound that Burchard eventually left his cushy corporate job and spent the next year transforming his “life’s message” about second chances into a parable titled *Life’s Golden Ticket*. The book was turned down by dozens of publishers and Burchard eventually filed for bankruptcy. In what he describes as a lonely, frustrating, and expensive quest, Burchard spent thousands of borrowed dollars on self-help books, audio programs and seminar tickets with the goal of teaching himself how to share his message with a broader audience:

In the years that followed, I listened to and read similar messages from the self-help and business world gurus – from Wayne Dyer and Deepak Chopra, to Stephen Covey and David Bach, to John Gray and John Maxwell. Most of these life and business experts had books, tapes, CDs, DVDs, seminars, and coaching programs that they sold to the public. I bought many of them and consistently did anything I could to improve my life and do well in my career and relationships. I was living a good life, guided by my three questions and the wisdom of those who were sharing their messages with the masses (Burchard 2011: 12).

By 2007, Burchard had reinvented himself as an expert on “how to become an expert” and reportedly earned $4.6 million over the course of two years instructing people how to become an author, speaker, coach, consultant, seminar leader and internet marketer. During that time, HarperCollins published *Life’s Golden Ticket* and Burchard became a $25,000 keynote speaker, a $10,000 per ticket seminar leader, a $50,000 per year small business consultant, and an internet marketer who averaged $2 million for every major promotion he launched online. By transforming his advice into informational products and programs which he delivered through group conference calls (teleseminars), instructional videos posted on YouTube, and presentations, lectures, workshops and seminars stored in virtual membership sites, Burchard managed to build a small empire in the comfort of his
home using a cell phone and a computer. In 2009, the demand for Burchard’s expertise became so great that he created Experts Academy and transformed the essential elements of his teachings into the *Millionaire Messenger*, a book which he now assigns as a required reading for the event. In fact, Burchard uses Experts Academy as a venue to sell commodities he created out of the “negative karma” he experienced in the Dominican Republic, including t-shirts, sweatshirts, journals and mounted art with the mantra “Live, Love, Matter”.

The economic spirit of 21st century entrepreneurialism also consists of attitudes towards profit-making that focus on the virtue of generosity. Advice gurus are encouraged to be generous with consumers because it enables them to fulfill their dharma or higher spiritual calling to be of service to humanity:

They [advice gurus] create great products and information not because doing so will make them millionaires but because it will help improve millions of lives. They send out free information that adds value to people’s lives, and then at some point they say, “Hey if you liked that free information, I also have a product/program that you can buy which goes much deeper”. That is a very empowering thing to know, and that is exactly how I recently made that $2 million. Now I know that anytime I want to earn more income, I just have to add more value to the marketplace and then offer a related sale (Burchard 2011: 29-30).

As this passage reveals, generosity is important because it activates the reciprocity norm that is central to accumulating unlimited wealth. Advice gurus trigger the reciprocity norm by providing free information in exchange for a valid email address which they subsequently use to market new products and services to consumers. As I detailed in the introductory chapter, this can take the form of free instructional videos followed by an offer to purchase a more expensive product or service such as the Home Study Program I bought for $995. Burchard describes these commodities as “profit pillars” and instructs readers to
create a variety of products and services which they can market at different price points including books, ebooks, blogs, teleseminars, webinars, audio programs and DVD programs in the $0-$497 range, and membership sites, live seminars, speeches, masterminds, individual coaching, and certification programs in the $500-$55,000+ range. The goal is to offer information products which are valued at $0-$497 as bonuses or gifts in hopes it will trigger the reciprocity norm that results in consumers purchasing high price items which are valued at $500-$55,000.

Despite the fact that Hindu gurus live to understand reality and not for transitory material pursuits, both Chopra and Burchard successfully manage to appropriate and modify Hindu concepts and scriptures in order to further the capitalist economic imperative to accumulate unlimited wealth. While creating wealth is not a moral obligation for the advice guru per se, a sincere and dedicated willingness to embody the virtues of service and generosity certainly is. That the moral imperative to help others is fundamentally connected to a higher spiritual calling raises important questions about the place of religion and spirituality in the lives of New Age entrepreneurs. In the following section, I describe the religious profile of my research participants and consider whether they attach a sacred meaning to their work.

**Spirituality, Religion, and the Meaning of Self-Employment**

The role of religious belonging and belief among American entrepreneurs is at the heart of Weber’s (2002) discussion of the link between religious affiliation and capitalist achievement. Using ethnographic data collected during his extensive travels throughout the
United States in the autumn of 1904, Weber (2002: 130) argues that religious affiliation was closely associated with access to resources that would facilitate self-employment: “when a sect member moved to a different place…he carried the certificate of his congregation with him; and thereby he found not only easy contact with sect members but, above all, he found credit everywhere”. Weber (2002: 137, original italics) also notes a possible association between sect membership and trustworthiness in other business dealings: “they [non-sect members] give credit and deposit their money only with the pious, and they make purchases in their stores because there, and there alone, they are given honest and fixed prices”. If sect membership in the Protestant community allows the individual “to acquire a certificate of moral worthiness” (Porter 1965: 288) and if Catholic exclusion from informal networks hinders entrepreneurship (see Akenson 1988), I would expect to see greater religiosity among North American entrepreneurs today.

Findings from a nationally random sample of American entrepreneurs and non-entrepreneurs\(^5\) reveal that American entrepreneurs are equally likely to identify with a religious tradition as non-entrepreneurs (78% vs. 76%), but appear more religious in several notable ways (Dougherty et al. 2013). Overall, the vast majority of American entrepreneurs and non-entrepreneurs are affiliated with a dominant religious tradition, with 30% identifying as evangelical Protestant (31% for non-entrepreneurs), 26% as mainline Protestant (22% for non-entrepreneurs), and 22% as Catholic (23% for non-entrepreneurs)\(^6\). However, the authors also discovered that American entrepreneurs tend to pray more often (several times per week) and are more likely to believe in an engaged, responsive God who takes a personal interest in them. The latter is especially pertinent for it raises questions about whether the

\(^5\) Findings are based on the 2010 Baylor Religion Survey.
\(^6\) The number of Muslims, Jews, and people of other religious backgrounds, in addition to atheists and agnostics were too small to report.
individuation and autonomy associated with entrepreneurship reflects and supports a more personal and direct relationship with God. On other measures such as religious affiliation, belief in God, and service attendance, entrepreneurs are equally religious as non-entrepreneurs: approximately 90% are affiliated with a religious tradition, the vast majority attend church once per month, and two-thirds have no doubt that God exists.

Findings from the Baylor Religion Study both confirm and contradict other studies which link religiosity and self-employment (e.g. Woodrum 1985; Bellu & Fiume 2004; Dodd & Gotsis 2007). Figure 4 summarizes the spiritual and religious profile of my research participants. It differs from the Baylor Religion Study because respondents were asked to self-describe their religious/spiritual affiliation in a short biographical questionnaire rather than choose from a limited number of religious categories in a large-scale survey. The implications of letting participants self-describe their affiliation are evident in the wide range of responses, some of which reveal an association with Indian religions or an eclectic mixture of spiritual and religious faiths (e.g. Christian/Spiritual), while others indicate a possible departure from mainstream religion towards “spirituality” (e.g. spiritual but not religious) or a rejection of the sacred altogether (e.g. secular, none).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious/Spiritual Affiliation</th>
<th>N (25)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular/Agnostic/None/Minimal</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual, Not Religious</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian/Spiritual</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufi/Mystic/Buddhist/Shamanic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanist/Pagan</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu/Christian/Buddhist</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4 – Spiritual and Religious Affiliation of Respondents
The distinction between “spiritual” and “religious” is hotly debated within the social sciences and colloquial speech, with the former often framed as an unmediated and personal experience of transcendence dissociated from any particular form of divinity and the latter as an organized, traditional and communal experience connected to denominational doctrines, membership in religious institutions and formal rituals (Huffer 2011). Some commentators argue there is a growing shift towards secularization and religious privatization, especially since the number of Americans who describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious” has increased from 16% to 39% since 1999 (Goldberg 2010). My conversations with research participants further complicate matters since most were not conventionally religious in terms of church attendance and religious affiliation, but did respond affirmatively to the question “Do you have a higher calling?”:

**Jill (Christian/Spiritual):** I do. I do. I wouldn’t have written this book if I didn’t feel a calling for it.

**Janet (Catholic):** Oh totally. Totally. And really, for me, that’s part of my reasoning for wanting to learn more about this online world. To be able to create a message that gets out there in a different way and being able to reach more people.

**Jennifer (Christian):** Yep. My purpose is to inspire and support other people in the fulfillment of their dreams.

**Brenda (Spiritual, Not Religious):** I think everybody’s purpose in life is to find happiness [laughs], and so as long as I’m happy, I think I’ve found my purpose.

**Madeline (Minimal):** I do. I do. I probably came on to that in the past four or five years of realizing that I have some strengths and gifts that are unique to me and it’s kind of my duty, if you will, to put that forth… I wanna see people be successful, you know, find their fulfillment. I really love doing that and helping people. I do it purposely ‘cause it makes me feel good, right? I give knowing that what goes around comes around. To me, it’s kind of the undercurrent currency of the universe [pause] you know, those that give, receive.
**Annette (Spiritual, Not Religious):** Yes. I think I’ve always felt that I am a teacher…I’ve had many messages over the years and it’s not so much a specific message, but it’s being helpful and being very heart-centered. You help others and it helps you too…I have finally just come to realize that you could also make a living from helping others. And that’s a good thing, you know?

These responses capture the most common themes I observed among participants who linked their entrepreneurial careers to a higher calling. Overall, these entrepreneurs drew on a much broader understanding of the calling than the classical theological definition and often framed their answers in more spiritual terms by referring to subjective feeling states (Fox 1994) and a sense of individual purpose or duty (Ashmos & Duchon 2000). In fact, their definitions went beyond a general calling to serve God or a personal calling to pursue a worldly vocation to include feelings of passion, joy, happiness and peace; a personal sense of being helpful to others; a desire to reach more people; a duty to express individual strengths and gifts; an eagerness to help; an aspiration to teach and share “messages”; a commitment to being “heart-centered”; and a desire to help others find their own self-fulfillment.

Although Weber (1985) famously suggested that the importance of religion would diminish as capitalism evolved and Western societies became increasingly rationalized, he also acknowledged that the calling is not entirely lost among American workers and entrepreneurs. As Bellah et al. (1985: 66) observe in their discussion of American values at work: “the notion of a calling lingers on, not necessarily opposed to, but in addition to, job and career”. Their claim that certain careers are more conducive to a calling is consistent with Davidson and Caddell (1994: 141) who report that those who “worked with people thought of their work as a calling more than twice as often as people who worked with things”. The authors also found a positive relationship between viewing work as a higher
calling and high rates of religious commitment and belief. Rather than draw generalizable conclusions about the effects of religious participation on the meaning people attach to their work, I was more interested in the extent to which the calling is alive and well among the participants I interviewed, especially since Burchard invokes the distinctly religious term of the “calling” to sacralize the entrepreneurial career path of the advice guru as “spiritual”.

Insofar as achieving a “state of bliss” (Chopra) and working with “passion” (Burchard) are viewed as indicators of fulfilling a spiritual calling to serve others and exist alongside and in conjunction with the relentless pursuit of wealth, we can see how these entrepreneurs manage to fuse what Bellah et al. (1985) call “expressive” and “utilitarian” values. In the case of utilitarian values, life is understood as a struggle in which individuals aim to advance their own self-interest narrowly defined in terms of attaining advantages of wealth and power. From this perspective, humans are instrumentally rational creatures – *homo economicus* – engaged in calculations and strategy to advance their position. This unsentimental and instrumental approach to the question of everyday life (including economic life) is understood as a “masculine” worldview, despite the fact that women are completely capable of adhering to this view. On the other hand, expressive individualism is understood as a “soft” or “feminine” worldview. From this perspective, humans are primarily playful and sensing creatures – *homo ludens* – with unique emotional experiences that allow them to fuse with others and to experience a oneness with the cosmos.

Not only do aspiring advice gurus seek to provide their clients with a profoundly expressive, emotional and sensation-oriented experience loosely defined as “self-fulfillment”, they also derive their own “self-fulfillment” from helping others, though sometimes at the expense of immediate material rewards. Madeline’s comment about the “undercurrent
currency of the universe” is especially illuminating for it invokes the idea of karma and also captures the blind trust which New Age entrepreneurs often place in the “universe” (a common substitute for “God” among New Agers) as they pursue their careers. Not surprisingly, those who believe in the idea that living their higher calling (dharma) is connected to financial returns in the long run (good karma) can enjoy the short term emotional returns they derive from helping others. In effect, what they lack in financial wealth they make up for in spiritual and emotional abundance (liberation).

Although most of the entrepreneurs I interviewed attached a sacred meaning to their work, it would be misleading to overlook those who resisted or altogether rejected the idea of connecting their entrepreneurial careers to a higher calling:

**Robyn (Humanist, Pagan):** I don’t know that I would say that I feel like I have a higher calling. I believe that we’re all connected and if we don’t help another life form, we’re harming ourselves. I have found a lot of amazing human beings who do wonderful things but I still think it’s [pause] um, I derive meaning from being of service.

**Jack (Christian):** [sighs] that’s an interesting one. I kind of go “Nobody has a higher purpose. We’re here to experience” and that’s one side. On the other side, there are a lot of people walking around who are alive because of the information I’ve been able to give them. And so I think maybe there is a purpose. I don’t think people come here with their purposes already predetermined. I think they find one and fulfill it.

**Claire (None):** [sigh] that’s a tricky question. When people say something like “higher purpose” or “calling”, usually they’re also very religious and very spiritual. I’m not. I’m neither of those things. So from that standpoint, if that’s the implication behind a higher purpose, no. Do I have a purpose? Yes. And do I think I have a good message? Yes. Do I think that I could help a lot of people? Yes. Do I want to help a lot of people? Yes.

Robyn, Jack and Claire were among those who either resisted or rejected attaching a sacred meaning to their work, though I should note that three additional participants
“dodged” the question by changing the subject when I inquired. Like Claire, these participants were more likely to think of the calling as a distinctly religious/spiritual concept and were not entirely comfortable thinking about their entrepreneurial careers in such terms. In fact, their interviews often veered into conversations about the extent to which they rejected organized religion because it “causes a lot of problems and teaches us we’re all separate” (Jack). That said, Robyn, Jack and Claire’s unwillingness to identify with the calling does not prevent them from feeling *purposeful*. While the calling was more integral to the story of what it meant to be an entrepreneur for those who framed the calling in spiritual terms and who valued a subjective state of “feeling good”, it was less important for those who rejected organized religion and who relied more heavily on the inner conviction they had knowledge to share with the world as an indicator they were on the ‘right path’.

The idea of the calling is an important and even exaggerated aspect of the New Age spirit of capitalism, and yet it had little importance for several of the entrepreneurs I interviewed. My efforts to determine whether participants attached a sacred meaning to their careers by inquiring about the calling produced a number of unanticipated results. One participant who described her spiritual and religious beliefs as “minimal” and another who described herself as “secular” identified strongly with the notion of having a higher calling, a finding which surprised me given the spiritual/religious connotation of the term. In the end, participants employed a much broader understanding of the calling than the Hindu-inspired definition put forward by Burchard and drew links between the “calling” and their entrepreneurial careers in ways that were not straightforwardly connected to their self-identified spiritual/religious affiliation(s).
Conclusion

American self-help has evolved into an extremely eclectic and lucrative industry that draws on a set of privatized healing modalities rooted in Protestantism, New Age spirituality, and modern psychology. Tracing back through two centuries of self-help movements and moguls, we can see how the self-improvement industry continues to rely on three key assumptions: 1) something powerful lies within the person; 2) this power can be tapped; and 3) this power can be utilized to operate more successfully in obtaining material rewards (Rimke 2000). Eastern practices and beliefs associated with the New Age movement are particularly evident in the writings of Deepak Chopra and Brendon Burchard, both of whom appropriate Hindu concepts and themes to further the capitalist imperative to accumulate unlimited wealth.

The economic ethics of New Age spiritualism are well illustrated in the practical and evaluative attitudes towards work and profit-making which are expressed in the passages of Chopra’s book that draw on the Hindu doctrines of karma and dharma. The emphasis on being helpful towards other people and of transforming past experiences into products and services that generate unlimited wealth are also evident in passages from Burchard’s book that illustrate the attitudes towards work and profit-making which are founded upon the virtues of service and generosity specifically, and which constitute the economic spirit of 21st century entrepreneurialism more generally. In light of these findings, we can see how the economic ethics of Protestantism have been supplanted and transformed by the economic ethics of New Age Hinduism in ways that Weber could not have foreseen insofar as his focus was on the origins of capitalism rather than its expansion and justification. Part of this
expansion is also related to the Hindu idea of rebirth and the way it becomes compatible with the entrepreneurial ideal of reinvention. In the following chapter, I discuss how these themes become conducive to entrepreneurship through an analysis of the personal struggles that participants reported during our conversations about career change and professional renewal.
Fall Apart

The elective affinities between New Age spiritualism and 21st century entrepreneurialism described in the previous chapter provide a useful starting point for understanding how Burchard portrays the career path of the advice guru as a means of attaining liberation from an unfulfilling life and career. When I asked participants to reflect on their career trajectories, I was surprised to discover how frequently they relied on a similar storyline to describe why they reinvented their professional identities as entrepreneurs. While I assumed that most would cite job dissatisfaction and employment insecurity as main reasons for exploring a career change, many respondents described how their lives fell apart as a result of bankruptcy, divorce, death and illness in the family, behavioral problems among children, depression, anxiety, cancer, bacterial infections, viruses, and chronic fatigue.

I did not anticipate that my interview questions about career change would prompt interviewees to revisit painful events from their past; however, as I read the transcripts I noticed the importance of these events for the stories they told about who they were becoming. In this chapter, I demonstrate how New Age entrepreneurs blend the ideal of self-invention with the Hindu principle of reincarnation to construct a relationship between spiritual transformation and upward social mobility. I begin with a reflexive analysis of the “stories of struggle” which participants told about their career trajectories and demonstrate how the research interviews became part of the (re)invention process. I then discuss how the Hindu theme of rebirth becomes conducive to entrepreneurship through a description of the spiritual practices that New Age entrepreneurs use as they work towards spiritual and
socioeconomic liberation. In doing so, I demonstrate how Hindu traditions that blend worldly activity and spiritual soteriology find foothold in the American culture of New Age entrepreneurship.

**Tales from the Field**

Although I have chosen to highlight the career biographies of five aspiring entrepreneurs, I want to clarify that all of the participants I interviewed identified at least one work, relationship or health challenge that served as a major catalyst for initiating a career change. The duration and intensity of these crises varied among participants and some were in a better position than others to manage the stress that accompanies professional renewal. For instance, some entrepreneurs leaned more heavily on their social networks for support, while others were fortunate to have substantial savings, residual income streams, and/or spouses who were willing to bear the responsibility of being the sole income earner while they acquired new skills and built businesses from scratch. While each story differs in terms of content, they all exemplify the narrative structure that research participants used to describe the emerging entrepreneurial self.

*Jill’s Story*

I met Jill at a breakfast bar in the lobby of the Marriot hotel on the first day of Experts Academy in September 2012. In retrospect, it was a chance encounter since I had unknowingly wandered into a private room reserved for attendees with VIP status. As I scooped hot oatmeal into my bowl, Jill introduced herself and inquired about my reasons for
attending the event. She seemed genuinely interested in my focus on Experts Academy as site for exploring professional renewal and invited me to join her for breakfast. For the next half hour, Jill shared candidly about her personal struggles, professional setbacks, and recent successes as an author in the advice industry. We agreed to reconnect over the phone and parted ways after exchanging business cards and personal contact information.

Months later when I contacted Jill for an interview, I was surprised to learn how many times her career trajectory had shifted directions. Jill is 49 years old and currently lives in Florida with her second husband and their dog. When Jill graduated from high school in New York City she wanted to become an astronaut and decided to pursue a college degree in computer sciences and electrical engineering at the New York Institute of Technology. She did not enjoy electrical engineering and changed her minor to technical writing because it combined her passions for writing and technology. After completing college, Jill was hired to write engineering manuals for medical instrumentation systems at a Fortune 500 company based in New York City. She spent two years creating a technical writing department for the company and reported feeling extremely valued as an employee.

During that time, Jill’s ideas were well received and her supervisors often hired people based on her recommendations. However, this changed when a newly hired manager began assigning Jill administrative tasks such as drafting memos and editing emails. Jill struggled to negotiate the new terms of her employment and frequently “butted heads” with her boss. As the only woman on the team, Jill was convinced her boss was discriminating against her on the basis of gender. She came to that conclusion after a particularly heated meeting in which she recruited other male engineers to help expose how frequently her boss approved of their ideas even though she was dismissed for making similar suggestions only
moments prior. Jill reported the incident to upper level managers but did not receive the response she was looking for:

**Jill:** [senior managers said] "Well, I'm sorry. There's nothing we can do." I went, "Really? There's nothing you can do? He is prejudiced against me." And I discovered it was strictly office politics. This guy thought very, very little of women but he was higher on the political chain than I was. So nothing I did was going to make a difference. I thought about trying to change departments, but there was really no place else in the company I wanted to go. And I remember coming home and getting furious. I was just so angry because I had never been treated that way – ever. And so I finally said, "I'm just going to send my resume out." And I got a better job for a 30% increase in salary and a better position in five days.

Although Jill was fortunate to find a good paying job at a Fortune 500 company, she continued to have problems with her supervisors. On one occasion, Jill requested a transfer after her newly appointed boss chastised her for openly questioning his decisions during a staff meeting. Although Jill welcomed her new job in the IT department, she was soon reprimanded for submitting an expense report that included a limo ride to the airport for a business trip. During that time, Jill also discovered that her salary had been “red circled” which meant she had reached the top of her pay scale and would not receive a salary increase unless she was promoted to a higher position. Jill knew the demand for IT services was high and decided to accept a severance package from her employer that totalled six months of salary and one year of benefits.

Within months of leaving her corporate job, Jill divorced her husband, sold her home and grieved the death of her grandmother. Jill took three months off to “decompress” before she began her own IT company. While building her business, Jill completed several computer certification programs through a state-sponsored initiative that provides grants to workers who are looking to upgrade their skills. Jill did not discuss how she managed to
convince the agency to pay for advanced computer training courses but did note the program was originally designed to facilitate the acquisition of basic computer skills. During this time, Jill’s health began to suffer and though her family doctor attributed her symptoms to menopause, a second opinion revealed she had contracted Lyme disease from a tick bite. As Jill recovered from the illness, she began to dread managing clients and employees. After 15 years of running a highly successful IT business, she sold the company and accepted a consulting contract from the new owners to help with the transition. It was at this point that Jill realized how much she did not enjoy working for others and was “no longer waking up with joy”. A few months later, Jill learned about Experts Academy through the recommendation of a friend and began to explore her dreams of writing a book on work, family and relationships.

Steven’s Story

A few weeks after our interview, I contacted Jill to ask if she knew anyone who was trying to sell their VIP ticket to Experts Academy in May 2013. A few days later, I received an email from Steven who generously agreed to sell his VIP guest pass for $1,000. It was unusual for me to accept a gift from a complete stranger, let alone send a money order to their home in Silicon Valley. I was relieved when I received a confirmation email from the event organizer who indicated I was registered as Steven’s guest. When I arrived to the event several weeks later, I wandered through the crowd over to the area where VIP guests were gathering. I recognized Steven from the yoga videos he posted on his website which I had

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7 The regular ticket price for a VIP guest is $2,994. The breakdown is $1,997 for general attendance plus an additional $997 to upgrade to VIP status. In this case, Steven had an extra ticket and only charged me the cost of upgrading.
consulted in preparation for our meeting. I did not expect the big smile or warm hug I received when I introduced myself and thanked him for the ticket. I was equally surprised when Steven walked me over to a small group of VIP guests who became my companions and trusted informants for the weekend.

Steven is a 38 year old Taiwanese immigrant who currently lives in Silicon Valley with his parents. When Steven was a high school student in San Francisco, his father lost their family savings to a real estate foreclosure. When his father withdrew the offer to pay for his postsecondary education, Steven decided to delay attending university in favour of joining the army. Steven maintains that his experience in the army was “one of the best things that’s ever happened in my life” because it was on a particularly hot summer day while walking over twenty kilometers in full combat gear that he swore to himself “I’m gonna study the heck out of college so I find myself a desk job with air conditioning and never have to do this again”. Steven stayed in the army for seven years while completing a degree in business administration. He relied on the Federal Pell Grant Program\(^8\) to pay for his tuition and worked part-time as an administrative assistant in the school of business.

Upon graduating from university, Steven was hired as a project manager for an IT company based in San Francisco. Steven’s entry into the job market coincided with the collapse of the dotcom bubble in 2000/2001, which meant he changed employers frequently and was eventually laid off like many other IT consultants working in Silicon Valley. Steven was unemployed for 18 months and sent resumes to over 75 companies before he was offered

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\(^8\) The Federal Pell Grant Program promotes access to postsecondary education by providing need-based grants to low-income undergraduates.
a junior sales position. During that time, he also studied Qi Gong⁹, became a certified yoga instructor, and taught a few classes per week at a local studio. In 2011, Steven was promoted to a senior level position that required frequent travel all over the United States. Steven estimates he logged over 75 hotel nights and 80,000 air miles within 9 months. He remembers weighing “making really good money, versus my real passion” and chose to shelve his passion for teaching yoga and to accept the lucrative sales position. It was a year later that everything fell apart:

**Steven:** Long story short, I was in a relationship about a year ago, and that’s when everything fell apart. You know, she and I didn’t work out, and at the end of the year, I just felt really empty because, you know, I gave her everything. What I learned is that relationships are about unconditional love, you know? So, my job fell apart. It was a long distance relationship, so my relationship fell apart. Spiritual-wise, I fell apart. Health-wise, everything fell apart.

**Caitlin:** When you say that your job at the IT company started falling apart, what did you mean by that?

**Steven:** I was totally stressed out. I became chronically fatigued. No matter how much I slept, I felt really tired. And also, my cognitive memory started falling apart, and my cognitive thinking started to fall apart. I’m starting to second-guess, triple-guess myself and that affected my clients. It affected my job and my decision-making ability.

The end of Steven’s relationship coincided with a number of stress-related health issues which he attributes to the performance pressures and excessive travelling that were part of his new sales job. In January 2012, Steven realized he needed a “time out” and gave the IT company his notice. By that time, Steven was earning well over $200,000 per year.

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⁹ Qi Gong is a practice of aligning breath, movement, and mental awareness that has roots in Chinese medicine, martial arts, and philosophy. Qi Gong is a series of slow movements designed to cultivate and balance “life energy” or Qi (chi) (Cohen 1999).
selling IT services to the federal government. It was a big leap for Steven to leave the financial security of his corporate job and to pursue his passion for teaching yoga in exchange for “goose eggs”. American yoga teachers typically earn $35 to $50 per hour teaching a few classes per week which is barely enough to cover food and rent let alone health care. Steven supported himself by living on the savings he set aside while earning a large salary doing IT sales, in addition to some residual income he collected on a rental property he owned in Silicon Valley. In March 2012, Steven was volunteering at an event for self-help guru Tony Robbins when a friend recommended doing an internet search on Brendon Burchard. After watching a series of free videos, Steven decided he would study with Burchard and develop an online business as an “energy expert” who helps people increase their productivity and avoid burnout through a daily practice of yoga and Qi Gong.

Monica’s Story

I met Monica on the second day of Experts Academy 2012. We were sitting a few seats apart in the hotel ballroom and introduced ourselves during a group exercise with two other women. Everyone in the group exchanged business cards after taking a several minutes to explain their reasons for attending the event. Monica glanced at my card and noticed I was a PhD candidate at UBC. She asked about my dissertation topic and pointed to her card which indicated she had a PhD in organizational management. I explained my interest in using Experts Academy as a field site for studying professional renewal and indicated I would be returning in the spring to recruit interviewees. Monica expressed interest in contributing to the project and invited me to contact her once the interviews were underway.
She also cautioned me about the risks of writing a doctoral dissertation on the advice industry, a warning which I later learned was directly related to her experience of applying for an academic position as an expert in workplace spirituality.

Monica is 51 years old and currently lives in Washington, D.C. with her common law partner Cindy. Monica has a PhD in organizational psychology from Indiana University and has published two books, authored numerous journal articles, and writes a weekly blog on workplace spirituality that reaches over 5,000 readers. Monica is also a contributing author to an edited volume on spirituality in the workplace and writes a monthly coaching column for a women’s health magazine. Although Monica’s original plan was to develop an organizational consulting business, she spent 8 years working as an associate professor teaching marketing, entrepreneurship, and business ethics. In 2001, Monica published a non-academic book on the topic of workplace spirituality; a move which she retrospectively admits affected her ability to secure a tenure-track position at another university:

Monica: I didn’t get my teaching contract renewed for all sorts of political reasons. I had been teaching there for a while and I was up for a tenure-track position. Had it been a more academically based book, I think I would have gotten the nod for that, as opposed to it being considered just kinda out there. If you’re looking for an academic tenure-track kind of a position you’re gonna want to have a pretty progressive and open-minded department.

Monica believes her focus on workplace spirituality was too eccentric for her academic colleagues. She later learned from another candidate who interviewed for the same tenure-track position that the hiring committee was surprised when they expressed interest in Monica’s area of research and made direct reference to her work. Monica was not deterred by the lack of support she received in academia. Instead, she attributed the disappointing outcome to being on the forefront of a new field: “I was ahead of my time. They didn’t get
that this was actually a field within management”. Monica viewed the end of her career in academia as an opportunity to revisit her original plan to develop a consulting business. Although she recognized that large scale businesses would be resistant to hiring an organizational psychologist whose primary goal was to help workers “integrate their spiritual lives with their work lives” she was confident there would be a high demand for guidance on how to “align your gifts, passion, and purpose” among individuals who were seeking meaningful work.

Monica’s decision to shift from working with entire organizations to working one-on-one with people inspired her to complete two professional coaching certification programs: Coach Training Alliance and Team Advantage. After three years of unsuccessfully trying to launch a coaching and consulting business that could generate sufficient income, Monica decided to accept a full-time position working as an organizational development consultant for Roanoke County. Although Monica maintains she would have been “perfectly happy” doing organizational development and leadership training, she eventually left the position to support her partner Cindy. The couple was maintaining a long distance relationship while Cindy worked as an IT consultant in Washington, D.C. Although the plan was for Cindy to join Monica in Virginia, it became clear to Monica that with the “economy crashing” and the loss of Cindy’s sister to cancer, her partner would not be moving.

The couple agreed it was best for Monica to join Cindy in Washington even though it meant Monica would have to resign from a job she “absolutely loved”. Monica stayed in Virginia for six months while she looked online for work in Washington. By November 2010, Monica had still not found employment in Washington but decided to list her home for sale in Virginia and move to be with her partner. Although Monica’s house stayed on the real
estate market for nearly a year, she managed to continue paying the mortgage by drawing on an emergency savings fund. Monica was down to her last month of savings when she secured a small contract doing human capital consulting in Washington. Three months later her father died of cancer and two months after the funeral, the house in Virginia finally sold. In August 2011, Monica cleared her debts and by January 2012 she had published her second book on spirituality for everyday living. The next month, Monica received an email from a friend about Experts Academy and decided to attend the event with the intention of learning how she could launch an online business as an expert in personal and professional development.

Robyn’s Story

A few days after my conversation with Monica, I emailed her an audio recording of the interview, a brief thank-you note, and a request to put me in touch with other Experts Academy alumni who might be interested in doing an interview. Later that day, Monica responded with contact information for three women she had met at Experts Academy and who were preparing to launch their businesses in the advice industry. Robyn was the first to respond to my email with an expressed willingness to participate. I proposed to do the interview later that week, but Robyn asked me to stay on “standby” because she was helping her twenty-five year old daughter recover from leg surgery. We continued to correspond via email and Robyn kept me updated about her daughter’s progress. Although I was surprised that Robyn was so forthcoming about her daughter’s current medical condition, it became clear when we began the interview that Robyn’s interest in medicine and her daughter’s struggle with Type 1 diabetes were significant driving forces behind her entire career.
Robyn is 52 years old and currently lives in South Carolina with her second husband, two dogs and several cats. She has two adult children who live outside of the home and a step-child who lives with them on a part-time basis. Robyn attributes her passion for medicine to her early exposure to the medical field through her father’s occupation as a doctor and her step-mother’s occupation as a nurse. Although Robyn was accepted to medical school, she decided to pursue a Master’s degree in Business Administration instead. In 1997, Robyn’s second child was diagnosed with diabetes at the age of 10. Robyn became very involved in learning about her daughter’s illness and equally frustrated when her family moved to another city and could not find adequate medical care. Robyn remembered taking her daughter to an appointment with the only pediatric endocrinologist in the area, only to have him say she was “fine” and to come back the following year. Robyn was horrified by the experience since it was standard practice for children with diabetes to be monitored every three months. The experience was especially upsetting for Robyn because her daughter had blood pressure problems and protein in her urine, two signs that her insulin levels were not under control.

As a self-described “take charge kinda person”, Robyn decided to put her experience in business development to good use and co-founded a start-up company with her former husband. Together, they developed software that addresses non-compliance issues among diabetics by extracting data from glucose meters and blood pressure cuffs and transforming the data into trends which are sent wirelessly to caregivers. As the Chief Science Officer, Robyn travelled throughout the US and China to solicit investors. She also held a position at the local hospital helping physicians write grants and used that experience to secure a number of federal grants for the company. Within 18 months, Robyn secured 5 million dollars of
investment capital and obtained clearance from the US Food and Drug Administration. However, when the company started to grow and Robyn requested additional funds from investors, they began to express concern about supporting a husband and wife team. Here is Robyn’s description of what happened in the following months:

**Robyn:** I didn’t have the best marriage anyway. I had just been in total denial about that most of that marriage. And so, in pretty short order [after investors pulled out], I got fired, and divorced, and relocated. My ex-husband was Chairman of the Board and he was the only person who had the power to fire me. And he did fire me. At the same time, he closed our bank accounts and moved me and my son who was about 6 at the time to some investment property we had. And then he took my son, took all of my shares in the company…and then cancelled our health insurance.

Within a span of 12 months, Robyn went from being the Chief Science Officer of her own company from which she withdrew a six figure salary to being unemployed, geographically displaced, and without access to her marital assets and savings. Because her daughter required insulin and other medical supplies, Robyn saw only two options: “you either curl up in a little ball and give up, or you get busy”. Robyn spent the next year asking acquaintances for help as she coped with the dissolution of her company and the fallout of her marriage. Her realtor tried to sell the investment property before it went into foreclosure and gave her enough money to retain a lawyer. Her son’s kindergarten teacher made arrangements to have the local church provide money for groceries and offered free babysitting while Robyn looked for a job. Robyn was eventually hired to work part-time as a cashier at a local boat store for $7.50 per hour and credits the staff for rebuilding her confidence and self-esteem. A few months later, Robyn regained enough strength to begin networking with fellow business developers and eventually found a position in her field. Robyn spent several years working for different organizations in the area of business
development. After attending Experts Academy in 2012, however, Robyn decided to leave her job as the director of a venture capital firm in order to build a consulting business that helps people “start over” after experiencing unwelcome or unexpected change.

Kimberly’s Story

I connected with Kimberly via email after posting a recruitment message in a private Facebook forum for Experts Academy alumni. I was invited to the forum by another research participant named Annette who responded to my usual thank-you note and request for referrals by offering to send an invite request to the forum administrator that would enable me to contact other members directly through Facebook. I accepted the offer to be invited into the forum and waited a few weeks before receiving confirmation that I could post messages through my Facebook account. Within a few days, Kimberly responded to a Facebook post in which I publically thanked Annette for the invitation, introduced myself as a researcher interested in professional renewal, and invited consenting participants to contact me via email for an interview. Kimberly sent a message to my university email address that contained a link to her online calendar. I selected a date and time from the available options, and though we did not connect due to a scheduling mistake, we managed to conduct the interview on Skype several days later.

Kimberly is 55 years old and is currently going through her third divorce. She has one biological child who recently married and does not live at home. When Kimberly was a teenager, she cleaned condos for the family construction company until her father put her in charge of payroll and bookkeeping. Kimberly described their bookkeeping system and payroll technology as a “nightmare” and swore she would make it her mission to write
instructions which laypeople could understand. After graduating from high school, Kimberly became a bookkeeper and developed a system for managing receipts, invoices, client files, and tax returns without the use of a computer.

Three years later, Kimberly gave in to family pressure and pursued a bachelor of science in marketing with a minor in marketing research. Kimberly supported herself through college by working as a file clerk, marketing analyst and executive assistant. While attending university, she completed a marketing internship with a chemical company and later convinced a consulting company to hire her as part of their Office Automation Team. For two years, Kimberly worked as a trainer, wrote step-by-step instructions for using software programs, managed a team of ten people, answered the internal troubleshooting hotline, and taught upper level executives to rely on computers rather than personal assistants.

After leaving this position in 1985, Kimberly worked for several large corporations doing technical documentation and business analysis until she gave birth to a child with severe allergies and breathing problems. Because her son required constant care, Kimberly left her job in 1988 and launched her first solo business selling a trademarked methodology for creating, maintaining and sharing instructions on how to use computer systems and other types of technology. For 19 years, Kimberly ran a successful consulting business with clients that ranged from small start-ups to large Fortune 500 companies. Although Kimberly had no intentions of ever becoming an advice guru, a sequence of serious health problems led her to reconsider her career path:

**Kimberly:** The illness that led me to declare I was gonna be a life coach and inspirational speaker [pause]. I had a complete adrenal collapse and so I had no energy. I was sleeping 18 hours a day…and over the course of about two years I kept going downhill, and doctors couldn’t find what was going on. And one night my husband raced me to the emergency room based on the fact
that I doubled over in pain. And he had seen me in pain, but he hadn’t seen me do that. And turns out I had a tumor between my pancreas and my spleen.

Kimberly was hospitalized for eleven days and sent home with a feeding tube. Doctors worried the tumor would become cancerous within 6 months and scheduled surgery in January 2010. Kimberly did not recover well from the surgery and was hospitalized with a serious infection. Three months later, doctors discovered a cyst that was “eating away” at her ear drum and perforating her skull. Over the course of 4 years, Kimberly had two ear surgeries, a knee surgery to repair torn cartilage and a total knee replacement to alleviate arthritis pain. While waiting for her first ear surgery, Kimberly’s eardrum burst and doctors discovered she had developed an infection caused by a strain of staph bacteria that is resistant to penicillin. This type of infection occurs in people who have been in hospitals or other health care settings and is typically associated with invasive procedures such as intravenous tubing and joint replacement surgery (Meehan, Jamali & Nguyen 2009).

Kimberly remembers waking up in the intensive care unit after surgery for the pancreatic tumor thinking she “really wanted to die”. Her husband’s sudden announcement that he did not want to “take care of a woman who was constantly ill” drove Kimberly into deep financial problems and the constant cycle of becoming well, returning to work, and falling ill again triggered enormous amounts of anger and depression. In between bouts of illness, however, Kimberly attended conferences and other live events about internet marketing and personal development which she described as “energizing”. Kimberly discovered Experts Academy while attending a live event organized by another motivational speaker and purchased a ticket for Burchard’s event with the intention of exploring a new career path as a life coach and inspirational speaker. Through conversations with other
aspiring entrepreneurs, however, Kimberly was reminded of the high demand for assistance with business technology and decided to launch a business that helps people develop the data processing component of their company using technology that is freely available online.

Co-CreatingStories of Struggle

These vignettes capture the stories of struggle which participants told as they reflected on their career trajectories and reasons for becoming entrepreneurial advice gurus. The centrality of these stories in our conversations about career change and professional renewal raises important questions about the phenomenon of self-invention since many anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists have argued that people tell stories about themselves in order to constitute themselves. As McAdams (1985: 18) succinctly notes: “An individual’s story has the power to tie together past, present and future in his or her life. It is a story which is able to provide unity and purpose…Identity is a life story”.

Stories of struggle are major clues towards understanding identity formation among aspiring entrepreneurs. They provide a cause, a history and a sequence of events which enables participants to communicate how their employment trajectories and personal crises led them to entrepreneurial careers as advice gurus. Plummer’s (1995) call for a sociology of stories grounded in symbolic interactionism provides a useful starting point for thinking about the relationship between storytelling and identity. Plummer (1995: 20) maintains that stories are symbolic interactions insofar as human beings are “social world-makers” who use language and symbols to create identities for themselves and others. People form identities by integrating their life experiences (reconstructed pasts, perceived presents and imagined
futures) into an internalized and evolving story of the self which provides a sense of coherence, direction and purpose.

For Plummer (1995), thinking about how stories of the self are produced requires the analyst to consider the formal properties of stories and the interactions that emerge around storytelling. In other words: how are the turning point experiences which are communicated through stories of struggle organized, perceived, constructed and given meaning by interacting individuals? Narrative analysis was a useful strategy for examining how study participants form identities by integrating their career trajectories and life experiences into an internalized, evolving story of the self. Methodologically speaking, it is fairly easy to glean interview transcripts for stories; narratives have beginnings, middles, and ends, as well as features that distinguish them from other types of discourse (e.g. plots, settings and characters). In the end, my ability to identify narratives in the interview transcripts made it possible to trace the development of particular stories and to consider how Skype interviews and email correspondences shaped the storytelling process.

Because aspiring entrepreneurs tend to rely on a sense of linear progression to produce narratives about the emerging entrepreneurial self, their stories of struggle can be viewed as modern tales of self-invention (Plummer 1995). In their classic, condensed and archetypal form, modern Western tales usually rely on a limited number of generic plots such as: taking a journey, enduring suffering, engaging in a contest, pursuing consummation, and establishing a home. At a simple level, stories of struggle all contain elements of suffering which give tension to the plot; Jill’s account of feeling angry and devalued at work, Monica’s experience of struggling to find employment after relocating to be with her partner, Steven’s inability to make sound decisions due to extreme fatigue, Kimberly’s frequent bouts of
illness, and the dissolution of Robyn’s business and marriage are all examples of the ways participants described elements of suffering in their lives.

Within stories of struggle, suffering is always followed by a turning point or *epiphany*. Denzin (1989: 70) defines epiphanies as “interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people’s lives”. Although epiphanies can be positive or negative, they always alter the fundamental meaning structure of a person’s life:

**Robyn:** So I took on helping entrepreneurs get started, but also helping attract both angel capital and venture capital to that particular location. So I did that for a couple of years, and in the process of doing that, two things happened: I realized I wasn't the stupidest person on the planet because I thought that the mistakes that I had made in my own company were very unique. Then I learned, no, actually, that was pretty run of the mill for what happens in start-up companies. When there's money involved, friendships go by the wayside and people stab each other in the back. And if you don't understand the paperwork that you're signing, that just happens.

The meanings which are given to turning point experiences are always given retrospectively because they are relived and re-experienced in the stories people tell about what happened to them. In this case, Robyn is reflecting on the epiphanies she experienced as she recovered from the emotional and financial devastation that accompanied her divorce and the dissolution of a medical company she co-founded with her ex-husband. While Robyn had originally attributed the business failure to being “the stupidest person on the planet”, her experience raising capital funds for an economic development company and working for other start-up companies led her to reframe that experience in different terms: “if you don’t understand the paperwork that you’re signing, that just happens”. Furthermore, while Robyn thought the problems in her company were “unique”, she learned by working with other entrepreneurs that money and friendship do not always mix well and that betrayal within business relationships is a “run of the mill” type of problem.
Robyn’s realization that she was not the “stupidest person in the world”, Jill’s observation that she was no longer “waking up with joy”, and Kimberly’s experience of feeling like she “really wanted to die” are all examples of the positive and negative epiphanies that precede deep periods of transformation. Indeed, the turning points that participants described – whether brought on through personal reflection or imposed through external conditions independent of their own choosing – always preceded discussions of survival and surpassing that parlayed into entrepreneurial careers. Thus, when Monica realized she was “ahead of [her] time” with respect to her research on spirituality in the workplace, she transformed her original plans to work in academia into a career as a business consultant. Similarly, when Steven concluded he needed a “time out” from the stress associated with the heavy travel schedule of his sales job, he reconnected with his love for yoga, began teaching regular classes, and eventually transformed his passion into a lucrative business online.

Although my feminist approach to interviewing may have created an intimate space where participants felt comfortable revisiting painful events from their past, it is also important to acknowledge that Skype interviews may have facilitated disclosure. Scholars working in the field of online interviewing, for instance, argue that participants who meet with researchers via email or instant messaging are more likely to reveal potentially negative aspects of the self due to the relative anonymity of online interactions (Bargh et al. 2002). Others report that while a “head shot” from a webcam limits full access to body language (Cater 2011) this is offset by a person’s greater willingness to share details about their personal history online rather than in person (Leibert et al. 2006). While the question of whether participants would be more or less forthcoming in face-to-face interviews cannot be
resolved with absolute certainty, the issue of whether remote interviewing techniques encourage personal disclosure is an important factor to consider with respect to how stories of struggle are told.

While my goal was to assemble stories of struggle with honesty and accuracy, there is never a perfect correlation between what actually happened, how that happening is experienced, how that happening is told, and how that happening is represented. In this case, I have interpreted the narratives which participants told about their career trajectories and personal crises as stories of struggle and reported them in biographical form. While participants may feel these stories capture something “truthful” about themselves, my experience of asking participants for feedback on the narratives I crafted out of interview transcripts, biographical questionnaires, and email correspondences raises important questions about conventional standards of (auto)biographical “truth”. Consider the following excerpt from an edited copy of Kimberly’s story of struggle:

Kimberly is 55 years old and currently lives with her third husband in Indiana. She has one biological child and two step-children, none of whom who recently married and does not live at home. When Kimberly was a teenager, she cleaned condos for the family construction company until her father put her in charge of payroll bookkeeping and payroll. Kimberly described their bookkeeping system and payroll technology as a “nightmare” and swore she would make it her mission to write instructions which laypeople could understand. After graduating from high school, Kimberly became a bookkeeper and learned to filter through receipts, invoices, and scraps of notes printed on paper napkins without the use of a computer. Instead, she developed a system for organizing client files and records that organized information so that it was easily found when needed and made doing tax returns about 40% faster than the previous system or lack of a system.

**Figure 5 – Co-Creating Stories of Struggle**
In this example, the black print is the original account I sent to Kimberly for clarification on her role in improving the payroll and bookkeeping system for her father’s construction business. The underlined print and the comment in the margin are the amendments Kimberly made to the original draft. This textually-mediated interaction is what I am referring to when I describe stories of struggle as joint actions which are co-created by the researcher and the participant. I did not ask participants to submit their amendments in this format nor did I anticipate they would even respond to my request for feedback since most participants in previous projects did not respond when I extended the same courtesy.

While Plummer (1995) acknowledges the co-creative character of stories by pointing to the ways in which researchers provoke stories from people by probing, coaxing, and coaching interviewees into sharing specific details about their lives, his discussion does not extend into the reporting phase of the research because he does not offer participants the opportunity to provide feedback on draft versions of his interpretation of their stories.

The decision to let interviewees edit their stories at this stage of the research was informed by my awareness of feminist issues in qualitative research and my corresponding sensitivity to the ways in which unequal levels of power and control are (re)created during post-fieldwork phases of analysis and report writing. This sensitivity stems from having participants from other research projects disagree with my interpretation of pivotal moments in their lives (see Forsey 2012) and of having sensationalized, inaccurate, and unrevised accounts of my research featured in a local newspaper that resulted in several angry phone calls from participants. The task of representing words in forms that are suitable for disciplinary texts will always raise issues connected to power and interpretive authority. In this case, my goal was not to relinquish full interpretive authority to research participants, but
to engage in an open exchange of ideas that honors the stories participants told during the interviews, in addition to the knowledge, experience, and analytical concerns I brought to the material.

**Reinvention vs/as Reincarnation**

Analyzing the formal properties of stories, in addition to the online interactions that emerge through storytelling provides an interesting opportunity to examine how people who are experiencing various forms of downward social mobility (e.g. job loss, divorce, layoffs, health problems) find creative ways to reinvent themselves as entrepreneurs. Among the research participants I interviewed, part of the reinvention process involved fashioning the actualities of their (inter)personal crises into a storyline that is part of the institutional discourse of Experts Academy (see Smith 2005). This aspect of the reinvention process is evident in the similarities between the narrative structure of Burchard’s story described in Chapter 1 and the stories of struggle presented above.

The stories of struggle which participants co-constructed through Skype interviews and email correspondences can also be viewed as symbolic “rebirths” that capture the transformation of their entrepreneurial identities. In this sense, the Hindu themes of karma and rebirth become conducive to entrepreneurship insofar as *reinvention has become synonymous with reincarnation* among New Age entrepreneurs. There are compelling reasons to posit that the New Age appropriation of Hindu doctrines represents a constructive joining of Eastern and Western thought that hinges on a presumed relationship between spiritual transformation and upward social mobility. That Burchard likens his mystical experience of communing with the divine to having a “second chance” is an example of how
the concept of reincarnation is deployed in his account of changing careers and developing a multi-million dollar business online.

As noted in the previous chapter, one of the prime Eastern influences on the New Age movement has been the Hindu doctrine of karma and the corresponding idea of rebirth. Within Hinduism, a person is born into the caste which he or she deserves by virtue of actions committed in a prior life. Hindus believe that karma determines social fate and that through faithful adherence to caste-appropriate duties, a person will be reborn “to a new temporary life on earth in circumstances which are at least as fortunate as the present ones” (Weber 1958b: 22). The doctrine of reincarnation (samsara) concerns the transmigration of the soul into a series of physical or supernatural forms which are customarily human, animal, divine, angelic, demonic, vegetative, or astrological in nature (Flood 1996). In most traditions of Hinduism, salvation or liberation (moksha) refers to freedom from the cycle of reincarnation, in addition to the store of action (karma) built up over innumerable lifetimes.

It is important to note that compared to the other Indian religions (Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism), Hinduism provides little encouragement to change one’s situation in terms of material well-being (Singer 1966). Moreover, Hinduism is strongly associated with the emergence of the caste system (jati), an outlawed form of social stratification that remains formidable and imposing in practice. Historically, Hindus were classified into four major castes: Brahmins were scholars, priests, and advisors to kings who taught the Vedas and sacrificed for others; Kshatriyas were kings and noblemen who were responsible for protecting people and practicing arms; Vyshyas were traders and entrepreneurs who tended cattle, engaged in money-lending, and practiced agriculture; and Shudras were people of all other occupations who served the other classes and practiced art (Flood 1996).
This system was part of a larger “chain of being” that persisted across generations and shaped the career paths of Hindus. Whereas Weber (1958b) cites the clear demarcation of occupations based on castes and the persistence of occupational decisions across generations as reasons why Hinduism inhibits capitalist development, Kapp (1963) argues that beliefs about cyclical time and cosmic causation are equally significant for the lack of capitalist development. According to Kapp (1963), beliefs in karma and reincarnation may lead to feelings of helplessness; to reliance on magic, astrology, mysticism, contemplation and withdrawal; to denial that history, social reform, and economic development depend on human will and social action; and to the belief that human existence is transitory, illusory, and unimportant. Kapp (1963: 43) concludes that Hindu metaphysics stand in the way of “the emergence of one basic prerequisite of economic development, namely, the conviction that man [sic] does make his own history”.

Kapp (1963) does not explain how economic action follows logically, psychologically, or culturally from metaphysical beliefs in karma and reincarnation nor does he demonstrate how Hindus who profess such beliefs have become fatalistic and other-worldly to the extent that they do not have the character traits which modern European capitalists were supposed to have derived from the Protestant work ethic (e.g. arriving on time for appointments, working hard, and investing their savings). However, if we accept that capitalism constantly reinvents itself (Novak 1990) and that entrepreneurs must continuously reinvent their professional identities in order to successfully navigate the capitalist “field” (Bourdieu 1993), we can see how the American ideal of reinvention does not necessarily stand in contrast to Hindu beliefs about cyclical time and cosmic causation.
The Hindu concept of dharma derived from the Vedas (primary revelation) implies a fundamental division between the affirmation of worldly life and social values on the one hand, and renunciation in order to achieve salvation or liberation on the other. Whereas the former is concerned with legitimizing hierarchical social relationships and ensuring better circumstances in the next lifetime through the accumulation of good karma, the latter is concerned with faith, individual salvation, and initiation into spiritual techniques which result in liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth (Flood 1996). However, the distinction between worldly life and soteriology is less apparent among New Age entrepreneurs, some of whom describe entrepreneurialism as a form of spiritual salvation:

**Rachel**: I was pediatric OT for six, seven years. And then the chronic fatigue was getting bad. I had a severe herniated disc in my back. I basically couldn't continue doing what I was doing. I had to stop working. I was on disability. I stayed at a clinic for three months, really figuring out how to get well. And then I heard about the Institute for Integrative Nutrition and it called to me. It called to me...And at the same time I started the school, I also started acupuncture. And soon after I started acupuncture, I had that awakening experience. So at that time, I was still doing the pediatric OT. But once I woke up, it was like [chuckles] "You have to teach people about nutrition. This is so important". And this inspiration just flooded my soul. And that was it for me. [chuckles] I'm like, "I have to teach nutrition." So I quit my job and I started my business. That was the transition.

The blending of worldly activity and spiritual soteriology is clearly expressed in Rachel’s account of how she quit her job as a pediatric occupational therapist after experiencing an “awakening”. Many religious and spiritualist traditions view these types of mystical experiences as revelations caused by real encounters with angels, gods, and other higher-order realities which human beings are not ordinarily aware of. Rachel’s spiritual awakening was preceded by several sessions of acupuncture which she later described as “the vehicle through which I could truly see myself”. New Agers often share the Hindu belief that
the “higher self” or Atman is only recognizable through union with a divine source (York 2001). Here, Rachel is describing how acupuncture triggered an encounter with the Atman or “higher self” that resulted in an awakening experience about her career path as a nutrition counsellor and entrepreneur. Later in the interview, Rachel maintains that despite concerns from friends and family about the abrupt decision to quit her job as an occupational therapist, this spiritual awakening produced an “I’m one with everything” experience that enabled her to access “universal wisdom” about the “path that I charted out for myself”.

Unlike traditional interpretations of dharma which draw sharp distinctions between the sacred work of spiritual transformation and the profane work of occupational activity, Rachel’s experience more closely parallels the blending of worldly life and soteriology depicted in the Bhagavad Gita (secondary revelation). Translations and contemporary commentaries of the Bhagavad Gita have appeared in English, most notably by the famous Transcendental Meditation guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi described in Chapter 1. According to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s interpretation of this famous set of Hindu scriptures, the dieals of caste obligation (world affirming) and ascetic renunciation (world rejecting) are brought together by saying that a person can work and fight towards liberation while still fulfilling worldly responsibilities. Indeed, Marishi Mahesh Yogi’s efforts to revive India’s sacred traditions of yoga and meditation through an entrepreneurial mission that resulted in a multi-billion dollar empire is just one example of how the blending of worldly duty and spiritual liberation provides New Age proponents with a rationale for spiritualizing commercial activity (York 2001).

The Bhagavad Gita is often regarded as the most influential Hindu scripture for the way it appears to synthesize the brahmanical concept of dharma with the yogic ideals of
spiritual liberation through the paths of karma, raja, jnana and bhakti (Flood 1996). The path of action (karma-yoga) begins with the understanding that selfish action binds the soul. As a way to reconcile worldly commitment with liberation, karma-yoga recommends that all activities be linked to a greater cause through detachment from the fruits of action. The royal path (raja-yoga) leads to a state of concentration in which the wandering mind is controlled through physical postures (asana), breath-control (pranayama), sense-withdrawal (pratyahara), and meditation (dhyana). In this state of concentrated absorption, the practitioner achieves a higher state of consciousness and is no longer aware of the body or physical environment. The path of knowledge (jnana-yoga) promotes knowledge of the absolute (brahman) through secluded study and sense abnegation. Since the pursuit of wisdom and realization is not purely an academic exercise, emphasis is placed on becoming free from the sensual desires that delude the soul. The path of devotion (bhakti-yoga) is the path towards spiritual fulfillment most recommended in the Bhagavad Gita. It involves the pure and selfless worship of a personal God that fosters an intense emotional love between the human and the divine. Through devotion, a disciple attains the state of brahman and enters the Lord through his grace (prasada) (Flood 1996).

While the stories of struggle presented above can be viewed as symbolic rebirths which document a spiritual quest to transmute negative karma into products and services which help other people, the New Age spiritual practices which participants used to reinvent their entrepreneurial identities correspond to the yogic pathways to liberation known as karma-yoga and raja-yoga. In Chapter 1, I detailed how advice gurus engage in karma-yoga by linking their entrepreneurial careers to a higher spiritual calling to help other people. This is evident in the sacred meaning that many participants attached to their work, in addition to
beliefs about the importance of assisting clients with their own self-fulfillment at the expense of immediate material rewards (i.e. detachment from the fruits of action). However, the widespread use of meditation, prayer, breathing exercises, physical postures, and mantras suggests that New Age entrepreneurs also rely on disciplinary practices which more closely parallel raja-yoga:

Steven: I really love yoga because I love the stretching aspect, and I feel so much better afterwards. But more important, I love the spiritual aspect of it as well [pause] the mind-body connection, right? And within Yoga, there's many different types of yoga too, right? So there's power yoga if I wanna get a workout. There's flow yoga, which is more like a moving meditation. And the other types are restorative yoga for when I'm burned out or when I feel like my adrenals are shot.

Yoga’s popularity among ten of the entrepreneurs I interviewed is partially attributable to the psycho-physiological benefits that a regular practice can produce including flexibility, core strength, emotional stability, relaxation, and overall well-being (see Büssing, et al. 2012). Steven’s appreciation for the “stretching aspect” of yoga, his preference for power yoga when he needs a “workout”, and his penchant for more restorative forms of yoga when he feels like his “adrenals are shot” reflect the tendency for 21st century Western societies to view yoga as a physical health practice. However, as Park et al. (2014) observe among their sample of yoga practitioners in the United States, “spirituality” is also a common reason for adopting and maintaining a regular yoga practice. The spiritual and philosophical dimensions of yoga are captured in Steven’s comment about the “mind-body connection” and his description of flow yoga as a “moving meditation”.

Although there are several ancient Hindu texts that codify yogic ideals and practices, they all make reference to a subtle body with energy centres or “wheels” (chakras) that are
located along the central axis of the body and which are connected by meridians or channels (nadi) through which the life-force (prana) that animates the body can flow. The seven main chakras are aligned in an ascending column from the base of the spine to the top of the head (Figure 6). New Agers tend to associate each chakra with a color, physiological function, and aspect of consciousness. The “crown chakra”, for instance, is located at the top of the head, is represented by the color white, is linked to the pituitary gland, and is generally associated with a state of divine consciousness. In contrast, the “root chakra” is located at the base of the spine, is represented by the color red, is linked to the perineum, and is related to instinct, security, and survival (White 2011).

![Figure 6 – The Chakra System](image)

In practice, the chakra system functions as a visualization aid that is used during meditation for the purpose of achieving concentration. While the ultimate goal of raja-yoga is spiritual liberation, some research participants relied on New Age interpretations of the chakra system for spiritual protection:

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10 Adapted from Flood (1996:99).
**Caitlin:** Great. So what does a typical workday look like for you?

**Annette:** [sigh] Um, it really depends. The first thing I do before I even make it out of my bedroom is I do my ten minute energy routine.

**Caitlin:** Can you tell me what that is? Can you walk me through the steps?

**Annette:** There's a special thing that you do that connects you to Heaven and Earth so you're, you know, you're connected. I protect myself from all [pause] it's my intention that I protect myself from all negative energy. You zip up your back at the same time as you're doing it, and then you lock the key with a little kiss, and you place the key in your heart. But as you're saying your intentions, you say that you're protecting yourself from negative energies even as you stay open to the positive [energies].

Annette’s “ten minute energy routine” is a New Age spiritual practice that involves a series of daily rituals which protect her from “negative energy”. According to the handout which Annette sent me shortly after our interview (see Eden 2010), “Connecting Heaven and Earth” involves a series of breathing exercises and physical postures which connect the practitioner to Heaven through the crown chakra and to Earth through the root chakra (Figure 7). This technique is performed for approximately two minutes and is believed to “open the meridians” which connect the seven main chakras and “expel toxic energies” from the invisible energy field or “aura” that surrounds all human beings.

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**Figure 7 – Connecting Heaven and Earth**
The “Zip Up” is another form of raja-yoga that Annette practices every morning. This technique involves a series of intentions, breathing exercises and arm movements which are performed along the central meridian of the body, and which reportedly protect Annette from “negative” energies while staying open to “positive” ones. As a self-described “empath” who can “pick up other people’s energies”, Annette maintains that her daily energy routine helps her manage the demands of her entrepreneurial career. In fact, she credits the “Zip Up” for helping her get through “21 days like a ball of fire” when she released her first advice book, travelled to multiple U.S. cities for her book tour, and came into contact with thousands of people.

Whereas some research participants relied on physical postures and breath-control to achieve a state of concentration and inner peace, others reportedly used prayer or meditation to attain higher states of consciousness:

Eli: So I use "Om." That rumbling sound means something. It actually gets you in that trance phase. And if my mind takes off and I am trying to get quiet, I catch myself, I say "Deflect. Return." I say it to myself normally in a breath. You know, that means "Get yourself back to quiet." And once you’re in that quiet step, you start hearing your inner voice.

Kristin: I'd been deliberating about being an entrepreneur for, like, three years and never had the guts to do so, right? And then one day [during prayer], a very audible voice says, "It's time. Step out and go."

Jill: When my contract ended and we decided not to go forward, after the initial "Oh shit. What do I do now?" I got really quiet. I mean, it literally -- in my head, the voice that I call God said, "I want you to write this book, and it's gonna be called “[…]”." 11

Many yoga traditions claim that magical powers can result from the heightened state of consciousness that raja-yoga ultimately produces. According to Flood (1996: 101), these

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11 Title omitted to preserve confidentiality.
powers include “knowledge of past and future, knowledge of past lives, telepathy, the ability to disappear, foreknowledge of one’s own death, great strength, supernormal senses, levitation, and omniscience, including knowledge of the cosmic regions”. Most research participants engaged in some type of prayer or meditation on a daily basis and the comments above reveal how these contemplative forms of communication enabled them to hear a “voice” which they claimed was of divine origin. Although Eli was reluctant to share details about the guidance he received from his “inner voice”, he was willing to discuss how the Hindu mantra “Om” produces a trance-like state that helps him control his wandering mind and access inner wisdom. In contrast, Kristin and Jill shared openly about the divine guidance they received about their entrepreneurial careers. Kristin received instruction that the timing was right to become an entrepreneur and Jill was informed of God’s desire for her to write an advice book with a very specific title that she eventually used. Like many of the entrepreneurs I interviewed, Kristin and Jill relied on meditation and prayer to access divine wisdom which reportedly helped them as they co-created a more fulfilling life through an entrepreneurial career.

Conclusion

Self-making through storytelling is not an individual or isolated phenomenon and it is important to consider how stories of struggle are co-created through the research process. Recounting stories of struggle on behalf of participants lends a momentary coherence to lives which are always in motion and I must stress that describing the career biographies of aspiring entrepreneurs was a selective endeavor that involved “a good deal of bold assertion
and immodest neglect” (Denzin 1989: 5). The career biographies of the entrepreneurs I interviewed were varied, complex and full of twists and turns brought on by office politics, intimate relationships, health problems and family issues. Respondents framed their personal crises as a necessary step in the process of becoming an advice guru, and many reported multiple and simultaneous work/health/family crises that made my dissatisfaction with academia seem trivial by comparison.

Although each participant mentioned at least one (inter)personal crisis that served as a catalyst for professional renewal, it is important to note that the stories presented in this chapter are indicative of how research participants talked about their crises and not necessarily representative of what crises they experienced. The classic account of “what I was like, what happened, and what I am like now” is evident in the narrative structure of the stories of struggle described above and is typical of the larger field of people involved in entrepreneurial self-help (recall Burchard’s story and Oprah’s story from Chapter 1). The storyline is also part of the packaging work that research participants learned at Experts Academy. The live event provides a forum where seminar participants can reflect on their lives through a series of writing activities and questionnaires that help identify relevant information for the purpose of creating a story that can be performed, marketed, and even sold. In the following chapter, I examine this theme in greater detail through an ethnographic description of the Experts Academy live event.
Attend a Self-Help Seminar

The seminar portion of Experts Academy is continually evolving and hardly resembles Burchard’s description of the event when only 28 people first gathered in 2007. During this early stage, Burchard recounts that what energized seminar participants was the discovery that other people faced similar problems communicating their advice to a broader audience, felt passionately about helping people, and had a collection of best practices and valuable insights they could share with each other. Part of Burchard’s ability to coordinate and lead Experts Academy is related to his educational background and career trajectory. Burchard’s knowledge of the self-improvement and internet marketing industries stemming from years of reading books and attending seminars; the public speaking skills he acquired while obtaining a Master’s degree in organizational communication; the reputation he built for storytelling while collaborating with non-profit organizations and transnational corporations; the unusual success he experienced synthesizing best practices and generating a multi-million dollar business; and the early support he received from industry insiders such as Tony Robbins earned Burchard the trust and respect that would enable him to link people between industries and host high-priced, sold-out events.

In this chapter, I describe the social organization of the live event and demonstrate how this community can be viewed as a New Age “sect” in the Weberian sense of the term. Through ethnographic descriptions of my experiences at the live seminar and interviews with participants, I map the layout of the event, identify rituals which are used to create emotional bonds with Burchard and fellow attendees, trace the contours of Burchard’s charismatic style.
of leadership, and pinpoint the techniques of pastoral power which have found support in the discourses and practices of self-invention at Experts Academy. I conclude with a discussion of the similarities and differences between Protestant sects in the early 20th century and New Age sects in the early 21st century by examining the rules that govern sect membership and the resources which New Age entrepreneurs must have at their disposal in order to fully participate in this community.

The Layout of the Event

The seminar portion of Experts Academy is a multi-day event that is part training symposium and part capitalist spectacle. The event takes place over the course of four days from 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. at the Santa Clara Marriott in the heart of Silicon Valley, California. The nickname “Silicon Valley” was first coined by a successful Californian entrepreneur named Ralph Vaerst, though it did not become widely used until the early 1980s when IBM first introduced the Personal Computer to the consumer market. Geographically, Silicon Valley encompasses all of the Santa Clara Valley and the Southern portion of the San Francisco Bay area. The term originally referred to the region’s large number of computer industries and silicon chip innovators, but today is it generally used as a metonym for the high-technology sector in the United States. Despite the development of other high-tech centers throughout the world, Silicon Valley is home to many of the largest technology corporations, in addition to thousands of dotcom companies and other small startups. The significance of hosting the Experts Academy live event in Silicon Valley becomes increasingly evident in light of its reputation for innovations in software and internet technology which enable people to nurture networks and conduct business around the globe.
As I detail below, not only does Silicon Valley house the corporate headquarters of Google, Paypal, Facebook and other high tech companies that make online entrepreneurship possible, it also functions as an important site for accumulating and converting different forms of “network capital” (Elliot & Urry 2010) that enable New Age entrepreneurs to establish network ties and oversee business transactions “on the move”.

The Santa Clara Marriott is located across the street from eBay’s corporate headquarters and is nestled within a sprawling landscape of palm trees, manicured lawns, flowers and exotic plants. The hotel lobby exudes luxury with marble walls, leather sofas, Renaissance art, and a Starbucks barista preparing lattes for guests. At a rate of $359 per night, the Marriott offers guests a wide range of services including valet parking, car rentals, foreign exchange, high speed internet, shoe shining, daily newspaper delivery, dry cleaning and virtual concierge services. Fortunately, event participants paid a discounted rate of $154 per night and most arrived on Wednesday evening in preparation for onsite registration which began at 7:30 a.m. the following morning.

Despite a concerted effort by volunteers and staff to coordinate the movement of over 900 people, the registration process was chaotic and frenzied. As I wandered past the hotel restaurant through a hallway that led to the seminar room, I encountered several dozen attendees waiting in line to sign registration forms. Informal chit chat and business card exchanges helped ease the discomfort of standing in such close proximity to complete strangers and often led to conversations about business ideas and reasons for attending the event. “I can help you find the new happy you”, Carmen explained as she handed me a card. “Oh yeah?”, I laughed, “How are you going to do that?”. “That’s the part I’m here to figure out”, she continued; “I know what I want to do. I just don’t know how to do it”. There was
no doubt that I shared Carmen’s ignorance about how to transform a decade of training and expertise into an entrepreneurial career. Unlike Carmen, however, this was my first time attending a self-help seminar and I was quite surprised by what I observed over the next four days.

There were very strict rules for attending the seminar portion of Experts Academy. During registration I was required to sign a release of liability form and accept a series of terms of conditions. For instance, despite a 100% satisfaction guarantee I forfeited my right to pursue legal action should I incur any personal or financial damages as a result of implementing the tools and strategies that would be shared at the event. I also signed a waiver that released Burchard and his extensive network of officers, employees, interns, contractors, sponsors, and representatives from any liability that may result from attending the seminar including accident, injury or death. Once I signed the form, I was directed to an adjacent table where a staff member verified my driver’s license in exchange for a badge with a lanyard that displayed my name. “You can’t enter the seminar room without this, so don’t lose it” the young woman explained as she motioned me towards a basket full of blue, green, yellow, red, and purple silicone wristbands with Burchard’s “Live, Love, Matter” mantra imprinted on them. I selected a green wristband, tucked my business cards into the plastic badge holder, and joined the growing line of participants with green wristbands outside one of five doors leading to the Grand Ballroom where the actual seminar took place.

Shortly before 9:00 a.m., the chart topping hit “Club Can’t Handle Me” by American rapper Flo Rida began thumping from behind the walls of the seminar room. Event organizers stood at each of the five color-coded entrances and roused attendees by clapping their hands, pumping their fists and shouting “Are you ready!?”. At the climax of this very
loud and feverish pep rally, the doors flew open and attendees rushed to have their name tags inspected before entering the room. “Is it always like this?” I asked the man who graciously nudged me ahead of him in line. “Brendon’s events are ALWAYS like this” he chuckled, “You gotta fight for a good seat”. It was not until I entered the ballroom that I fully understood his advice. Although attendees with VIP status could sit in a reserved section of approximately 100 seats near the front stage, those with regular status had to choose from the remaining 800 seats that were organized into rows and divided by a corridor down the middle of the room.

As the song shifted to “I Gotta Feeling” by the Black Eyed Peas, I maneuvered my way to the front of the room in hopes of getting a seat closer to the stage. “These are all taken” several people informed me as they pointed to seats covered with notebooks, jackets, and coffee cups. I settled for a spot midway to the stage and was surprised to observe dozens of participants singing, clapping, and dancing to the music. Event organizers encouraged and even demanded this type of behavior as they moved up and down the corridor preparing the crowd for Burchard’s big arrival. “Are you ready!!?” a man’s voice boomed from the loudspeaker. “Are you ready to meet one of the top motivation and marketing trainers in the world!!?” he asked again as the crowd jumped, clapped, danced, and shouted affirmatively. “Here he is! Give it up for Breeennnnnddoooommmnnnnnnnnn Brrrrrrrrehaaaaarrrrrd!!”

Burchard emerged from behind the stage curtains wearing a grey suit and an open collar white dress shirt. He immediately launched into an elaborate dance routine that took him from one end of the 50 foot stage to the other in a series of hops, skips, fist pumps, and hand waves. An encore of Flo Rida’s “Club Can’t Handle Me” accompanied Burchard as he directed the crowd to “Put Your Hands Up” when the lyrics commanded listeners to do the
same. This ritual was used every day to initiate participants back into the sacred space of the seminar room at 9:00 a.m. in the morning and following scheduled lunch breaks from 1:30-3:30 p.m. in the afternoon. The high energy level engendered through singing, dancing and celebrating Burchard’s arrival is what Durkheim (1915: 245) terms “collective effervescence”. This communal effervescence is an amplified, excited reaction made possible when a group of people experience something emotional together. In this case, it provided a positive, uplifting mood not unlike a spiritual or religious experience that makes people feel closer to their God.

Many New Age business seminars are founded on the Eastern philosophical view that humans are divine and the masters of their own fate (York 2001). The belief that human beings can change themselves by calling upon their infinite human potential or some divine power from within is evident in buzzwords such as “self-actualization”, “meditation”, “transformation”, “inner self” and “positive affirmations” which are frequently used at these types of events (see Jeremiah 1996). These New Age concepts were often used at the live seminar in conjunction with tools and techniques which Burchard claimed would help us tap into the creative and expressive aspects of ourselves that were allegedly being suppressed at work. Midway through the first morning, for example, Burchard explained to the crowd that as members of the creative class\(^\text{12}\), they were the artists and drivers of the knowledge economy. “How many people LOVE to create content?” he asked seminar participants, to which the majority raised their hands and nodded affirmatively. “Well, that’s what we do full-time” he explained. “Experts are the most idea-driven and content-creating segment of the economy. We live in the information world, and we are creating it all”. Burchard went on to explain how the creative aspect of being an entrepreneur is what activates the most energy

\(^\text{12}\) Burchard credits Richard Florida for the term. See Florida (2002) for a discussion of the creative class.
and artistic expression. He then commanded the audience to chant “I’m a creator!” as a way to ignite what he called “the deep well of passion within the human spirit” that comes from creating knowledge and helping other people.

For the rest of the weekend, whenever Burchard chanted “I’m a creator!” the entire crowd echoed the mantra in response. This ritual helped participants stay focused after long hours of sitting in uncomfortable chairs, but it also reinforced the quintessential New Age belief that human beings are responsible for creating their own reality. Indeed, many established advice gurus will prescribe a course of action for creating a new life by way of a simple promise: “do this and you will get that” (Starker 2008: 9). These prescriptive guidelines place the responsibility for achieving results squarely on the shoulders of individuals and stand in contrast to more descriptive guidelines which present a number of possible procedures for accomplishing a goal. Advice gurus with a prescriptive tone have a closed system or self-contained philosophy that discourages interaction with other perspectives. In contrast, advice gurus with an open system philosophy encourage people to access new information and expect them to tailor and modify content according to their individual situation.

Advice gurus who draw on the “X Steps” approach popularized by the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous have a prescriptive tone because they establish a sequential course of action and attribute failure to deviation from the path. Burchard’s tenets for becoming an advice guru are part of a closed system philosophy that is prescriptive in tone. Following a two hour lunch break on the first day, for instance, Burchard led participants through a segment titled 10 Steps to An Expert Empire. “Those who reach millions of people and make millions of dollars all follow the same game plan” he advised as he pointed to the large
screens that flanked the stage. The “10 Steps” which Burchard presented via Powerpoint were as follows:

**Step 1:** Claim and Master Your Topic  
**Step 2:** Pick Your Audience  
**Step 3:** Discover Your Audience’s Problems  
**Step 4:** Define Your Story  
**Step 5:** Create a Solution  
**Step 6:** Put Up a Website  
**Step 7:** Campaign Your Products and Programs  
**Step 8:** Post FREE Content  
**Step 9:** Get Promotional Partners  
**Step 10:** Repeat and Build the Business Based on Distinction, Excellence, and Service

These steps were presented in the collective “they” of an unspecified number of unnamed gurus who had “reached millions of people and made millions of dollars” in the advice industry. Initially, the requirements seemed intimidating, but Burchard assured seminar participants that the steps were “shockingly simple” and that “anyone can be an expert or guru”. These pronouncements render social relations of power invisible and cultivate the illusion that people can escape the constraints of structural inequality and shape their own trajectories via personal transformation. Indeed, many established advice gurus exalt the individual over the social and further constitute the self as being ontologically separate from the person (Hazleden 2003). Personal transformation thus rests upon a belief in professionals acting at a distance who can help in understanding and then correcting the self, a process that usually entails practices of self-confession and self-diagnosis which continually turn the subject back on itself (Rose & Miller 1992).
The notion that people can experience liberation through practices of self-examination and self-regulation is a unique feature of the self-help genre (Rimke 2000). The liberation/regulation paradox (Rimke 2000) was deployed at the seminar whenever Burchard instructed participants to reflect on their lives by completing a set of self-reflexive exercises. For instance, an important part of establishing credibility and building a guru identity involved developing a “tagline”. Burchard spent quite a bit of time explaining the importance of developing a tagline and many of the individual and group exercises that were assigned on the first day were designed to help us develop a memorable phrase we could use to market our products and services. The first was an exercise in which we were given five minutes to identify and reflect on potential customers by jotting notes in response to the following questions: 1) Who needs my topic?; and 2) Who would I love to work with?. We were discouraged from choosing customers based on “Who will pay?” since this runs counter to the advice guru’s primary focus on service and dedication to humanity.

Following this exercise, we were directed to the workbooks we received as part of the registration package and instructed to complete a set of “fill-in-the-blanks” for each component of the tagline formula: I help______, Do/Understand______, So they can______. To assist with this process, we were counseled to answer the following two questions in our workbooks: “What is it that people are always asking how I do?” and “What are the questions people always seem to be asking when they deal with the subject of _____?”. In my case, I was primarily interested in working with graduate students at Canadian universities and the notes I made centered on the topics for which students often request assistance: academic writing, graduate school applications, research proposals, and graduate funding. As I worked through the “I help X do/understand Y so they can Z” formula I finally
settled on a tagline: *I help students apply for SSHRC\textsuperscript{13} funding so they can maintain financial stability during their graduate studies.* As a recipient of SSHRC funding at the MA and PhD level competitions who routinely offers guidance on the application process for free, it made sense to develop an advice framework based on my own experiences of securing funding and of helping other students draft their proposals.

The group work and Q&A sessions that followed the individual writing exercises were not unlike the confessional practices that Vrecko (2002) observes among members of Alcoholics Anonymous. Unlike the hierarchical, authoritative and compulsory forms of confession that Foucault (1978) traces in Volume 1 of the *History of Sexuality*, the group work assigned at the seminar was egalitarian, voluntary, and performed by the laity. For example, when Burchard instructed participants to form groups and take turns sharing the results of their writing exercises, the decision regarding “who went first” was determined through a process of self-selection that usually proceeded clockwise until a buzzer was broadcast over the loudspeaker that signaled it was time to switch turns. Although no one in my group ever claimed authority to proceed first on the basis of seniority or expertise, there was a discernible air of discomfort when someone ignored the buzzer and encroached on the next person’s speaking time. In these cases, someone would politely indicate it was the next person’s turn and the group would abruptly shift their focus to the next person’s confessional process.

The disciplinary features of these confessional practices are evident in the ways group members observed, judged, and corrected each other’s taglines. “I don’t think you should limit yourself to SSHRC” one woman stated matter-of-factly after I explained the basic

\textsuperscript{13} The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) is a federal agency that provides funding for graduate students in the humanities and social sciences. The application process is competitive, regulated, and highly selective.
structure of tri-council funding in Canada. “Yeah, but I don’t feel confident teaching people how to apply for other grants since I’ve never done that myself” I explained in an admission of guilt and ignorance that members of my group pondered momentarily before offering a response. Supplying testimony to a group of seminar participants who then employ a diagnostic gaze and render a corrective judgment can be viewed as a form of pastoral power (Foucault 2003). Pastoral power is distinguished by its emphasis on getting to know a person’s innermost thoughts for the purpose of attaining individual salvation. This form of power implies a particular type of knowledge between pastors and devotees that “cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people’s minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets” (Foucault 2003: 132).

Although the ecclesiastical institutions in which techniques of examination, confession, guidance, and correction were originally developed have declined in vitality, techniques of pastoral power have “spread out into the whole social body” and “found support in a multitude of institutions” in modern Western societies (Foucault 2003: 133). Since the 18th century, the institutions of the family, medicine, education and employment have all developed modern forms of pastoral power that rely on a range of micro-technologies that require intimate knowledge of the person for the purpose of achieving a new objective: “it was no longer a question of leading people to their salvation in the next world, but rather ensuring it in this world” (Foucault 2003: 132). This reorientation was true of Experts Academy where Burchard repeatedly stated that group work was an important forum for receiving feedback on business ideas and marketing strategies that would liberate us from unfulfilling lives and careers.
The influence of pastoral power was also evident in the Q&A sessions that were held between Burchard and the entire crowd of participants. People who were selected by one of several volunteers scurrying around the room with portable microphones were invited to introduce themselves using their newly formulated taglines: “Hi. My name is Carol and I help mothers find work/life balance so they maintain a sense of well-being”. In true AA form, Burchard commanded the entire crowd to respond by greeting each speaker by their first name: “Hi Carol!”. Following this loud public reception, the speaker would typically ask for clarification about a prescribed step in Burchard’s program, confess to a problem they were having in their business, or request advice on how to reformulate some aspect of their marketing strategy. Although Burchard rarely provided more than a brief response and never allowed participants to reply, he always initiated a “big round of applause” for the brave speaker. This was followed by a New Age ritual of sending “positive energy” to the person, many of whom looked surprised when the entire room chanted “3, 2, 1, shazaam!” as they extended their arms, fluttered their fingers, and sent “loving intentions” in their direction.

The morning and afternoon sessions held on Thursday, Friday and Saturday all followed the same basic structure: an initiation back into the room through song, dance and a celebration of Burchard’s arrival on stage; a lesson on one of Burchard’s 10 steps; an individual writing exercise; a group activity; and a Q&A session with Burchard. On Sunday afternoon, however, Burchard led the group through a meditation in which everyone was asked to close their eyes and find their “higher self” in preparation for a creative visualization exercise. Although Burchard often commanded people to dance, clap, adjust their posture, breathe deeply, hug, and high-five at various times throughout the event, he was adamant that people close their eyes for this exercise out of respect for those who might have a profoundly
emotional experience. Something about the tone of Burchard’s voice aroused a rebellious curiosity that led me to keep my eyes open and observe him on stage. Because I was seated in the second row, it did not take long for Burchard to detect my willful disregard for his authority. He snapped his fingers, pointed directly at me, and shook his head “no” with a disapproving glare. I closed my eyes with modest embarrassment and dutifully participated in the group meditation. Why did I obey Burchard’s command to fully participate? Is Burchard an extraordinary leader worthy of absolute devotion? How do his extraordinary accomplishments inspire loyalty and obedience from followers?

**Prophets for Profits**

There is no doubt that Weber (1958c: 78-80) would be interested in the “inner justifications” and “external means” through which Burchard’s authority over the entire seminar room is legitimized. By inner justifications, Weber means the beliefs, values, and moral codes that appeal to people’s intellect and emotions, such as the ideological appeal to New Age spirituality discussed in Chapter 1. By external means, Weber is referring to hierarchical arrangements, the material implements necessary for carrying out orders, and appeals to personal interest such as economic rewards and social honor. These control strategies – those that pull on the individual from within and those that push the individual into complying – are present regardless of the authority structure under consideration. Traditional authority, for instance, is based on a belief in the sanctity of longstanding custom and is legitimized through loyalty to tradition. Modern societies are typically characterized by rational-legal authority, meaning power is legitimized through established rules and
enacted procedures which guarantee those who are elevated to positions of authority the right to issue commands.

Although Experts Academy is a profit-oriented enterprise that relies on formalized rules to govern the conduct of seminar participants, Weber’s bureaucratic model of rational-legal authority does not adequately explain the social structure at Experts Academy: participants are not necessarily recruited for their specialized training, there is supposedly no hierarchical distribution of authority, and the entire seminar is broadly oriented towards spiritual values in addition to specific economic goals. For these reasons, Weber’s (1968) discussion of charismatic authority provides a more useful approach to understanding how Burchard’s authority is legitimized at Experts Academy. Weber (1968: 241) uses the term charisma to describe “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities”. Charismatic leaders include heroes, messiahs, prophets, oracles, shamans, and others whom people regard as “divine” or “exemplary” (Weber 1968: 241). While Burchard’s unusual entrepreneurial success can be viewed as a “gift of grace” that distinguishes him as extraordinary, it is the presence of a following, the continuous proof of his miraculous abilities, and the expectation that participants assume new identities that characterize Burchard as a charismatic leader.

In the case of charismatic authority, obedience arises through belief and personal trust in the exemplary qualities of a leader. In charismatic organizations, a leader has a following whose interactions are based on an emotional form of communal relationship (Biggart 1989). Figure 8 illustrates the structure and distribution of Burchard’s following. The first level is a group of devoted aides from the publishing, internet marketing, and self-improvement
industries that includes Scott Hoffman, Brian Tracy, Frank Kern, Jeff Walker and John Gray. These members were identifiable through their contributions to the Experts Academy Home Study Program in the form of video recorded presentations of their teachings, in addition to their rotating presence on the front stage at the live events. They either possess charisma of their own or have been granted charismatic authority by Burchard, and their role consists of contributing to an aspect of Burchard’s “10 Step Plan” based on their respective area of expertise.

At the next level outside this core group is a highly active group of devotees comprised of Center Ring members and VIP attendees. The Center Ring is a private coaching group that consists of 25-30 people who were often described as “Brendonites” or “disciples” by other attendees. They were identifiable by a white ribbon affixed to their ID badges and received
special privileges at the Experts Academy live event such as front row seating, a special queue outside the ballroom, a Center-Ring only lounge, and group Q&A sessions with Burchard. Within the second group, there were also approximately 100 VIP members who attended the live event. These members of Burchard’s following were identifiable by a black ribbon affixed to their ID badges and were frequently in the company of other VIP participants and Center Ring members. VIP attendees paid an additional $997 for premium seating, a special queue outside the ballroom next to Center Ring members, gourmet lunches served in a separate conference room and access to the same private Q&A sessions as the Center Ring. Although VIP participants and Center Ring members attend live events regularly and stay connected through private Facebook forums created by Experts Academy, a large portion of Burchard’s following belongs to a third group that remains largely on the periphery. There were approximately 600 regular attendees who paid $1,997 per ticket and who had no ribbon affixed to their ID badges. These participants entered the seminar room on a rotating basis, were responsible for their own meals, and only interacted with Burchard if they were selected by a volunteer during the public Q&A sessions with the entire group.

Although regular attendees represented the largest group of followers who attended the live event, those who purchase the Home Study Program or who follow Burchard online through Facebook and YouTube represent the largest group of peripheral devotees. Burchard estimates there are currently 5,000 people who have purchased the Home Study Program, of which half have never claimed their ticket to the seminar portion of Experts Academy. People who purchase the Home Study Program pay the same price as regular attendees ($1,997) and have access to the same online materials and physical products as Center Ring members and seminar registrants who upgrade to VIP. Burchard’s following also extends to Facebook where
over one million “friends” have access to book excerpts and inspirational quotes, in addition to a collection of motivational YouTube videos with nearly 5 million “views”.

Like most charismatic leaders, Burchard must demonstrate his abilities to followers through miracles, the continued success of his mission, and other “proofs”. The very serious car accident that Burchard survived in the Dominican Republic is just one of several “miracles” that he uses to demonstrate his “specialness”. Burchard’s union with the divine and the “second chance” he received from God both function as “proof” that Burchard’s mission to “Live, Love and Matter” is imbued with sacred meaning. Burchard also relies on frequent email updates to disseminate evidence that his mission to help people is a continued success. During the 2014 calendar year, for example, I received 119 email updates from Burchard that referenced at least one indicator of his miraculous abilities: earnings in excess of $1 million; collaborations with celebrity figures such as Tony Robbins and Katie Couric; the release of two new books titled The Charge and The Motivation Manifesto, the status of his books on the New York Times Bestseller List; and statistics that showcase his online popularity such as YouTube views, website visits, and Facebook “likes”.

Charismatic leaders also expect followers to assume new selves and repudiate their former way of being in the world. “You can become a highly paid expert in any field and on any topic” Burchard explained. “We are not at the mercy of horrible bosses, weird coworkers, corporate kiss-ups, or any other ladder climber who plays office politics”. During my first trip to Experts Academy, I was skeptical that people without a graduate degree could successfully position themselves as “experts”, but open to the possibility that entrepreneurship might offer a suitable alternative to the unstable academic job market I was

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14 Facebook users can click on a “thumbs up” icon to indicate they like a piece of content posted online. Internet marketers are increasingly using the number of Facebook “likes” to measure the popularity of their online postings.
about to enter. By the second trip, however, I found myself in the unusual position of accepting Burchard’s charismatic leadership while privately critiquing the extent to which pronouncements such as “anyone can be an expert or guru” cultivates the illusion that people can escape the constraints of structural inequality.

By the end of my second trip to Experts Academy, the effort it took to straddle these seemingly incompatible worldviews started to wear on me. Tears welled in my eyes as I returned to my hotel room after the evening session on Saturday night. I ordered room service and phoned my sister. Although the challenges of negotiating the insider/outsider divide were at the forefront of our conversation, another issue quickly surfaced that caught me by surprise: “Why the fuck should I work as a sessional instructor for $9,000 a course after studying for nearly 12 years!” to which she replied “Just don’t take the job. Are you worried about money? You know mom and dad will help”. I ended the conversation somewhat abruptly and felt a surge of frustration about my decision to pursue employment at the University of Winnipeg. At the time, I was applying for a two year term position with a decent salary, but I also knew there would be other applicants with equal or greater qualifications. Needless to say, the thought of working as a sessional instructor for an annual income that would total less than half the scholarship support I received during my graduate studies did not sit well with me.

These were the fears that plagued my mind while studying at LSE and which surfaced during a phone conversation with my undergraduate mentor after I hung up the phone with my sister.¹⁵

¹⁵ Note that Kelly becomes a participant in the field by virtue of the phone call and her assistance in a moment of crisis. Kelly authorized me to use this conversation as data.
Kelly: You’re exposed to something different and your mind is open enough to say “well, what’s wrong with that?”. Well, I know what’s wrong with that because you’re saying “Well, I’m a sociologist and I’m committed to this paradigm and I’m being pulled in a different direction”. But as I say, that’s…write it down, write it down. It’s part of the dissertation.

Caitlin: What are the three things you were saying that are part of the trifecta?

Kelly: Well, there are four. You have all these different roles simultaneously. So, you’re there as a researcher and part of the process is that you engage legitimatly. So, you don’t identify as a researcher because you have to establish credibility as a legitimate participant and you have to put forward a business model. And then you’re supposed to be critically analyzing them but you’re saying “This makes sense, this is good”. Right?

Caitlin: Yeah.

Kelly: So that’s three. And then four is that you’re judging yourself for shifting out of your sociological paradigm.

Caitlin: Yeah.

Kelly: So, you’re judging yourself. So there’s four levels going on in your brain simultaneously. So, no wonder you’re exhausted [laughter].

This excerpt from our conversation captures the role conflict I experienced while conducting fieldwork at Experts Academy. Role conflict occurs when “incompatible role demands are placed on a person by two or more statuses held at the same time” (Murray et al. 2014: 122). In this case, I felt pulled between my role as a sociologist who is concerned with the exploitive dimensions of capitalism and my role as an aspiring entrepreneur who profits from the economic logic that underpins this unequal system. The role conflict I experienced between “sociologist” and “entrepreneur” was so profound that it took hold in my subconscious. Following my conversation with Kelly, I took a bath, climbed into bed, and quickly feel asleep. That night I had a dream I was on a watercraft with Burchard and two unidentified individuals. I remember thinking it resembled a jeep and marvelling at the speed
at which it glided over a dark, stormy body of water. As the watercraft approached the base of a cliff, it gently raised to the top and paused long enough for me to step onto the edge. As the cliff shifted under my feet, I struggled to maintain my balance and fell back into the stormy waters. As waves crashed over my head, I noticed dozens of other people struggling to swim as the ocean threatened to drown us.

As I reflected on this dream and my conversation with Kelly, I began to think of my growing acceptance of the New Age spirit of capitalism as a conversion experience related to Burchard’s charismatic style of leadership. Although Weber does not explicitly address the conditions under which people accept the charismatic’s call to give up their identities and resources – money, time, effort, values, beliefs, social bonds and commitments – others attribute the acceptance of charismatic leadership to social-psychological factors (see Eisenstadt 1995). Weber’s (1978: 245) own formulation could lend itself to such an interpretation insofar as he suggests that charisma “may involve a subjective or internal reorientation born out of suffering, conflicts or enthusiasm” that may take place “in times of psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, political distress”. Although I am reluctant to suggest that only the disturbed, disoriented and desperate respond to such appeals, my growing acceptance of Burchard’s message was taking place during a significant period of economic and psychological distress, as evidenced by the tumultuous dream, my conversation with Kelly, and the disgust I expressed in the phone call with my sister about the “rate” at which my educational credentials would “convert” into a reasonable income.

Although the gradual and sudden process by which I experienced an “internal reorientation” towards the New Age spirit of capitalism is well-captured in the dream and phone conversations described above, it is equally important to acknowledge how the
formation of my entrepreneurial identity was linked to the cohesive integration, intense socialization, and communal discipline of the “sectlike” community at Experts Academy (Weber 2002: 130). The irony, of course, is that the self-absorbed and anxiety-ridden virtues of the entrepreneurial advice guru can only be sustained through social relations which are necessarily communitarian in nature. What is unique about New Age sects in the early 21st century, however, is that “networking” involves a complex interplay of connections and disconnections that stem from “mobile patterns of relating” (Elliot & Urry 2010: 87).

**Experts Academy: A New Age Sect?**

Weber’s (2002) ethnographic reflections on Protestant sects in the United States were prompted by the fact that the associations he observed during his visit to America could not be easily identified within Ferdinand Tönnies framework of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. At the time, it was widely believed in Europe that capitalism, urbanism, and industrialism severed individuals from “community” (*Gemeinschaft*) and “society” (*Gesellschaft*). Germans in particular viewed Americans as lacking personal, nonmarket connections, a stereotype which Weber confronted directly by noting the broad tendency for Americans to form clubs and other voluntary associations. To this end, Weber (2002: 130) makes a clear distinction between a “church” and a “sect”:

It is crucial that sect membership meant a certificate of moral qualification and especially of business morals for the individual. This stands in contrast to membership in a “church” into which one is “born” and which lets grace shine over the righteous and unrighteous alike...Affiliation with the church is, in principle, obligatory and hence proves nothing with regard to the member’s qualities. A sect, however, is a voluntary association of only those who, according to the principle, are religiously and morally qualified.
Weber (2002) describes American society as an intricate network of clubs, associations, and religious sects for which membership in the latter was especially important for entering the business world. Sect membership was a vehicle of social ascent into the entrepreneurial middle class because admission was granted through balloting and ethical probation. Business opportunities were influenced by this legitimation because what entrepreneurs lacked in economic capital they made up for in social-symbolic capital: networks, rights, obligations, trust, honour, and prestige (Bourdieu 1986). There are clear parallels between the New Age sect I observed at Experts Academy and the Protestant sects that Weber observed in the early 20th century. Experts Academy is certainly a voluntary association insofar as members are not “born” into Burchard’s congregation through kinship ties with other devotees (i.e. ascribed status), but rather “elect” to become members on the basis of volitional adherence to his mission (i.e. achieved status). Burchard’s universalist aspirations to inspire and instruct the masses are also eclipsed by several barriers to entry which imply restricted membership: money to purchase the program; a home address to receive the book, DVDs, CDs, and other physical products; an internet connection to access the online forums where audio/video recordings are stored; a Facebook account to stay in touch with fellow entrepreneurs; an email address to receive updates and continuous inspiration; and the time, resources, and government-issued documents which are necessary for international travel.

Investing money into Burchard’s personal development program will guarantee admission to the periphery of this New Age sect, but it will not grant full admission to anyone since “money in itself…purchases power, but not social honor” (Weber 2002: 134). Seminar participants who wanted to join the Center Ring, for instance, paid a one-time
application fee of $2,000, but they also completed a three page questionnaire about their entrepreneurial challenges, goals and aspirations. For example:

1) The skills, passions, and/or expertise that I have that would add value to the group are…
2) When you feel like your most successful and happy self, what makes you feel that way?
3) What would your dream life look like if you could wave a wand and make it happen?
4) What has prevented you from having that dream?
5) What do you do for a living and why did you choose that career?
6) What distracts you most from being more productive?
7) What areas of your life do you feel you are succeeding in right now?
8) How purposeful do you feel in living each day? How would you describe your purpose?

Once the application was approved, the prospective member was invited to attend a reception on the Saturday evening of Experts Academy where they met other Center Ring members and completed an interview with Burchard. Although the exact rules for accepting members into the Center Ring were unclear, the application did specify a candidate could be declined admission to Burchard’s exclusive group. The membership fee for those who were accepted was $54,000 US per year and included VIP tickets and guest passes to all the live events, lifetime access to the online programs, and admittance to a private Center Ring Facebook group. Center Ring members also join Burchard twice per year in Laguna Beach and once per year on a private island in the Caribbean to work through business problems and support each other’s personal development.

Just like the different colored badges that Weber (2002) observes in the buttonholes of middle-class entrepreneurs in the United States, the ribbons that were affixed to participants’ badges during onsite registration communicated credit worthiness to staff
members and fellow attendees. As I learned through my own experience of trying to recruit
Center Ring members for interviews, my VIP membership did not involve extensive
investigation and probation into my moral character and therefore limited (to some extent)
how much trust was vested in me. When I introduced myself at the VIP registration table on
the first day, for instance, the young woman responsible for issuing name tags quickly
exclaimed “You’re Steven’s guest!”\textsuperscript{16} as she handed me a black VIP ribbon. The warm
reception gave me confidence to probe about her role at the event to which she indicated she
was responsible for managing guest relations among members of the Center Ring.

I explained that I was a PhD candidate in sociology doing research on the advice
industry and that I would love to know more about the Center Ring and her role at the event.
The warm reception came to a close as she looked away and began shuffling papers. “I’ve
only been here for a couple months” she said, “so I’m probably not the best person to talk
to”. In an effort to put her at ease, I replied “That’s ok. I’m just curious to know what type of
work you do. You know, what you actually do at the event. I’m happy to talk another time if
you’re busy”. As she hastily placed my business card in her pocket she said “Sure, be in
touch” and promptly moved on to help the next registrant. At that point, I took her reluctance
at face value and reasoned that her inexperience was the source of her discomfort. However,
as I joined the VIP line for Center Ring members, I began to doubt my perception of the
encounter. When I explained to Steven what happened he replied, “Yeah, don’t just ask staff
members about the event. This is considered intellectual property and they won’t feel
comfortable telling. There will be a few I can introduce you to who might talk a bit. Just
make sure I introduce you before you ask questions.” That Steven was deemed “credit
worthy” by Burchard and other Center Ring members is evident in the amount of trust they

\textsuperscript{16} Recall Steven is the Center Ring member who gifted his extra VIP ticket to me at a discount.
placed in him to “pre-screen” initiates before introducing them to other sect members and to
avoid revealing aspects of Burchard’s intellectual property which are reserved for the Center
Ring.

Despite these parallels, it is important to note that New Age sects in the early 21st
century do not congregate the same way as Puritan sects did in the early 20th century, due
largely to changes in digital and mobile technologies. Weber’s (2002: 129) description of the
“two-wheeled buggies” that facilitated the movement of religious congregations and
travelling entrepreneurs hardly resembles the extensive assemblage of mobility systems that
facilitate “life on the move” for the globally-connected New Age entrepreneur. These
mobility systems – cellphones, text messages, voice mail, computers, aircrafts, taxis, trains,
buses, email accounts, internet, online booking systems, and so on – facilitate the constitution
and reproduction of what Elliott and Urry (2010: 10) call “network capital”. People with high
levels of network capital possess an array of travel documents (visas, money); maintain
relationships with others at-a-distance (email, Facebook); travel around the world for
intermittent visits (workshops, conferences); have movement capacities in relationship to the
environment (reading arrival/departure information on display screens, boarding planes,
carrying luggage); can access location-free information (voicemail, websites); rely on
communication devices to (re)make arrangements (cellphone, computer); rely on secure
meeting places en route and upon arrival (internet café, hotel); have access to various modes
of transportations (car, airplane, bus, taxi, trams); and have significant time and financial
resources to coordinate these different elements, especially when there is a failure in the
system.
Given how many seminar participants travelled from different parts of the world to attend Experts Academy, it is fair to say their stock of “network capital” is quite large. Claire’s description of her mobile life in the months leading up to the live event can serve as an ideal-typical portrait of the wealth of network capital that New Age entrepreneurs must have at their disposal in order to fully participate in this sect-like community. Like many entrepreneurs living in North America, Claire’s career revolves around the constant negotiation of her personal and professional life, especially when it comes to travelling. Feeling overwhelmed by the constant demand on her time and recognizing the unlimited income-earning potential of transforming her coaching and consulting business into an online business, Claire purchased a ticket to Experts Academy in 2012.

During a phone conversation with her friend Janet, Claire mentioned the program to the aspiring entrepreneur and encouraged her to research Burchard online and to consult his free training videos on YouTube. A few days later, Claire left with her husband and three adult children for a 14 day vacation in Venice, Italy. Every morning while her family took their time to wake up, Claire sat on the front stoop of the hotel because it was the only place that had Wi-Fi. Although the hotel’s internet connection was down, Claire was able to use her iPad’s built-in wireless scanner to find other wireless networks in the area. Tapping into an unsecure Wi-Fi hotspot is easy because it does not require a password; however, Claire knows it is risky because it exposes her online activities to computer hackers who can access her passwords, banking information, and email accounts. During this morning ritual, however, Claire was primarily concerned with searching for books and articles to inspire her next blog on leadership. She perused the Amazon.ca bestseller list and purchased an e-book on gender and communication which she immediately downloaded to the Kindle e-reader on
her iPad. Later, after spending the day sightseeing with her family, Claire curled up in a chair with a glass of wine and accessed her new purchase by gently tapping the touchscreen of her mobile device.

When Claire returned from her family vacation, she began working through some of the online modules in preparation for her trip to California. The content was stored in a private membership site hosted by Kajabi which Claire accessed using a username and password. Sitting in her home office while her husband was gone to work, Claire watched a series of videos on her computer and took notes in the accompanying workbook about how the concepts applied to her current business as a leadership and marketing consultant. When she scrolled down the page to the comment section where other members posted and responded to questions, Claire noticed Janet’s profile picture next to one of the comments. Surprised to see her friend had purchased the program, Claire called Janet on her cellphone to ask if she would be attending the live event. Janet confirmed her plans to attend, and the women agreed to commute by car from their respective suburban neighborhoods, book flights out of Toronto, and split travel costs by sharing a hotel room.

Claire had a lot of work to finish before she met Janet at the Pearson International Airport later that month. Most importantly, Claire was scheduled to deliver a seven day course on executive leadership for a management team at Canadian Tire. This was the second of four training seminars that Claire was contracted to deliver over the course of 12 months. Claire prioritizes her relationship with the large retailer because it yields $10,000 per course. She also maintains a strong business relationship with management personnel at Canadian Tire because it generates lucrative referrals. When a former Canadian Tire executive accepted a management position at the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC), for
example, Claire was the first person she recommended to senior executives who were looking for a leadership consultant. Combined with the individual coaching contracts Claire normally receives from seminar participants who are seeking additional help, these referrals ensure Claire will continue to earn between $125,000 and $150,000 per year.

Because the corporate demand for consulting services ebbs and flows according to market performance and intellectual trends in business and marketing, Claire wears multiple hats to ensure her income remains relatively stable. Although she works primarily as a coach for individuals and a seminar trainer for corporations, Claire also develops programs for other training organizations when demand is low among her existing clientele. Claire’s willingness to adapt means she is constantly acquiring new knowledge, updating her course materials, and forming relationships with new people. By the time Claire met Janet at the airport, she had reportedly read three books; skimmed through one or two more; downloaded research articles from academic journals; posted over twenty blogs; coached clients in person and through Skype; received dozens of text messages; scheduled several breakfast meetings with prospective clients; made numerous phone calls; updated her website; checked the sales report for her most recent book; provided updates on her Facebook page; synthesized her notes in preparation for another book; deleted hundreds of emails; delivered two workshops; and commuted via public transit to a large research library in downtown Toronto where she spent countless hours reading and writing.

Three weeks later, Claire’s professional life transported her through Toronto, Chicago and San Jose. Together, Claire and Janet navigated their way through airline check-ins, overpriced food, security screenings, and conversations with customs officials who scrutinized their bodies, suitcases, passports and reasons for attending a self-help seminar in
the United States. After a twenty minute journey to Santa Clara by taxi, Claire and Janet checked into the Marriott hotel which they booked online using a special discount code for seminar attendees. Because onsite registration for the event did not begin until the next morning, the women decided to drop off their luggage and change into clothing more appropriate for an afternoon lounging by the pool.

What does Claire’s mobile life tell us about the entrepreneurial self in the early 21st century? Partly, it reveals how entrepreneurial identities are held together by a vast network of mobility systems that facilitate the (re)formation of interpersonal connections on a global scale. Wellman (2001: 238) describes the development of person-to-person connectivity as a form of “networked individualism” that stems from changes in communication technology. Mobile phones and wireless computers afford entrepreneurs a fundamental liberation from place and therefore shift the connectivity from distinct locations – such as households and worksites – to individuals like Claire who can navigate multiple networks because they are the primary portal of connectivity.

It also demonstrates how the routine practices of business and professional life are virtually impossible to undertake without flights, taxi rides, emailing, texting, phoning, Skyping, and so on. Whereas mobile connectivity gives rise to an entrepreneurial self that is dispersed internationally through bandwidth and satellite frequency, the widespread use of automobiles throughout the world and the rapid growth of budget air travel (domestic and international) have given rise to “portable personhood” insofar as “the globalization of mobility extends into the core of the self” (Elliott & Urry 2010: 3). As such, entrepreneurial identities do not simply “adapt” to changes in transportation and travel, but are fundamentally transformed by new capacities for movement.
Conclusion

The seminar portion of Experts Academy is a forum where interpersonal ties provide sociability, support, information, and a sense of belonging. Through a charismatic style of leadership that inspires obedience and trust, Burchard prescribed a series of writing exercises and group activities that encouraged entrepreneurial conversion. The disciplinary and pastoral qualities of these techniques were evident in the confessional practices that were part of the group work, in addition to the Q&A sessions led by Burchard. As a voluntary association with restricted access that relies on forms of ethical probation, Experts Academy can be viewed as a New Age sect that encourages a contemporary form of entrepreneurial individualism that relies on mobile and transportation technologies, in addition to meetings and other networking activities which take the New Age entrepreneur around the globe.

Establishing expertise using the “I help X do Y so that Z” formula was arguably the most important lesson that seminar participants learned at Experts Academy. As such, we can see how the concept of “expertise” still reigns as a central attribute of knowledge work and is therefore relevant for the ways in which aspiring advice gurus create, communicate, and disseminate their advice. The distinction between abstract, explicit knowledge acquired through specialized higher education (know-what and know-why) and tacit, embodied knowledge acquired through experience (know-how) is especially important since many study participants began their careers with a stock of cultural capital acquired through higher education, but later found it more lucrative and personally meaningful to commodify and sell their practical know-how as a form of expertise. In Chapter 4, I explore the nuances of how
study participants position themselves as experts as a way to understand the formation process of their new identities.
Construct an Expert Identity

The apocalyptic image of the “steel hard casing” that haunts the concluding pages of the *Protestant Ethic* signals Weber’s growing concern with the ascendancy of bureaucratic institutions and the rationalizing tendencies of the modern world of global capitalism. As capitalism evolves and the pursuit of wealth is stripped of its religious-ethical meaning, modern workers become “specialists without spirit” and “sensualists without heart” (Weber 2002: 124) who take up economic occupations and perform bureaucratic tasks in the name of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. Many seminar participants who lost their jobs to corporate downsizing or who abandoned their meaningless careers in bureaucratic organizations were inspired by Burchard’s efforts to reject aspects of the bureaucratic social order by suggesting that people can thrive as “experts” without educational credentials, work experience, or institutional affiliation. “I’m not talking about you becoming an expert in order for you to become a knowledge worker for some drone-creating global company” Burchard explained at the seminar in Silicon Valley. “The new class of experts will work for themselves and will create real relationships with people based on valuable advice and information”.

In this chapter, I trace the discursive resources which are used to define expertise and demonstrate how New Age entrepreneurs position themselves in relationship to these available discourses. I argue that because these discursive structures take the form of identity categories, they can be viewed as subject positions that provide content for ‘doing’ expertise. Whereas Chapter 2 presents a narrative analysis of the cultural resources which participants
use to make sense of their career trajectories and Chapter 3 sketches the setting in which participants learn this storyline and begin to develop a new identity, this chapter demonstrates how the New Age spirit of capitalism described in Chapter 1 is internalized and acted upon through different forms of reflexive and interactive positioning. To this end, I begin by reviewing an approach to analyzing discourse that draws on principles of poststructuralist theory. Next, I identify the discourses which are used to explain who experts are and what they can be through an analysis of my interview transcripts and a chapter titled “You: Advice Guru” from *The Millionaire Messenger*. In the final section, I discuss the importance of the personal crises described in Chapter 2 and the group exercises outlined in Chapter 3 for becoming an ‘expert’ and demonstrate how ambivalence arises during the early stages of identity formation.

**Interpretative Repertoires and Discursive Positioning**

Discursive psychology emerged in the late 1980s as a challenge to cognitivist approaches to social psychological research that assume selfhood is stable and coherent. Proponents of this revised approach to studying identity formation are inspired by poststructuralist theory and reject the modernist idea that selfhood consists of a single, stable identity in favor of viewing the self as made up of multiple, discursively constituted identities (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002). Indeed, many discursive psychologists draw on the following conception of identity as a way to demonstrate how identities emerge from subject positions within discourse:
I use ‘identity’ to refer to the meeting point...between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate’, speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities which construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken’. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us (Hall 1996: 5f).

Within discursive psychology, the linguistic resources which are made available to the social subjects of particular discourses and which produce a sense of self are known as “interpretative repertoires”. The notion of “interpretative repertoires” was first proposed by Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) as a way to understand the relationship between the construction and function of discourse. The concept was later imported into discursive psychology and defined as “discernible clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech often assembled around metaphors or vivid images...building blocks used for manufacturing versions of actions, self and social structures in talk...resources for making evaluations, constructing factual versions and performing particular actions” (Potter & Wetherell 1995: 89). Interpretative repertoires are not transparent representations of attitudes, beliefs or the true nature of events but resources individuals use to (re)construct social identities.

In this study, the interpretative repertoires used by New Age entrepreneurs to define expertise help us understand how speakers give meaning to themselves, others and the social world (Weedon 1987). According to Burr (1995: 145-146), meaning-making arises through positioning in discourse:

Once we take up a subject position in discourse, we have available to us a particular, limited set of concepts, images, metaphors, ways of speaking, self-narratives and so on that we take on as our own. This entails both an emotional commitment on our part to the categories of person to which we are allocated and see ourselves as belonging...and the development of an appropriate system of morals (rules of right and wrong). Our sense of who we
are and what it is therefore possible and not possible for us to do, what is right and appropriate for us to do, and what it is wrong and inappropriate for us to do thus all derive from our occupation of subject positions within discourse.

Recognizing when speakers take up, negotiate or refuse a subject position is a methodological problem that has been subject to much debate. Although many writers share assumptions about the discursive nature of social life, the academic literature is replete with contradictory notions of what it means to be discursively positioned. One advantage of using discursive psychology is that it acknowledges both the constitutive force of discourse and the choices people make in relation to those discourses. In this case, I am arguing that the constitutive force of discourse lies in the way it provides subject positions to speakers. According to Davies and Harré (1991: 46), a subject position “incorporates both a conceptual repertoire and a location for persons within the structure of rights for those to use that repertoire”. Once individuals take up a subject position as their own, they begin to see the world from the vantage point of that position in terms of the images, storylines, and concepts which are made available through the discourse(s) in which they are positioned. The concept of “positioning” draws attention to the dynamic aspects of social encounters and highlights the discursive process through which “selves are located in conversation as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines” (Davies & Harré 1991: 46). Whereas the concept of “role” underscores the static, formal and ritualistic aspects of selfhood, the concept of “positioning” captures the dynamic and discursively mediated process through which selfhood is accomplished.

My analysis of how Burchard and the New Age entrepreneurs I interviewed construct and negotiate guru identities builds on three working assumptions: 1) interpretative repertoires contain the building blocks which construct subject positions within discourse; 2)
discourse arranges people in meaningful ways; and 3) discourse enables people to arrange themselves in meaningful ways. As such, my analysis required one reading of the chapter titled “You: Advice Guru” from *The Millionaire Messenger* and two readings of the interview transcripts where research participants discussed the topic of expertise. I chose the chapter titled “You: Advice Guru” for the way it positions or “interpellates” (Althusser 1971:11) the reader as a subject in the ideological discourse of the advice guru. This chapter also provides a detailed description of the three repertoires of entrepreneurial selfhood that build on the virtues of service and generosity described in Chapter 1, and which constitute the “guru trifecta” that New Age entrepreneurs are expected to embody.

During the first reading of my interview transcripts, I identified the different ways that New Age entrepreneurs distinguish experts from non-experts. During this stage, I identified three repertoires which are used to explain what it means to be an “expert”. During the second reading of the interview transcripts, I identified instances where speakers positioned themselves or were positioned by others in relationship to one of the interpretative repertoires described during the first phase of analysis. As detailed below, the interpretative repertoires used by New Age entrepreneurs take the form of *identity categories*. Currie et al. (2007) argue that identity categories are important because as subject positions in a discourse they offer potential content for selfhood. I say potential because identity categories only become ‘lived’ once they are taken up by speakers (see Currie 1999).

A final interpretation comes into play when incoherence and contradiction threaten to destabilize this selfhood, as sometimes happened elsewhere in the interviews. In this case, I paid close attention to the ways in which participants shifted from third person to first person when discussing their own thoughts, behaviours and feelings about themselves as experts. By
focusing on the ways these shifts signalled changes in reference points – from the construction of the subject through the expectations of the advice industry to self-constructions – I came to understand these discursive moves as examples of what Currie (1999: 113) terms the “doing” and “undoing” of the subject. “Doing” refers to moments when participants spoke confidently and coherently about themselves as experts through affiliation with an identity category. “Undoing” refers to moments when self-doubt leaked into interview narratives, as was the case when participants spoke ambivalently about themselves as experts. Whereas Currie (1999) uses the concepts of “doing” and “undoing” to address debates about how power works through commercially-generated texts that mediate discourses about femininity directed to young readers, I use these terms to isolate empirical ‘moments’ where expert identities are being formed and to highlight the contingent quality of these self-constructions as they relate to the stories of struggle described in Chapter 2 and the seminar environment outlined in Chapter 3. This way of working over transcripts helps me understand what entices research participants to take up, negotiate or reject specific discourses as they (re)construct their identities as entrepreneurial experts.

The Guru Trifecta

The work involved in becoming an entrepreneurial advice guru becomes clearer when we approach it not in terms of professionalization (Wilensky 1964), but as a process fundamentally connected to the concept of expertise (Rimke 2000). Although the concept of “expert knowledge” or “expertise” still reigns as a central attribute of professional work (Gorman & Sandefur 2011), Rose (1998) draws an important distinction between
professionalization and expertise which is useful for this analysis. Whereas the notion of professionalization implies an attempt to define occupational exclusiveness on the basis of “a monopolization of an area of practice and the possession of an exclusive disciplinary base” (Rose 1998: 86) the concept of expertise captures something much more heterogeneous. Indeed, Rose (1998) argues that the style of activity involved in establishing expertise is best described as a form of bricolage whereby knowledge and techniques from different sources are amalgamated into a complex ‘know how’. Only later is an attempt made to uphold the coherence of these procedures and thought forms into some form of “specialism” which experts subsequently claim to have.

In advocating for the notion of non-professional expertise, Rose (1998) provides the most precise definition of what constitutes an expert. First, he argues that experts have a particular type of social authority that rests upon the possession of ‘truths’ which are grounded in specialized knowledge such as science and objectivity. Second, Rose (1998) claims that experts exercise a diagnostic gaze and have mastered an array of procedures and techniques which serve as tools for the rational guidance of subjects and which encourage their self-governing capabilities. Experts are also involved in the competent administration of relationships between themselves and individuals that center on power, freedom, counsel, and advice. Finally, Rose (1998) maintains that these distinguishing characteristics are reflected in their credentials which are earned through formal and informal training, whether or not they are represented by professional organizations (Abbott 1988).

While Rose provides insight into how the concept of expertise might be understood within a general neoliberal framework, I was curious to learn what specific qualities constitute an expert from the perspective of seminar participants at Experts Academy. A
close reading of my interview transcripts and *The Millionaire Messenger* chapter titled “You: Advice Guru” reveals three interpretative repertoires which are used to explain what it means to be an expert: 1) the results expert; 2) the research expert; and 3) the expert role model. Each contains a limited range of definitions and terms which are used to describe expertise in relation to the virtues of service and generosity. Here, I explore these interpretative repertoires through an in-depth look at their discursive constitution.

“*Been There, Done That*”: The Results Expert

If you sat down and listed all the things you have learned and experienced in life and business, you would find that you know a lot. As a matter of fact, you’d be shocked at how long that list really is. This act would lead you to realize that you are, in fact, what I call a “results expert” – someone who has “been there, done that” and now can teach “that” to others (Burchard 2011: 40).

The “results expert” is a person who has accumulated expertise through extensive experience and a proven record of success. This interpretative repertoire is organized around statements which define expertise in terms of formal credentials, life experience, or marketplace success. This repertoire locates the advice guru within a frame of intelligibility that accentuates the completion of college or university courses, diplomas, degrees, certifications, licenses and other awards or distinctions. It also emphasizes the importance of informal credentials through reference to lived experience and uses two measures of marketplace success to define “good results” within the advice industry. Despite Burchard’s insistence that educational credentials are less important for establishing expertise within the advice industry, many seminar participants referred to educational credentials as an important marker of expertise:
Signy: I would look at their background. Is it somebody who is just proclaiming they’re an expert because this is an untapped area? They might know a lot and they might have read a book, but they would not be an expert. If it was somebody without any type of credentialing or educational background, I would question it more.

Consistent with the self-help consumers interviewed by Eisler (2004), Signy and several other entrepreneurs claim that ‘real’ experts have formal credentials obtained through post-secondary education. As a key symbol of knowledgeability (see Eisler 2004), educational credentials convey a level of mastery and skill that distinguishes experts from non-experts, a view more commonly held among research participants with an advanced degree such as a Masters or PhD. Signy uses educational credentials to discriminate against people who vainly and opportunistically claim expertise over an untapped area in the marketplace. As symbols of sustained and dedicated study, educational credentials distinguish experts from those who “might have read a book” and thus communicate a deeper level of understanding and commitment on the part of the expert to be of service to humanity.

Despite the importance of educational credentials for distinguishing experts from non-experts, many seminar participants cited “personal experience” as an important measure of expertise:

Shauna: Experts are people who have personal experience, who are out there, who are doing what it takes to become an expert through actual hands-on experience. I have to tell you, I’m not a big fan of formal education to become an expert. That’s why I so believe in the advice industry because it's really about people who have a certain perspective and who wanna share.

Within this repertoire, the terms “life experience”, “hands-on experience” and “personal experience” are used to define another measure of expertise. Respondents who drew on this repertoire maintained that in order to be considered an expert a person must
have experienced the problem for which they claim to have expertise in solving. Through the simple act of having accomplished some fundamental task in life, for instance, Burchard (2011: 40) claims that result experts have accumulated “accidental expertise”. This unintended accumulation of expert knowledge is the result of transforming karmic experiences into goods and services that help other people: living through a particular problem, reflecting on the experience, and distilling key lessons which are valuable to others. While this form of expertise stands in clear contrast to disciplinary knowledge acquired through higher education, its relevance is construed primarily in terms of how it fulfills the civic responsibility to be of service by shortening the learning curve for others who are facing similar problems. Just as a child looks with amazement at adults who can tie their shoelaces, result experts recognize that “they have come further than many others on the highway of life” (Burchard 2011: 39) and thus have useful knowledge and advice they can share with other people.

In addition to formal credentials obtained through higher education and informal credentials acquired through life experience, this repertoire includes two measures of marketplace success. Burchard routinely cites annual profits that exceed $1 million dollars in ways that suggest this is an important measure of marketplace success, and yet these references are often framed in terms of indicators an advice guru has furthered his or her mission to be helpful through the virtuous distribution of free information that results in future sales. None of the aspiring advice gurus I interviewed cited profit margins as indicators of expertise, though several described the importance of career longevity and consumer testimonials:

**Jill:** I would have to say that what differentiates experts and non-experts is longevity and testimonial. Anyone can be a bestselling author. It’s easy to get
your numbers to where you can be on the bestseller list for a day. They may get one burst of a book sale, but they’re not gonna be there six months down the road.

Jill’s description of the difference between experts and non-experts captures two measures of marketplace success which were frequently used by New Age entrepreneurs to define expertise. Longevity – defined as the length of time an advice guru maintains their status as a bestselling author – is an important part of establishing expertise within the advice industry because it represents a measurable outcome of success. Here, Jill is highlighting an important difference between experts who maintain months of bestselling status and non-experts who make the bestseller list for a day. Like music performers with only one hit single, software companies with one successful release, or athletes known for only one major career event, authors who only make the New York Times, USA Today, or Amazon.com bestseller list for a short period of time are viewed as ‘one-hit wonders’ who lack sufficient marketplace success to be considered real experts.

To suggest that “anyone can be a bestselling author” is a bit misleading, though it does point to an industry trend which often goes unnoticed. Making the bestseller list for one day is considered better than having no bestselling status at all because once authors make the list they can establish credibility by referring to themselves as a bestselling author on book covers and marketing campaigns. To achieve this status, advice gurus such as Burchard will purchase thousands of copies of their own book and offer free copies to consumers as bonuses for more expensive programs or in exchange for paying the cost of shipping and handling. Because bestseller status is allocated exclusively on book sales, established advice gurus with sufficient economic capital know they can increase their odds of making the
bestseller list by purchasing their own books, a practice which elevates their status as a results expert by portraying unusual levels of success.

Although Jill does not elaborate on the importance of customer testimonials for establishing expertise, Burchard spent ample time at Experts Academy emphasizing this point. Eisler (2004: 217) defines testimonials in the context of the self-help industry as “actual or hypothetical statements from ‘unknown others’ that attest to successes that have apparently resulted from the use of expert knowledge and skills”. As the second measurable outcome of success, testimonials function as proof of a good track record and evidence that the expert in question can produce results for others. Although the self-help and personal empowerment materials that Eisler (2004) analyzed often relied on sourceless testimonials from “unknown others”, established advice gurus are less inclined to rely on fictitious individuals and prefer to solicit third-party endorsements from celebrities or other well-known industry gurus. Burchard, for instance, includes a testimonial from John Gray on the book cover of *The Millionaire Messenger* that states “Brendon Burchard shows you how to get your message to the public in a much bigger way (and get paid for it too)”. As a *New York Times* bestselling author of the wildly successful *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, John Gray’s endorsement functions as a powerful symbol of Burchard’s expertise that promises good outcomes to prospective consumers.

“Always Students First”: The Research Expert

Did you know that you don’t need to have ever done something to be considered an expert in it? You don’t have to be a “results expert”. This seems an outlandish claim, but have you ever seen an academic on television being interviewed about business? They aren’t even in business, and they may never have practiced business principles, but because they studied business closely
enough and knew about best practices in business, they were considered experts…never forget that experts are always students first (Burchard 2011: 42-43).

The “research expert” is a person who has accumulated expertise through a comprehensive analysis of topics that people find valuable. This interpretative repertoire is organized around statements that define expertise in terms of lifelong learning, subject mastery, and transferable trends. This repertoire locates the advice guru within a frame of intelligibility that emphasizes the virtue of service through an ability to identify useful topics, review the literature, interview experts, synthesize findings, distil lessons, create best practices, and communicate results in ways that laypeople can understand. It also frames learning as an ongoing process that takes place throughout life rather than an ability that is confined to childhood or the classroom. Within this repertoire, a deep understanding of the subject matter is an important gauge of expertise as is the ability to extrapolate findings to a broader audience. The view that experts are “always students first” was often communicated by fellow advice gurus who shared the stage with Burchard at the live event and it was generally expected that seminar participants would stay apprised of changes within their respective field(s). The importance of expanding personal and professional knowledge was often framed within a discourse of ‘lifelong learning’ and described in relation to character traits that capture this dimension of expertise:

Emily: I think experts are lifelong learners, you know? They just don't stop. And it's not even just in their field. If you're interested in anything, then you usually want to just dig deep, and I think that's one of the differences between an expert and somebody who never goes in that direction. They just have that natural curiosity and they wanna know more and more about a subject.
Many research participants claimed that ‘real’ experts have a ‘natural curiosity’ that leads them to explore subjects both within and beyond their respective area of expertise. Within this repertoire, “curiosity” is a quality related to exploration, investigation, and continuous learning. A deep desire to “know more and more about a subject” is considered a positive quality because it requires advice gurus to engage in activities which keep them on the leading edge of their field: asking questions, talking to people, reading relevant literature, experimenting, innovating, and sharing information with others. As a key indicator of lifelong learning, curiosity translates into the ongoing and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge and therefore distinguishes experts from those “who never go in that direction”.

In addition to exhibiting genuine curiosity, there was a consensus among research participants that mastery is an essential characteristic that differentiates experts from non-experts. As Ida’s comments reveal, this aspect of the “research expert” repertoire captures the ‘depth’ component that arises through prolonged study:

**Ida:** Being an expert in a subject or topic that you want to teach or share with someone else takes, in my opinion, years of practice and study. An expert has beyond a passing casual understanding of something. They know the subtleties and nuances of the field. The whole “10,000 hours of practice to get to mastery” idea.

Within this repertoire, the terms “mastery”, “practice” and “years of study” are used to define another measure of expertise. Participants who draw on this repertoire use temporal descriptors to differentiate between experts who know the “subtleties and nuances of the field” and non-experts who have a “passing casual understanding of something”. This is usually described in terms of years mastering a field through sustained practice and study. Although there is no consensus regarding the number of years an expert must study in order
to master a subject, a handful of respondents noted that a minimum of 10 years is necessary. Like Ida, others cited the “10,000 hour rule” made famous by Malcolm Gladwell in his analysis of the factors that contribute to high levels of success. In his book *Outliers*, Gladwell (2008) repeatedly argues that success in any field is largely attributable to practicing a specific task for a total of 10,000 hours. Thus, if a person practiced a task or studied a topic for twenty hours per week, it would take approximately 10 years to achieve a level of mastery that would constitute expertise. Although newbies in the advice industry may be inclined to cut corners and proclaim expertise after only superficially researching a subject, core members strongly discourage this approach. As Burchard repeatedly states at Experts Academy: “do not hang out your shingle as an expert on a topic you casually researched on Google one day”.

Most of the tasks which advice gurus must perform in order to develop advice frameworks bear a striking resemblance to the work involved in conducting qualitative research. Indeed, one surprising finding that emerged from my conversations with entrepreneurs was the extent to which transferability factored into their definitions of expertise:

**Monica:** It's one thing to be an expert on your own life -- and we all are, right? So we can talk about the lessons that we've learned in our life. But there's a difference between an anecdote and a trend. So I think within the expert field, it's really a judgement call between sharing their anecdotes or sharing broader trends that can be extrapolated across different people and different industries? So people who call themselves experts because they personally have had experience -- that's their personal expertise. Are they experts enough to say that what they’re sharing is a broad trend or best practice that the industry as a whole knows is the right way to do things? That's really different.
These comments reveal how Monica is using the “personal experience” component of the “results expert” repertoire to differentiate between experts who rely exclusively on anecdotes from their personal lives and experts who can identify broader trends that can be “extrapolated” to other people and industries. Implied in this description is the idea that advice gurus who wish to “transfer” the results of their research to a broader audience are responsible for making judgments about the sensibility of that transfer. Within this repertoire, personal experience narratives create problems for people who develop advice frameworks based exclusively on their “personal expertise”. Just as Burchard cautions against claiming expertise on the basis of casual internet searches, advice gurus are expected to engage in prolonged research on their topics and to ensure their results are applicable to a broader audience.

“Be a Good Person”: The Expert Role Model

If you are seen as a role model, you will find that your status is an incredibly powerful pillar in positioning yourself as an expert. This is my way of saying to you, Be a good person and good things will follow (Burchard 2011: 47).

The “expert role model” is a person who embodies a moral character that magnifies his or her expertise. This interpretative repertoire is organized around words that define expertise in terms of accessibility, integrity, and civic responsibility. It locates the advice guru within a frame of intelligibility that accentuates trust, respect, compassion, and admiration. In this case, expertise is connected to modelling three actionable skills: 1) demonstrating a specific task (demonstrating expert practice); 2) observing phenomena that novices might overlook (observing from an expert viewpoint); and 3) developing a social
conscience (caring with expert dedication). Within this repertoire, good customer service is an important gauge of expertise as is the ability to develop products or services with integrity and a willingness to balance self-interest with a concern for broader social issues.

Offering superior customer service is a big part of being a “good person” within this community insofar as advice gurus are expected to engage in practices that ensure customers feel comfortable about their purchasing decisions. The importance of cultivating trust is usually framed alongside the virtue of generosity and described in relation to the level of free information an expert is willing to provide:

Jill: Experts that matter are always around. They’re accessible and they’re willing to respond to emails in a [pause] what’s the best way to describe this? Um, some people respond to emails in a formulaic response. They say things without really saying anything. And the only way they'll actually give you the answer is if you pay them. I don't think those are the real experts. The real experts are willing to share. They'll give you a layer to prove what they can do for you.

Providing good customer service is one way that advice gurus model expert practice. In this remark, Jill is defining expertise as a willingness to “share” information for the purpose of “proving” competency without any expectation of financial return. Giving consumers a “layer” as opposed to providing a “formulaic response” is how ‘real’ experts demonstrate generosity. Other best practices for modelling good customer service include: issuing a 30-day money back guarantee; offering a smooth refund process that does not create “hardship” or “humiliation” for the consumer; providing customer support for all products and services; including a phone number on all sales materials that reaches an actual person; returning phone calls within 24-72 business hours; sending confirmation emails for all products and services purchased online; and providing carbon copy receipts for any order forms received at live events.
In addition to being accessible and transparent, most New Age entrepreneurs agree that “integrity” is a character trait that distinguishes experts from non-experts. As Annette’s comments illustrate, this aspect of the “expert role model” repertoire highlights issues that novices may overlook:

**Annette**: Being an expert has a sense of integrity and I'm always aware that whatever I do impacts other people's lives and other people's jobs. I think experts take that seriously.

Within this repertoire, integrity is framed as consistent commitment to honouring ethical values and principles. Implied in Annette’s remarks is the notion that authentic experts have the capacity to discern how their actions will affect other people. The ability to (un)consciously assume the role of the ‘Other’ and to anticipate how their business practices and services might affect consumers’ lives is one way that advice gurus adopt an expert viewpoint. Whereas novices or non-experts may be primarily motivated by self-interest, genuine experts model compassion and empathy in such a way that distinctions between self and other are less pronounced. Other ways that advice gurus model integrity include protecting the personal information of consumers through a commitment not to share their contact details with third party vendors and abstaining from persuasive tactics that would lead consumers to purchase products they cannot afford.

The emphasis on spiritual service within this community also has significant consequences for the ways in which advice gurus define expertise. As noted in Chapter 1, many New Age entrepreneurs ascribed a spiritual or religious meaning to their work. In the context of our conversations surrounding expertise, however, this commitment to helping people was framed within a discourse of civic responsibility:
Steven: One of the things they [experts] think about is how they can make a difference in the world. How can they make a difference in their community? How can they better mankind? And when I say “man”, I’m talking about both men and women.

Although the entrepreneurial career path of the advice guru is often framed as a solution to the (inter)personal crises identified in Chapter 2, this repertoire links the resolution of those “private troubles” as opportunities to address broader “public issues” (Mills 1959). The entrepreneurs I interviewed did not always understand the historical and structural dimensions of their own predicaments; however, they were clear that experts are distinct from non-experts in their commitment to “making a difference” and “bettering mankind”. Within this repertoire, developing a social conscience is one way that advice gurus model expertise and it is through a commitment to maintaining a balance between rational self-interest and the virtues of service and generosity that experts embody the characteristics of a “good person”.

(Un)Doing Expertise

The interpretative repertoires described above take the form of identity categories that establish the discursive resources through which expertise is defined and understood. Once I identified the identity categories that emerged from The Millionaire Messenger and my conversations with research participants, I was faced with the task of ‘seeing’ how New Age entrepreneurs position themselves in relationship to these available categories and their associated discourses. Isolating moments where speakers take up, resist or rework available discourses for establishing expert identities offers insight into the speaker’s agency because a
person is never completely ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ a specific discourse. As my interviews reveal, New Age entrepreneurs often construct expert identities through comparison by defining what an expert ‘is’ in relation to what an expert ‘is not’. Despite the significance of this binary logic for defining expertise, study participants did not always position themselves either inside or outside an available category as they shifted from constructing expert others (third person statements) towards constructing expert selves (first person statements).

To help capture this complexity, I found it useful to engage in what Currie (1999:60) terms a “symptomatic reading of texts”. Currie (1999) uses symptomatic reading as a way to explore the doing and undoing of the gendered self as an outcome of reading teen magazines. In this study, I use symptomatic reading as a way to explore the doing and undoing of the entrepreneurial self as an outcome of “falling apart”, attending Experts Academy, and of being in the early stages of forming a new identity. As I detail below, the different ways in which New Age entrepreneurs positioned themselves or were positioned by significant others in relation to the identity categories described above (results expert, research expert, expert role model) shaped their ability to “sustain a [coherent] narrative about self and to answer critical questions about what to do, how to act, and who to be” (Currie 1999:113) in ways that were not entirely straightforward.

(Un)Doing the Subject: Reflexive Positioning

The range of available discourses for defining expertise had important implications for how research participants constructed expert identities. The most obvious way that interviewees adopt the discourse of expertise is by claiming affiliation with a given category.
Reflexive positioning occurs when study participants position themselves in relation to an available identity category and affiliation arises when the speaker identifies with a given category by claiming membership (Currie et al. 2007). Some examples are evident in interview excerpts where speakers employ the pronoun “me”, as when Robyn refers to herself as an expert due to her experience navigating the dissolution of her marriage and the medical company she co-founded with her former husband:

**Caitlin:** What do you think distinguishes experts within the [advice] industry?

**Robyn:** Um, that's an interesting question. There's a guy named Michael Masterson who's written a lot of bestselling books, and he REALLY publicly denounces a lot of other bestselling authors in his space, which is entrepreneurship, saying, "All they've ever done is aggregated information and regurgitated it. And they are good marketers, so they have bestselling books, but they haven't actually walked the walk, or talked the talk and done the businesses, whereas I've had all these different companies.” I think in some ways, having had that direct hands-on experience differentiates me. Having crashed and burned big time -- it differentiates me because it hasn't been all fun and games. I did crash, and I have come back. That differentiates me.

Here, Robyn is comparing herself to an established advice guru who has “walked the walk” and is therefore positioning herself in the “been there, done that” discourse of the results expert category. Part of the reason why Robyn is enticed to take up the discourse of the results expert is attributable to her career biography. As I detailed in Chapter 2, Robyn secured 5 million dollars of investment capital from Chinese investors, invented software that addressed non-compliance issues among diabetics, and received clearance from the US Food and Drug Administration to market this new technology. However, Robyn’s life “fell apart” when her former husband and co-founder of the medical company terminated her role as Chief Science Officer and filed for divorce. When Robyn refers to “having crashed and
burned big time” and “it hasn’t been all fun and games” she is referring to these life changing events as evidence of her expertise.

Indeed, Robyn uses the phrase “direct hands-on experience” to differentiate herself from non-experts in the advice industry who may have bestselling titles due to savvy marketing strategies (e.g. giveaways that increase sales and boost bestselling status) but who lack the personal experience that enables them to claim expertise. It interested me that Robyn drew on two aspects of the results expert repertoire to construct Michael Masterson as an expert in the field of entrepreneurship (bestselling author, direct experience owning multiple companies) but still considered herself an ‘expert’ despite having no bestselling status. In this example, affiliation implies membership in the “results expert” category because “me” invokes an individual accomplishment related to “crashing”, “burning” and “coming back” that enables Robyn to claim expertise in the fields of personal development and entrepreneurship.

Other examples of how research participants reflexively position themselves in a discourse by claiming affiliation with a given category came from interview excerpts where speakers employed the pronoun “I”. This was the case in a lengthy discussion where Steven positioned himself as an expert role model through his commitment to addressing larger social problems:

**Steven:** The world needs more people who serve from the heart. And who make a difference and who want to make a difference in the world. I am one of those people. I will start a movement called “Turning Stones Into Schools”. I will start this non-profit center, raise money, and go to rural parts of the world for many Third World countries in Asia, South America, and Africa. I will go there. I will build schools, help kids to get an education, and bring clean water system there…You know, I can take the money and make a difference in the world and go out there and build schools in a Third World country versus I just take the money and just blow it all away.
In this comment, Steven is describing how he plans to use a substantial portion of the earnings he derives from his business as an advice guru to establish a non-profit organization that brings clean water and education to impoverished communities in various parts of the world. In light of the story of struggle I described in Chapter 2, we can see why Steven is enticed to take up the discourse of the expert role model. Prior to his life “falling apart”, Steven weighed the spiritual and emotional benefits of teaching yoga for $35 per hour against the financial benefits of earning $200,000 per year as an IT consultant travelling all over the United States. As a result of pursuing the latter, Steven was able to purchase real estate, amass a significant financial portfolio, and live a consumer lifestyle; however, Steven’s health also deteriorated and his contribution to the world felt meaningless.

By taking up the subject position of the expert role model, Steven is able to reconcile the previously incompatible identities of passionate yoga instructor, six figure income earner, and philanthropic world changer. To this end, Steven draws on the discourse of civic responsibility to position himself as an expert role model and to distance himself from the alternative: “take the money and just blow it all away”. This is achieved by drawing on phrases such as “serve from the heart” and “make a difference in the world”, both of which capture the virtues of service and generosity that constitute the “good person” dimension of this repertoire. In this example, affiliation implies membership in the “expert role model” category because “I” invokes an individual commitment to solving social problems that enables Steven to claim expertise by virtue of his willingness to donate a substantial portion of his earnings.

While affiliation is arguably the most discernible way that speakers reflexively position themselves in an identity category, I also found passages where New Age
entrepreneurs signalled ambivalence towards a category that led to inconsistencies in their self-constructions as experts. Following Currie et al. (2007: 386) who use ambivalence as a descriptive label rather than a psychoanalytic concept (Gonick 2003) I have observed that ambivalence can arise during the early stages of identity formation, especially when a speaker invests intense emotional energy into apparently mutually exclusive ideas:

Caitlin: Mm hmm. Um, what do you think distinguishes experts in the [advice] field?

Shauna: Experts are people who are out there doing what it takes to become an expert, whether it's through research [pause] I have to tell you, I'm not a big fan of formal education to become an expert but I do consider myself an expert because I have a teaching degree…

In this exchange, Shauna is constructing two opposing categories that offer content for doing expertise: the research expert who is “out there doing what it takes” by presumably accumulating knowledge on a topic versus the results expert who has acquired expertise through formal education. The term “whether” suggests that Shauna may be on the verge of drawing on another discourse to construct expertise; however, it is the seamless shift that Shauna makes from denouncing formal education to identifying as an expert because she has a teaching degree that interests me the most. Although Shauna consciously positions herself in the credential-oriented identity of the results expert who has the educational background to back up their expertise, her positioning is destabilized by her initial attraction to the research expert repertoire and subsequent rejection of formal education as an indicator of expertise. In this case, ambivalence arises when Shauna simultaneously rejects the importance of formal education for becoming an expert but identifies as an expert because she has educational credentials.
That Shauna takes up the subject position of the research expert, rejects formal education as an indicator of expertise, and briefly aligns with the subject position of the results expert with a teaching degree can also be explained in terms of her career biography. Although Shauna earned a bachelor of education in preparation for a teaching career in politics and history, she spent the bulk of her career working as a performance specialist in a sales training firm. At the time of our interview, Shauna had recently left her position at the firm to work full-time on developing a business that helps aspiring entrepreneurs build a brand. In fact, Shauna was in the process of finalizing the details of an online course that was scheduled for release the following week. Not surprisingly, Shauna aligns herself with the subject position of the research expert because she is “out there doing what it takes” to communicate the results of her research in ways that laypeople can understand; namely, creating an online course on how to develop a business plan. However, because Shauna had yet to consolidate this new identity through the unveiling of her online program, her entrepreneurial identity became momentarily “undone” through contradictory statements about her sense of self as an expert.

Another example of the contradictory results that can emerge from ambivalence towards an imagined category rather than membership in a lived category came from an interview with Suzanne where she described herself as ‘on the verge’ of becoming an expert:

**Caitlin:** What do you think distinguishes experts in the advice field?

**Suzanne:** This is going to sound flaky, but I left Experts Academy believing that not only could I position myself as an expert but that I believed I'm not far off. And if I'm off, then I can just learn and fill in the gaps. I read the book *Outliers,* and it talked about how you become an expert after 10,000 hours of study or something. Well, how long is 10,000 hours, really? You couldn't possibly be an expert on your kid, because they're changing every six months! I just don't have 10,000 hours with one kid at one static place. You know?
Suzanne’s comment captures the imagined dimension of expert identities insofar as the ability to achieve full membership in a lived category of expertise is simply a matter of “learning and filling in the gaps”. Here, Suzanne is positioning herself in the discursive category of the research expert by suggesting that any gaps in her knowledge about motherhood can be addressed through sustained study. This positioning is further evidenced by Suzanne’s reference to Gladwell’s claim that expertise is achieved through 10,000 hours of study which, as detailed above, is part of the broader discourse on mastery that constitutes the research expert repertoire. However, contradiction arises when Suzanne cites the 10,000 hour rule as the path to expertise (and thus of attaining full membership through affiliation) but quickly dismisses this strategy for achieving mastery on the grounds that “I just don’t have 10,000 hours with one kid at one static place”. Here, ambivalence arises when Suzanne invests in the notion that she is not “far off” from being an expert even though she contends that expertise requires 10,000 hours of study.

The analytical significance of this remark also lies in Suzanne’s belief that her sense of self as an expert is the result of attending Experts Academy. Suzanne’s experience of becoming an expert is akin to Shauna’s in that both women expressed ambivalence during the early stages of taking up a new identity. Despite this similarity, Suzanne does not cite her Master’s degree in education as evidence of her expertise and instead credits Experts Academy for shaping her sense of self as an expert, even though she admits it sounds “flaky”. Implied in this comment is the idea that despite her educational credentials, Suzanne did not consider herself an expert until she participated in the intimate and highly supportive environment of the live event, a finding which I explore further through the idea of “interactive positioning”. 
Whereas reflexive positioning occurs when study participants position themselves in relation to an available identity category, interactive positioning occurs when significant others position participants’ in relation to one (or more) of the identity categories described above. In Chapter 3, for instance, I described the Q&A sessions that were held between Burchard and the entire crowd of participants at the Experts Academy live event. The way Burchard incites the crowd to participate in a scripted form of interactive positioning by introducing themselves with their newly formulated taglines (recall Carol: “I help mothers find work/life balance so they maintain a sense of well-being”) is just one example of how Burchard uses techniques of pastoral power to position seminar participants within a discourse of expertise. I refer to this type of positioning as interactive because it requires Carol to position Burchard within a discourse of expertise through the very act of seeking advice. However, in order to fully participate in the Q&A session, Carol must also consent to being positioned within the discourse of expertise by introducing herself using the “I help X do Y so that Z” formula prior to receiving advice from Burchard.

The importance of the live event for reaffirming expert identities through different forms of interactive positioning is also apparent in the stories research participants told about how they felt when other seminar attendees positioned them as experts. Jill’s account of her experience at Experts Academy, for instance, is an illuminating example of how participants become affiliated with an identity category through interactive positioning:

**Caitlin:** At what point did you decide you wanted to be an expert in the advice industry?
**Jill:** I never actually decided that. Other people decided that for me.

**Caitlin:** Really?

**Jill:** Yeah, so I’m at Experts Academy and I’m talking to people, and they’re all picking my brains and I’m talking about everything I’ve done. And I am -- I’m helping people left and right. I mean, some of the really big players [Center Ring members] in the room were talking to me because I was helping them reframe and shape questions. And somebody said to me, “You’re the expert on questioning. You have so much to offer.” And I went, "COOL!" [laughs] ’Cause until that moment, I had never thought of myself that way. So now I’m the question expert.

Jill is describing her experience of working with Center Ring members (i.e. “big players”) during the group work that was assigned at Experts Academy. As noted in Chapter 3, group work is how seminar participants practice delivering their tag lines and giving each other advice. Jill’s experience is significant because in addition to giving her an opportunity to network with powerful members of the Center Ring, the group work created an avenue through which she gained a sense of self as an expert. Even though Jill positions herself as a results expert by describing how “I’m talking about everything I’ve done” (life experience), it is not until an unidentified “somebody” says to her “You’re an expert on questioning” that she begins to think of herself ‘that way’. The results of this interaction become evident when Jill confidently states “So now I’m the question expert”, a declaration that clearly demonstrates affiliation with the results expert category. Moreover, when Jill returned home, she wrote a self-help book on “asking good questions” that eventually spent several weeks on the Amazon.com bestseller list.

Other examples of how New Age entrepreneurs are positioned by significant others came from interview excerpts where speakers told stories about business exchanges they had
with clients. Janet’s description of how she handled a potential client who was questioning her expertise is a great illustration of interactive positioning:

**Caitlin:** What do you think distinguishes experts in the advice industry?

**Janet:** I think it is the knowledge and the experience that they bring and their level of integrity in backing up what it is that they do. I mean, I had a client that came pretty reluctantly to me through another coach to work with me for a full day, and she said, "How do I know you're any good?" I said, "Well, here's the deal." I said, "First of all, your coach is recommending me." I said, "If you have respect for her, you would think that she would be recommending you to somebody that's gonna be able to help you". Okay. And I said, "And the second thing is, is if you don't feel you get the results at the end of the day, you don't have to pay me." And she sat down at the end of the day and asked me how much she owed me [laughs].

Janet’s description of the interaction she had with a prospective client is compelling because it captures two moments where Janet was discursively positioned as an expert by significant others. On the one hand, Janet is positioning herself as a member of the expert role model category through her willingness to coach a client for free in order to prove her generosity and competence. As previously noted, providing a layer of information is considered good customer service and is one of the primary ways that advice gurus model expertise. However, Janet also reminds the client that she was recommended by someone whom the client trusts and respects. This recommendation is akin to the customer testimonial which is part of the discourse on marketplace success that constitutes the results expert repertoire. By evoking the recommendation of another coach as proof that she is “gonna be able to help”, Janet signals to the client that trusted others have already positioned her as an expert. The second moment occurs when the client offers to pay Janet for her coaching services, a gesture which implies that she “got the results” she needed in order to feel confident that Janet was in fact an expert.
Although Jill and Janet both described encounters that reveal how affiliation can arise through interactive positioning, I also found passages where aspiring advice gurus were positioned by significant others in ways that signalled ambivalence towards a category. In these cases, self-doubt leaked into conversations about whether a respondent could appropriately be considered an expert:

**Caitlin:** So what do you think distinguishes experts in the advice industry?

**Claire:** [pause] [sigh] I get people that refer to me as an expert and I'm kinda going, "Aw man, you think I'm an expert? You should go and learn from this person or this person because I'm learning from them!" So from the standpoint of differentiating, I differentiate between being THE expert and AN expert.

**Caitlin:** Okay

**Claire:** So it seems like a small distinction, but for me it's a huge distinction. And it freed me up in some respects, you know, because it's like if you're THE expert, then you're the definitive expert. Then nobody should be citing a study that you don't know something about, right? To me, those are THE experts. I'm not one of those. I don't have to deal with that imposter, "Oh, I'm not enough. I don't know it all," or feeling like "Oh my God. I have to be checking over my shoulder all the time, because somebody's gonna figure this out." I know for myself that is the reason why I hesitate to call myself, you know, THE expert. I'm not THE expert. I'm AN expert.

The relevance of this excerpt centers on Claire’s reluctance to identify as THE expert in her field (leadership and marketing), as evidenced by her tendency to redirect people to other experts rather than claim full membership as an expert herself: “You should go learn from this person or this person because I’m learning from them!”. Indeed, Claire draws a “big distinction” between definitive experts (THE expert) who are familiar with all the research on a particular topic and those, like herself, who are learning from these definitive experts (AN expert). On the one hand, Claire is dissociating herself from the discursive category of the research expert when she states “I’m not one of those”. At the same time,
however, she identifies as “AN expert” because she researchers and synthesizes information from those whom she considers “THE experts” in her field. That Claire consciously refers to herself as “AN expert” rather than “THE expert” in order to avoid feeling like an “imposter” is especially significant. Here, self-doubt is evident in Claire’s use of an indefinite article (an) rather than a definite article (the) to position herself within the research expert repertoire. This discursive move signals uncertainty about her status as an expert; however, it also insulates her against feeling like she is inadequate (“not enough”), unknowledgeable (“don’t know it all”), or at risk of being exposed as a fraud (“checking over my shoulder all the time because someone’s gonna figure this out”). In this case, ambivalence arises when Claire invests in the notion that she is ‘an’ expert even though she insists that definitive experts have a deeper mastery of the field (“nobody should be citing a study that you don’t know something about”).

The final example of how ambivalence can emerge when participants are discursively positioned by significant others can be seen in an email exchange where I unintentionally positioned Monica as an expert:

**Monica:** Caitlin - Thanks for sharing your findings when you are done. I have to admit I sort of cringed when you said good luck with my 'expert' business. I felt like more of an 'expert' when I was teaching at the university. To clarify - my definition of an expert is someone who has studied and practiced something for years. Having said that, by now I feel I have some expertise in a range of areas beyond what I went to university to study. I have studied over the last 15 years various fields of mysticism and Shamanism, and practiced my craft for some time. I do feel I have more expertise now and can offer it to others.

This comment is Monica’s response to a generic email I sent to participants where I thanked them for doing an interview, indicated I would follow-up with my findings once the report was complete, and wished them good luck with their “expert business”. I did not think
of this informal goodbye as an instance where I had positioned research participants as experts until I conducted the second reading of my transcripts and remembered this email exchange. Monica’s decision to reach out and express her feelings of discomfort (“I sort of cringed”) lends insight into how self-doubt leaked into her email response as she resisted this positioning. As her comments reveal, Monica felt more like an expert when she was working in a university setting where her educational credentials (PhD) were formally recognized as expertise than she currently does working in the advice industry where educational credentials are often considered less important than hands-on experience. In this case, ambivalence arises when Monica invests in the idea that her expertise rests upon her university education (results expert) even though she spent 15 years researching mysticism and Shamanism after completing her doctoral degree (research expert).

The ambivalence that Monica and Claire expressed when they were positioned by significant others further underscores the importance of the seminar environment for reinforcing expert identities. It is noteworthy to mention, for instance, that neither Monica nor Claire expressed any form of ambivalence regarding their identities as experts while we practiced our taglines and completed other forms of group work together. That this ambivalence emerged after the event suggests that people may become ‘undone’ once they leave the sacred space of the seminar room and return home to their ordinary lives, especially in the absence of other people who are going through the same process and who engage in different forms of interactive positioning to reaffirm this new identity.
Conclusion

As a method for revealing how people formulate new identities, discursive psychology enables the analyst to see how the entrepreneurial self “is not an object to be described once and for all” (Wetherell & Maybin 1996: 222) but an ongoing process that emerges through discourse and social interaction. Through an analysis of how research participants distinguish experts from non-experts, in addition to a chapter from *The Millionaire Messenger* where Burchard lays out three forms of expertise that build on the virtues of service and generosity, I identified three repertoires of entrepreneurial selfhood which are used to define expertise: results expert, research expert, and expert role model. Because these interpretative repertoires take the form of identity categories, they can be viewed as subject positions and analyzed in terms of how research participants position themselves in relation to their associated discourses through different forms of reflexive and interactive positioning.

This chapter also traces the contingencies surrounding the formulation of a new identity through the idea of (un)doing, and further demonstrates how this process can be viewed as an outcome of “falling apart”, attending Experts Academy, and of being in the early stages of becoming a new person. Although the different ways that research participants were either reflexively or interactively positioned as experts had important implications for how they internalized and acted upon the New Age spirit of capitalism, this process was not entirely straightforward: some participants expressed ambivalence towards an identity category while others claimed full membership through affiliation. In the end, it was the sacred environment of the seminar room that played a crucial role in holding these new
identities together by encouraging participants to reflect on their lives and perform group activities that would enable them to become the entrepreneurial experts they were allegedly meant to be.
Conclusion

Resurrecting the Spiritualism of Capitalism

I think that if Max Weber were to rewrite his legendary book on capitalist protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism today the title of the book would have been, I’m sure, the Taoist or Buddhist ethic and the spirit of global capitalism or something like that (Zizek 2012).

In a recent commentary on the spirit of global capitalism, Slavoj Zizek (2012) proposes that Taoism, Buddhism and New Age spirituality can be viewed as the necessary ideology for coping with the ceaseless change and rootlessness that result from being thrown around by market forces. Zizez (2012) agrees with Weber that the religiously-informed work ethic of Protestantism guaranteed the discipline and active participation of the workforce during the industrial age, but points to the ways in which “not clinging” becomes the virtue that defines the contemporary era. This sense of spiritual “looseness” is clearly expressed in the extensive list of contemporary self-help books whose titles begin with the phrase “The Tao Of…” and which frame detachment, going with the flow, balance, and change as a “good thing”. This brand of New Age spirituality offers a very effective way of coping with unstable and unfulfilling economic conditions insofar as Qigong, yoga and other meditative practices offer release, respite, and escape. The Buddhist principle of ceasing “dukkha” or “suffering” through passive, meditative detachment also allows Western workers to fully participate in the global capitalist economy “while sustaining the perception that you are not really in it” (Zizek 2001: 14).

Whereas Zizek proposes a largely Marxist reformulation of Weber’s famous thesis that attends to the pacifying and politically debilitating aspects of Taoist and Buddhist
individualism, this project updates and supplements Weber’s work by tracing a mutation in the spirit of capitalism that preserves the original focus on the elective affinities between capitalism and religion, in addition to economic ethics and cultural worldviews more generally. I agree with Zizek that the religious tradition of Chinese origin that emphasizes living in harmony with the Tao (roughly translated as “Way” or “Path”) has achieved widespread popularity among New Age enthusiasts in the United States and may offer self-help consumers with a set of beliefs and rituals that allow them to manage stress and reduce anxiety. However, the most important ethical principle in Taoism favours effortless action (wu-wei) out of concern that willful action may disrupt the cosmic order. This emphasis on inaction within Taoism does not lend itself well to the new spirit of capitalism insofar as it discourages the type of hurried or “harrried” life (Elliott & Urry 2010: 3) that takes New Age entrepreneurs around the globe.

The main argument of this dissertation hinges primarily on how Burchard formulates the intersection between the “expert calling” and the “advice guru”. My research extends Weber’s memorable collection of historical figures by offering an ideal typical portrait of the capitalist entrepreneur originally epitomized in Benjamin Franklin, later reformulated as the “connexionist man” of the 1990s (Boltanski & Chiapello 1999), and now reconfigured as the “advice guru” of 21st century online entrepreneurship. In sketching an ideal typical portrait of the contemporary advice guru, my goal has been to use Weber’s historical frame of reference as a way to trace the development of a new spirit of capitalism that blends the economic ethics of Eastern and Western religious traditions into a New Age spirit that animates the entrepreneurial self of global capitalism today.
In response to my first research question – How does the advice guru emerge as a contemporary entrepreneurial figure? – I must stress how the arrival of several Hindu yogis and swamis to the United States contributed to the dissemination of Hindu practices and beliefs which are now part of the highly eclectic structure of the New Age movement. Only through a longer, historical view of New Age spiritualism can we begin to understand how yoga, meditation, and the Hindu doctrines of karma and dharma become linked to online entrepreneurship in the United States today. As I discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, these Eastern practices and beliefs have been appropriated, transformed and commodified by a variety of self-help gurus and are widely available to the American public in the form of books, DVD programs, live classes, and online courses, to name a few. The importance of these New Age practices and beliefs for developing guru identities is evident in Burchard’s account of how he commune with the divine prior to reinventing himself as an entrepreneurial expert, the group meditation at Experts Academy in which everyone was instructed to find their “higher self”, and the stories participants told about receiving divine guidance they should pursue an entrepreneurial career.

The advice guru also emerges during times of personal and economic crisis, as evidenced by the stories of struggle presented in Chapter 2 and the broader recessionary context in which these personal crises unfolded. These stories are revealing because they capture the structural changes that shaped the different forms of downward social mobility respondents experienced prior to changing careers. To be sure, the human impact of the U.S. recession is not simply economic. Research participants also developed illnesses, divorced their spouses, were geographically displaced, and felt inspired to ask deeper questions about the meaning of life: Who am I?, What is my purpose?, and What will I do?. As an
entrepreneurial figure that is linked to an actual person living in an unstable economy (i.e. Burchard), the advice guru emerges as a representative of post-recession recovery that displays the attributes of spiritual health, economic wealth, and upward social mobility.

The irony, of course, is that post-recession recovery begins in a setting that blends the conversion experience of the Christian revival meeting with the team bonding goals of the corporate retreat/workshop and the party atmosphere of the dance club. As I explained in Chapter 3, by drawing on a New Age ideology of self-fulfilment, self-discovery and self-development, live seminars such as Experts Academy encourage participants to restructure their identities in a dramatic, even magical way. Larger social structural problems related to the global financial crisis linger in the backdrop as circumstances people cannot control, but which individuals can overcome by taking responsibility for their career trajectories. By completing questionnaires and participating in group activities, participants at the live event in Silicon Valley learned how to reinvent themselves as online entrepreneurs who can withstand any changes in the global economy because they live by the virtues of service and generosity.

My analysis of how the New Age spirit of capitalism is internalized and acted upon also reveals how the advice guru emerges at the meeting point between three repertoires of entrepreneurial selfhood that interpellate readers into a discourse of expertise (results expert, research expert, and expert role model) and the different forms of reflexive and interactive positioning through which the advice guru comes to be. As I pointed out in Chapter 4, however, this process is not entirely straightforward, due largely to the importance of the seminar setting for shoring up this new identity. Participants may form temporary attachments to repertoires of entrepreneurial selfhood by claiming full membership or they
may express ambivalence because they are in the early stages of forming a new identity, but in the absence of a supportive environment where their sense of self as experts is continuously reinforced, they will likely struggle to consolidate their guru identities.

With respect to my second research question – What is distinct about the New Age spirit of capitalism in the early 21st century? – the most compelling answers are based on my analysis of the elective affinities between Deepak Chopra and Brendon Burchard. Figure 9 is an updated version of Weber’s bifocals that positions Chopra as an ideal-typical representative of the New Age ethic and the 1994 publication of his *Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* as a monumental text that captures the Eastern spirit of an increasingly “Hindu” occupational calling. The new version of Weber’s bifocals also positions Burchard as an updated representative of Boltanski and Chiapello’s (1999) connexionist entrepreneur and the 2011 publication of *The Millionaire Messenger: Make a Difference and a Fortune Sharing Your Advice* as a monumental text that captures the New Age spirit of 21st century capitalism in the United States.
As one of the most visible and wealthy figures associated with the New Age movement, Deepak Chopra provides some important insights into the economic ethics of New Age spiritualism. In Chapter 1, I demonstrated how Chopra’s New Age consolidation of the Hindu doctrines of karma and dharma gave birth to a new form of economic rationalism that places a premium on affective rational motives. For Chopra, work is an approved affective technique because every hour spent helping other people is an hour dedicated to achieving a state of spiritual bliss. Moreover, the value placed on systematic efforts to transform negative karma into products and services that help other people means that any form of displeasure that leads individuals away from their dharma is considered a threat to their upward social mobility. In this sense, we can see how the New Age idea of the dharma combined with the premium placed on blissful conduct through the commodification of karmic experiences supports a capitalist way of life.

A close up view of Burchard’s personal life and writings also brings certain features of the New Age spirit of capitalism into focus. The virtues of service and generosity are important features of this new spirit of capitalism because they combine secular values with ruthless acquisition. What is unique about the Millionaire Messenger, however, is the way Burchard draws on tenets of New Age spirituality to promote a unique form of online entrepreneurship. Both the connexionist entrepreneur of the 1990s and the advice guru of the 2000s have superior communication skills, a positive attitude, a curious mind, and an aptitude for establishing and maintaining contacts. However, in the connexionist and increasingly spiritualist world of 21st century online entrepreneurship, the advice guru is computer literate, motivated by a deeper spiritual calling to serve others, has a global presence, and knows how to generate passive income online.
In principle, the advice guru is more concerned with adding value to people’s lives than with regulating work-time: “Your pay equals the value you deliver, not the hours you work” (Burchard 2011: 30). The importance of making a difference in people’s lives was highlighted at length during a segment at Experts Academy where Burchard openly criticized *The Secret*, a bestselling self-help book written by Rhonda Byrne that is based on an earlier film of the same name. The book is premised on the “law of attraction” and claims that positive thinking can create life-changing results such as increased health, wealth, and happiness. Burchard claims the book has hypnotized North American popular culture into leading their lives by the mantra “ask and you shall receive” at the expense of considering all the hard work that goes into establishing relationships with consumers. Rather than ask a complete stranger to purchase a product or service without experiencing a “sample” of their advice, the entrepreneurial advice guru lives by the mantra “give and you shall receive” knowing their virtuous contribution to the marketplace will create affluence by triggering the law of karma. Although the virtue of industry still lingers in the new spirit of capitalism, the virtue of generosity is clearly more important for the New Age entrepreneur than the virtue of frugality was for Franklin and other 18th century entrepreneurs.

Describing the career path of the entrepreneurial advice guru as a “calling” can be viewed as a resurrection of the Protestant ethic, not as an ascetic way of life defined in terms of anxiety and thrift, but as a way of knowing one’s vocation through a process of self-discovery that yields a sense of meaning and purpose. Whereas the Protestant ethic embraces a Western philosophy of transcendence and portrays economic work as a means of serving God, the New Age ethic employs an Eastern philosophy of immanence wherein work is seen as an activity through which personal growth can be achieved. Thus, while the rational and
systematic pursuit of profit in the manner illustrated by Franklin (“time is money”) is central
to the spirit of capitalism captured in version 1.0 of Weber’s bifocals, the rational and
systematic pursuit of purpose is central to the spirit of capitalism captured in version 2.0
(“make a difference and a fortune”). Insofar as Weber’s bifocal approach suggests that the
life and writings of Baxter and Franklin offer coordinated viewpoints on rational asceticism
(self-denial), the writings of Chopra and Burchard offer coordinated viewpoints on emotional
hedonism (self-fulfillment) as a key spiritual and economic imperative that blends
instrumental and expressive human values.

While traditional Hindu yogis generally frown upon the cultivation of spiritual
powers for worldly ends, they hold an important position as indicators of progress along the
path to spiritual salvation. In the case of New Age entrepreneurs, the distinction between the
sacred work of spiritual transformation and the profane work of entrepreneurial activity is
less clear, a point which echoes Weber’s (1958b: 23) observation that “Asceticism, contemplation, works considered ritualistically pure, good works in the sense of social
accomplishment (particularly professional virtues), enthusiastic faith (bhakti), are
cumulative, alternative, or exclusive means to holy ends, according to the end sought”. Although New Age entrepreneurs are not necessarily seeking freedom from the cycle of
rebirth, they are reinventing their professional careers in search of more favourable life
circumstances. In this sense, we can see how the entrepreneurial ideal of reinvention and the
Hindu principle of reincarnation share a transitory and transformative ethos that emphasizes
personal responsibility and systematic discipline in the pursuit of spiritual and socioeconomic
goals.
Contributions, Limitations and Directions for Future Contemplation

This dissertation contributes to current debates about the changing form of capitalism in a few important ways. First, it demonstrates how the tendency to view the new spirit of capitalism as exclusively Christian in origin and outcome is a bit misguided. As I discussed in Chapter 1, a number of Hindu gurus discovered the benefits of combining business with a spiritual message and were extremely successful in importing/exporting yoga and meditation to the United States in the 1960s. In the domain of profit-making, I have argued that Deepak Chopra was among the first to transform the Hindu doctrines of karma and dharma into an economic ethic that was compatible with dominant trends within the capitalism mainstream. My research builds on Boltanski and Chiapello’s (1999) discussion of different mutations in the spirit of capitalism since the late 1800s and makes a timely contribution by extending the conversation into the 21st century. As such, it adds (spiritual) depth to the ideal-typical portrait of the connexionist entrepreneur outlined in the introductory chapter insofar as ordeals become karmic episodes, project-dependent shifts in identity become opportunities for reincarnation, and the stable personality of the entrepreneur is preserved in the self-help books and YouTube videos of the advice guru.

By tracing the historical roots of the New Age spirit of capitalism I am able to revive, update and modify Weber’s schema of the elective affinities between Protestantism and modern capitalism. Without Weber’s longer, bifocal view of historical figures and monumental texts (Kemple 2014), there is a risk of obscuring the underlying mechanisms that produce this new capitalist ethos. It would be difficult to deny that some of the critical responses to The Protestant Ethic may be to blame for how frequently analysts simply
describe the surface features of the capitalist spirit\textsuperscript{17}. According to Sprinzak (1972), these criticisms tend to fall along four lines: Weber was mistaken in supposing that Luther introduced the concept of the “calling”; Catholic religious doctrines are also favourable to the capitalist spirit; capitalist systems existed in Europe long before the Protestant Reformation; and the causal chain between Protestantism and capitalism is broken if one of the above criticisms holds true. Rather than address these criticisms, I have decided to focus on the contemporary relevance of Weber’s work and to reappraise the classical problem of how religious/spiritual ideas shape economic action. In particular, I demonstrate how the New Age ethic captured in Chopra’s late 20\textsuperscript{th} century advice provides the cultural scaffolding for the economic spirit of 21\textsuperscript{st} century capitalism that is expressed through the entrepreneurial figure of the advice guru put forward by Burchard.

My project also makes a distinct contribution to discussions about the spirit of capitalism through the idea of “interactive positioning”. In drawing attention to the co-constructed quality of the stories participants told about their career trajectories, the different ways that Burchard manages the crowd at Experts Academy, and the role of significant others in positioning New Age entrepreneurs within discourses and practices of expertise, I demonstrate how the New Age spirit of capitalism is also shaped by social interaction. This theme is present in Weber’s (2002) ethnographic account of how the spirit of modern capitalism is fortified through membership in Protestant sects, and reappears in the highly sociable characteristics of Boltanski and Chiapello’s (1999) abstract profile of the connexionist entrepreneur. My contribution is unique insofar as it addresses the ways in which social interaction can also undermine or constrain the diffusion of this new capitalist spirit, as was the case when participants expressed ambivalence towards significant others.

\textsuperscript{17} See Thrift (2005) and duGay and Morgan (2013) for examples of this trend.
who positioned them as experts and which led their entrepreneurial identities to become undone.

My research also contributes to a small but burgeoning literature that links identity formation to career transition (Ashforth 2001; Ebaugh 1988; Ibarra 1999, 2003). My research builds on several key insights that have emerged from this work, including the notion that “changing careers means redefining how we see ourselves in our professional roles, what we convey about ourselves to others, and ultimately, how we live our working lives” (Ibarra 2003: 2). It explores how people experiment with provisional selves (Ibarra 1999) and actively engage in identity work to claim, revise, and manage the boundaries of their career identities (Ashforth et al. 2000; Pratt et al. 2006). In this sense, my project can be viewed as a response to Ibarra’s (2003) call for additional research on the liminal phase of personal ‘becoming’ and contributes to this discussion by using a reflexive approach that recognizes how researchers themselves shape the (re)invention process.

While evidence exists to support the conclusions identified above, I am cognizant that this study has limitations related to its cultural and historical specificity. Because I was primarily interested in the New Age appropriation of Hindu values and beliefs, I did not explore the Western appropriation of indigenous and other non-Western spiritual beliefs and practices, nor did I consider the significance of other religious traditions such as Taoism, Buddhism, evangelical strains of American Protestantism, Catholicism or Paganism for the New Age spirit of capitalism in the United States today. More broadly, my dissertation does not address the overlapping histories of colonialism and global capitalism that provide the cultural trade routes for disseminating and combining various economic ethics and spiritual/religious worldviews.
Many of the macro-level processes instrumental to shaping the current moment (individualization, globalization) affect all countries, and yet my analysis of New Age entrepreneurship is primarily grounded in the experiences of professionals who live in post-industrial and consumer-driven economic, cultural, political, and social milieus. This discussion is therefore most relevant in the world’s developed economies since these are countries where self-help is more culturally popular. The growing popularity of Experts Academy beginning in 2008 combined with the timing of the (inter)personal crises that participants described during the interviews also raises questions about the geographical specificity of this research and the effects of the U.S. recession on (in)voluntary career change and identity.

During the analytical stages of this research, I became aware of several themes I was unable to address at this point in time, but which certainly merit future contemplation. The widespread use of the term “guru” in the United States and the recent launch of the Hindu American Foundation’s “Take Back Yoga” movement raise important questions about the cultural appropriation of Hindu scriptures, practices and beliefs in America. Previous studies tend to focus on cultural appropriation between marginalized groups and dominant groups as either imperialistic or counter-hegemonic (Anspach et al. 2007). In this case, it might be useful to frame the tendency for Americans to use the term “guru” synonymously with expertise as form of lateral appropriation wherein a high status group (experts in the USA) could be considered comparatively for how they appropriate the discursive resources of another high status group (gurus in India). A future project could likewise address the transposability of certain cultural constructs and examine how contemporary experts and gurus are legitimized in different settings.
While Burchard’s efforts to appropriate and release the bureaucratic spirit of expertise from the rigid structure of the cubical was encouraging for those who (un)willingly left their bureaucratic careers, it is unclear whether he actually believes a layperson can research, synthesize, and report results with the same level of skill as an academic. Given the emphasis on prolonged study within this community, it is not surprising that Burchard routinely draws parallels between “research experts” and academics. On the one hand, Burchard is claiming that academics have acquired research skills that are valuable and highly marketable outside the semi-autonomous sphere of academia. More importantly, however, Burchard is suggesting that laypeople without a research background have the capacity to review the existing literature, interview people about a topic, synthesize key findings, and produce a report, all of which are key components of most qualitative research projects in academia.

In light of these findings, we can see how Burchard’s extensive use of educational vocabulary – academy, teachers, learners, researchers, experts, and seminars – implies a certain elective affinity between academia and entrepreneurship (Thrift 2005). There are interesting tensions that result from merging the university and the corporation which I have not explored, but which provide interesting opportunities for future analysis. In a very clever book titled Academia Inc., for instance, Brownlee (2015) points to the casualization of academic labour, the rise of the student-consumer, the use of corporate management models, and the commercialization of academic research as evidence of how business interests and values are transforming higher education in Canada. In this case, I am suggesting that Burchard’s views on liberal education and public service in the context of online entrepreneurship present an opportunity to examine how academic interests and values are shaping the business world and would therefore address the flipside of Brownlee’s (2015) argument.
There is also enormous opportunity to explore how gender and class shape the development of entrepreneurial identities, a point which I allude to in my discussion of the different problems research participants faced prior to changing careers. Many of the stories about “falling apart” that I traced among female research participants, for example, revolved around their identities as mothers, wives and career-oriented women. Newman’s (1999) research on downward mobility among middle-class Americans echoes what many women I interviewed had to say about the impact of divorce, childcare, and workplace discrimination on their economic security. Women who aspired to become entrepreneurs were also more likely to embrace the ethic of care that underpins the advice guru’s responsibility to help other people, a finding which captures the gendered dimensions of “helping” and “serving” more generally. A closer examination of the gendered and classed dimensions of becoming an advice guru would require a larger sample of research participants, and I recognize this omission is both a limitation and a direction for future consideration.

There are also important distinctions to draw between aspiring entrepreneurs who are voluntarily changing careers and those who are involuntarily changing careers. Following job loss, for instance, career transition entails finding alternatives to a self that is no longer ‘viable’ and unemployment is often experienced as liminality (Newman 1999). In other words, involuntary transition often begins as a change by subtraction rather than a change by addition (Albert 1992), a point well encapsulated in the stories of struggle presented in Chapter 2. It might be useful to explore the reasons why participants did not consider alternative career paths to becoming advice gurus. Although the stigma associated with job loss or business failure may limit the number of alternatives research participants have
considered (see Ashforth 2001), this stigma may have also created more time for them to consider different alternatives and had the effect of directing them into other lines of work.

Some of the themes I found the most surprising could also be framed within a broader discussion of the neoliberal market-based philosophy that characterizes the current era. Whereas classical liberalism makes exchange the general matrix of society and naturalizes the market as an autonomous system with its own interest, rationality and efficiency, neoliberalism fosters competition by extending the scope of economics to virtually every realm of social life (Dilts 2011). That entrepreneurs are advised to commodify their karma is just one example of how the (ir)rationalities of the New Age ethic are submitted to an economic rationality through discourses and practices of supply and demand. What I find particularly fascinating is that when New Age entrepreneurs invoke the notion of a self-regulating system through the idea of karma, they are implicitly re-spiritualizing and rendering literal the metaphor of the “invisible hand” that Adam Smith used describe how rational self-interest in a free-market economy leads to economic wellbeing for everyone.

Although this argument is rather broad-brush at this stage, I think this classical understanding of a naturally harmonious order in the marketplace is being redeployed through the New Age work ethic insofar as the commodification of individual karma proceeds on the assumption that both the marketplace and the cosmos have a naturally harmonious order that converges perfectly when the New Age entrepreneur fulfills their spiritual calling to help others. Most commentators seem to agree that Foucault’s (2008) work on the economic subject of neoliberalism as an “entrepreneur of himself [sic]” offers a precise description of how neoliberalism encourages the virtues of competitiveness and individual responsibility. While this genealogical approach to entrepreneurial selfhood allows
Foucault to think differently about the question of governmental rationality, I am more interested in mapping how classical and neoliberal ideas of *homo economicus* are conjoined and expressed through the New Age entrepreneur.

Like Weber, I do not spend very much time analyzing the institutional pre-requisites for 21st century entrepreneurialism, though I should note that without the World Wide Web, Google, Facebook, YouTube, PayPal and other online technologies, it is unlikely that the advice guru would materialize. Whereas older generations of self-help gurus relied primarily on books, smaller intimate gatherings and large public lectures to distribute their advice, the newer generation of gurus rely on multiple distribution channels including books, ebooks, teleseminars, webinars, audio programs, DVDs, membership sites, live seminars, speeches, masterminds, individual coaching, certification programs, and online courses. Because the “capitalist side” (Marshall 1980: 420) of the argument remains virtually unexplored, there is ample opportunity to trace the economic logic that underpins online entrepreneurship as it relates to my brief discussion of network capital.

Internet marketers, for instance, rely on a similar approach to selling “knowledge commodities” online as direct selling organizations that sell makeup, Tupperware, and household cleaning products (Biggart 1989). Both rely on a business model that generates residual income (such as royalties, for example), though online entrepreneurs can automate their businesses using various free and/or inexpensive online technologies whereas network marketing distributors rely on extensive networks of people underneath them to sell products from which they eventually take a cut. These residual income streams allow entrepreneurs to amass substantial wealth with little to no additional involvement beyond the initial effort it takes to produce knowledge commodities which generate this type of revenue (e.g. videos, e-
books, webinars, and interviews). To this end, I could draw on Marx’s (1996) famous general formula for capital and trace the reticulated circuits of money (M) and commodities (C) that constitute the C-M-C and M-C-M formulas which online entrepreneurs use to produce and distribute spiritual/knowledge goods.

**Final Remarks: Teaching as a Vocation**

The idea of the calling was central to Weber’s entire project from *The Protestant Ethic* in 1904 through to his famous lectures on science and politics in 1917 and 1919. In a sense, ‘Science as a Vocation’ can be read as a muted reply to the despairing question: “How do we restore meaning to a disenchanted and bureaucratically ruled social system?”, a question which Weber alludes to explicitly in the concluding passages of *The Protestant Ethic*. Within academia, Weber (1958d) maintains that meaning cannot be derived from the pursuit of lasting intellectual impact; but rather, through a sense of duty and devotion to the task at hand. In 2013, one of my online students ignited this sense of duty and devotion with a simple but profound question. “How did you know teaching was your calling?” he asked in reference to the videos I had created for an online section of Introduction to Criminal Justice I was teaching at the University of Winnipeg (Figure 10).

![Figure 10 – Teaching Online](image-url)
After nearly 12 months of looking for permanent employment in academia without success and of doing freelance work as a curriculum design specialist for a textbook company based in New York City, this acknowledgement of my devotion to creating innovative teaching materials using what I learned about internet marketing at Experts Academy came as a blessing. In the midst of feeling disillusioned by my job prospects in academia, it reminded me that the advice guru is not unlike the devout teaching professor who aims to inspire, instruct and entertain. Whereas the calling of ascetic Protestantism promises eternal grace and the bureaucrat’s vocation offers security, the academic calling of the teaching professor is a life-long project that yields some semblance of spiritual peace.
References


Appendix A

Network of Participant Recruitment
## Appendix B

### General Characteristics of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Candace</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>$80,000-$89,999</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ida</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>$100,000-$124,999</td>
<td>Married</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
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<td>College</td>
<td>Kinesiology</td>
<td>$175,000 +</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
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<td>Environmentalism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Occupational Therapy</td>
<td>$10,000-$19,999</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
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<td>University</td>
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<td>Refusal</td>
<td>Refusal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Law</td>
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<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>$175,000 +</td>
<td>Single</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suzanne</td>
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<td>Married</td>
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<td>45</td>
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<td>Human Resources</td>
<td>$100,000-$124,999</td>
<td>Married</td>
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<tr>
<td>Signy</td>
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<td>Speech Therapy</td>
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<td>IT/Management</td>
<td>Refusal</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eli</td>
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<td>Business/Law</td>
<td>$175,000 +</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
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<td>University</td>
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<td>Relationship</td>
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<tr>
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<td>PhD</td>
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<td>Common Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shauna</td>
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<td>University</td>
<td>History/Politics</td>
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<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annette</td>
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<td>College</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>$60,000-$69,999</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robyn</td>
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<td>Business</td>
<td>$60,000-$69,999</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
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<td>University</td>
<td>Graphic Design</td>
<td>$30,000-$39,999</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leanne</td>
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<td>University</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>Refusal</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madeline</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>$20,000-$29,999</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>$125,000-$149,999</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>$5,000-$9,999</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>$50,000-$59,999</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Refusal</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carson</td>
<td>Refusal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baljit</td>
<td>Refusal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meghan</td>
<td>Refusal</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Consent Form

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Fax: 604-822-6161
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CONSENT FORM

A Sociological Study of Advice Experts

Principal Investigator: Dr. Thomas Kemple, Associate Professor of Sociology, (XXX) XXX-XXXX
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Co-Investigators: Caitlin Forsey, Graduate Student, (XXX) XXX-XXXX
XXXX@interchange.ubc.ca

Dr. Dawn Currie, Professor of Sociology, (XXX) XXX-XXXX
XXXX@mail.ubc.ca

Dr. Amy Hanser, Associate Professor of Sociology, (XXX) XXX-XXXX
XXXX@mail.ubc.ca

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore how people reinvent their careers as advice experts. This study will be submitted as a doctoral dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Caitlin Forsey’s PhD in Sociology. You are being invited to participate in this study because you have attended Experts Academy.

Procedures: Participation in this study involves one interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be tape recorded, transcribed and later analyzed for themes. The interview will be conducted in a setting that is mutually agreeable to the participant and the researcher. Questions regarding the procedures may be directed to any member of the research team.

Benefits/Risks: Anticipated benefits of participating include the opportunity to discuss your experiences without judgment and the chance to contribute to the scarce body of sociological
literature on the advice industry. Minimal to no risk of discomfort is anticipated from your participation in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The information gathered during this study will remain strictly confidential. Tapes and documents will be identified by a code and will be kept in a secure filing cabinet. Your biographical data will be stored separately from your interview tapes and transcripts in a secure filing cabinet in order to maintain confidentiality. Although the interview transcripts will be kept on the co-investigator’s computer, they will be password-protected. The tapes will be destroyed following the completion of the study.

**Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects:** If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may also contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or by e-mail at rsil@ors.ubc.ca.

**Consent:** You are reminded that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

Your signature below indicates that you: 1) understand the goals of this study; 2) consent to being tape recorded; 3) have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

**Please Check One:**

☐ I have read the above and **CONSENT** to participating in this study and having the interview tape recorded.

☐ I have read the above and **DO NOT CONSENT** to participating in this study.

________________________________________  __________________________
Subject Signature                  Date

________________________________________
Printed Name of Subject Signing Above
Appendix D

Interview Guide

Today we’ll be talking about your career history, your experience at Experts Academy, and your transition towards becoming an advice expert. I just want to remind you that you are not obligated to answer any questions and that you can stop the interview at any time.

I – Career Biography

1) What is your current occupation?
2) How long have you worked as a ____________?
3) Do you work full-time or part-time?
4) Do you have an area of specialization?
5) What does a typical work day look like for you?
6) Tell me the story of how you became a ____________
7) Did your educational background factor into that decision?
8) Have you changed your career path along the way?
9) Tell me about some key transition periods.
10) Who were the most influential people throughout this process?
11) Apart from changes in your career, have you made other big changes in your life?

II – Advice Texts

1) Tell me the story of how you first started reading self-help literature.
2) What was happening in your life at that point?
3) Was ____________ helpful? Why or Why not?
4) How did you obtain a copy of The Millionaire Messenger?
5) What parts of the book did you find useful?
6) What parts of the book were less useful?
7) How did you use the book to develop your expert business?
   i) Did you keep a journal?
   ii) Did you keep notes?
   iii) Did you respond to the questions/Expert signposts?
8) How did you hear about Experts Academy?
9) At what point did you decide to purchase the program?
10) What factored into that decision?
11) With whom did you attend?
12) Were your friends and family supportive of your decision to attend? Why or Why not?
13) How does it compare to other advice programs you have used?
14) Can you describe a particularly good moment at the live seminar? How about a bad moment?
15) What strategies have you implemented since attending Experts Academy?
16) Would you recommend Experts Academy to other aspiring entrepreneurs? Why or Why not?
III – Becoming an Advice Guru

1) Tell me the story of how you decided to become an entrepreneur in the advice industry.
2) Under what circumstances would you leave your current career to pursue this work full-time?
3) How does positioning yourself as an expert in the advice industry complicate or add to the type of work you currently do?
4) What knowledge and skills do you bring to the advice industry?
5) What distinguishes experts from non-experts?
6) What would it take for you to become the leading advice expert in your field?
7) What barriers have you encountered?
8) Tell me about the products and services that you are developing/have to offer.
9) Can you walk me through the production of ____________ (product)?
10) Did you outsource any of the work?
11) How do you measure the success of your business?
12) How has Experts Academy contributed positively/negatively to your business?
13) What changes have you noticed in yourself since attending Experts Academy?
14) What changes do you think others have noticed in you since attending Experts Academy?
15) Can you describe some of the emotional highs and lows you have experienced during your journey towards becoming an advice expert?
16) Do you feel you have a higher calling? If yes, what is it?
17) How did you come to discover your higher calling?
18) How does entrepreneurship help you fulfill your higher calling?
19) How do you define “New Age” spirituality? How is it different from organized religion?

IV – Wrapping Up

1) What advice would you offer someone who was thinking of attending Experts Academy?
2) Are you planning to join the Experts Industry Association? Why or Why not?
3) How many people did you meet at Experts Academy?
4) Have you been in touch? How did you obtain their contact information?
5) Have any business opportunities resulted from attending Experts Academy?
6) Will you purchase other programs offered by Brendon Burchard?
7) Where do you see yourself in 5 years from now? How about 10 years?
8) Is there anything you would like to add that we haven’t covered in the interview?

Thank you very much for your time.
Appendix E

Biographical Questionnaire

Instructions: The following questions are intended to provide some background information about you. Please answer the questions as accurately as possible. If you require clarification, please do not hesitate to ask the researcher.

1. How old are you? ________________ (Years)

2. Where were you born? ________________

3. Where do you currently live? ________________

4. How long have you lived there? ________________ (Years)

5. How would you describe your racial/ethnic background? ________________

6. How would you describe your religious/spiritual background? ________________

7. What is your marital status?
   a. Married
   b. Common law
   c. Single (never married)
   d. In a relationship, but not living together
   e. Separated
   f. Divorced
   g. Widowed

8. How many children do you have? ______

9. How many children are living at home? ______

10. What are their ages? ________________

11. What is YOUR highest level of education?
   a. Part of primary school
   b. Completed primary school
   c. Part of high school
   d. Completed high school
   e. Some college Major: ________________
   f. College diploma Major: ________________
   g. Some university Major: ________________
   h. University degree Major: ________________
   i. Other (please specify) ________________
11. What is your MOTHER’S highest level of education?
   a. Part of primary school
   b. Completed primary school
   c. Part of high school
   d. Completed high school
   e. Some college  
      Major:________________________
   f. College diploma  
      Major:________________________
   g. Some university  
      Major:________________________
   h. University degree  
      Major:________________________
   i. Other (please specify)________________________

12. What is your MOTHER’S current occupation? If your mother is a homemaker or student please state this. If your mother is retired or unemployed, please state this and list your mother’s former occupation.
   ____________________________________________ (Occupation)

13. What is your FATHER’S highest level of education?
   a. Part of primary school
   b. Completed primary school
   c. Part of high school
   d. Completed high school
   e. Some college  
      Major:________________________
   f. College diploma  
      Major:________________________
   g. Some university  
      Major:________________________
   h. University degree  
      Major:________________________
   i. Other (please specify)________________________

14. What is your FATHER’S current occupation? If your father is a homemaker or student please state this. If your father is retired or unemployed, please state this and list your father’s former occupation.
   ____________________________________________ (Occupation)
15. Please select the category that gives the best estimate of YOUR PERSONAL income from all sources before taxes for 2011-2012.

   a. No personal income
   b. Under $5,000
   c. $5,000 to $9,999
   d. $10,000 to $19,999
   e. $20,000 to $29,999
   f. $30,000 to $39,999
   g. $40,000 to $49,999
   h. $50,000 to $59,999
   i) $60,000 to $69,999
   j) $70,000 to $79,999
   k) $80,000 to $89,999
   l) $90,000 to $99,999
   m) $100,000 to $124,999
   n) $125,000 to $149,999
   o) $150,000 to $174,999
   p) $175,000 and above

16. Please select the category that gives the best estimate of YOUR TOTAL HOUSEHOLD income from all sources before taxes for 2011-2012.

   a. No personal income
   b. Under $5,000
   c. $5,000 to $9,999
   d. $10,000 to $19,999
   e. $20,000 to $29,999
   f. $30,000 to $39,999
   g. $40,000 to $49,999
   h. $50,000 to $59,999
   i) $60,000 to $69,999
   j) $70,000 to $79,999
   k) $80,000 to $89,999
   l) $90,000 to $99,999
   m) $100,000 to $124,999
   n) $125,000 to $149,999
   o) $150,000 to $174,999
   p) $175,000 and above

16. Please list any other “self-help” programs you are currently using:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Thank you very much for your participation. If you have any additional comments to make about any items on this questionnaire please write them in the space provided below.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

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