



The New York Times

Seeing Yourself in Their Light

by Allen Salkin | The New York Times
September 21, 2009



Four years ago, noon would have found Gabrielle Bernstein on her way to lunch at the Soho House with a potential client of the public relations agency she co-owned. By night, she was throwing back Patrón tequila at Cielo, the Coral Room or another of the downtown clubs she represented.

Her occupation has changed. Last Tuesday at noon, Ms. Bernstein, 29, was perched on a meditation blanket in a yoga studio on West 13th Street, easing into 45 minutes of silent contemplation.

That night in her apartment in Greenwich Village, she anointed her hands in fragrant oil and, using a mixture of phrases gleaned from self-help books, meditation exercises and inspirational music, led seven young women seated on saffron and red pillows through nearly two hours of spiritual life-coaching.

"Hang out in the light," she told the women, all in their 20s and early 30s, quoting from her forthcoming book, "Add More -ing to Your Life." "Take action once a day to do something that ignites your life."



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You could call Ms. Bernstein, who no longer eats red meat or drinks, a life coach, meditation guide or New Age therapist. But the clients who pay \$180 for four weekly sessions are more likely to call her guru.

"A lot of women look up to her," said Jennifer Fragleasso, 31, who joined Ms. Bernstein's group in January. "We need this guidance and we are searching for this guidance."

A decade ago, young women like Ms. Bernstein might have been expected to chase the lifestyle of high-heels and pink drinks at rooftop bars of the meatpacking district. But now there is a new role model for New York's former Carrie Bradshaws — young women who are vegetarian, well versed in self-help and New Age spirituality, and who are finding a way to make a living preaching to eager audiences, mostly female.

Ms. Bernstein is one of a circle of such figures, influenced less by the oeuvre of Candace Bushnell than that of Marianne Williamson, the spiritual lecturer who wrote "A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of 'A Course in Miracles,'" and by other books of pop self-actualization like "The Secret," "Eat, Pray, Love" and even "Skinny Bitch.

One of the most prominent is Kris Carr, a former actress who a month after appearing in two beer commercials during the Super Bowl in 2003 was found to have cancer in her liver and lungs. She went on a voyage of self-transformation that she chronicled in a documentary, "Crazy Sexy Cancer," which aired on TLC in 2007, and was followed by two books.

Her Web site, Crazy Sexy Life, has become a nexus for women who identify themselves as leaders of a new generation of self-empowerment. Bloggers for the site include Rory Freedman, an author of the "Skinny Bitch" diet guides; Ms. Bernstein; and Mallika Chopra, a parenting author whose father is Deepak Chopra.

"We are encouraging people to eat right, to exercise, to tap into their spirituality, to start listening to themselves, and to do it in a way that's bold and resonates," Ms. Carr, 38, said by phone from her home in Woodstock, N.Y.



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The last few weeks in Ms. Carr's life demonstrate her newfound stature. She celebrated her birthday and wedding anniversary in New Mexico before heading to San Francisco to speak with magazine editors at VegNews. Then it was on to Los Angeles for meetings about a television show she is developing. She ended the trip in Boston, where she gave the keynote address at a conference of the Association of Physicians Assistants in Oncology.

Other self-styled young gurus focus less on diet and more on spirituality. Before she began counseling other women, Jennifer Macaluso-Gilmore was a hand and foot model with alcohol, financial and relationship problems. After three people close to her, including her mother, died within months of one another in 1999, she wrote a one-woman show about coping, "Making the Best of It," which attracted strong reviews. Her career picked up, she gave up drinking, and she married a man she had previously been keeping at a distance.

Soon friends were asking how she managed to turn her life around. She offered advice from some of the "600 self-help books" she said she has read. She decided to organize a class at her apartment. "Three friends showed up," Ms. Macaluso-Gilmore said. "And a week later there were nine women, and seven years later I have seen over 700."

She charges \$100 an hour for private sessions. The core of her message, she said, is, "When you step out into the unknown anything is possible in your life."

Ms. Macaluso-Gilmore's meeting space in Midtown is decorated with framed collages of thank-you letters from women who have attended her sessions. "Some of them call me an oracle," said Ms. Macaluso-Gilmore, 36. "Some call me a guru. But I'm just a girl like anyone else."

The new wave offered up a few playful names for themselves — "the Charlie's Angels of Wellness," "Spiritual Cowgirls" and "Spiritual Superheroines." It's clear they are proffering guidance at a time when urban women like themselves are eager for it. Thomas Amelio, managing director of the New York Open Center, which has offered classes on self-transformation for 25 years, said that he has noticed far more women in their early and mid-20s signing up for classes on meditation, shamanism and Ayurvedic healing than ever before. Many started with yoga but have moved on. "They are looking for something that is functional and practical that makes life easier to deal with," he said.



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Some more established self-help and spiritualist leaders are skeptical of the Spiritual Cowgirls. Esther Hicks, who co-wrote a series of books explaining “the law of attraction” said she is dubious of those who preach a hodge-podge of philosophies.

“When they mix what we’re teaching with other stuff that doesn’t work, people get confused,” Ms. Hicks said.

Patrick Williams, the founder of the Institute for Life Coach Training, which certifies life coaches, said untrained coaches probably won’t cause any harm, but they may not do much good.

“A good coach has learned to elicit a client’s best thinking and to have the client say what they haven’t said, dream what they have not dreamed, think what they have not thought about,” Mr. Williams said. “You ask more questions than you give answers.”

But the adherents of these young female gurus continue to swear by — and even emulate — them.

Ilana Arazie, who used to produce a video blog about her dating life, Downtown Diary, discontinued it after becoming a client of Ms. Macaluso-Gilmore. She is preparing to start a new blog, Downtown Dharma, about spiritual pursuits in Manhattan. “You don’t want to be stuck in that role of being the single girl,” Ms. Arazie, 34, said. “You need to look at your life as holistic.”

Sera Beak, 33, the author of “The Red Book: A Deliciously Unorthodox Approach to Igniting Your Divine Spark,” is working on a documentary about women like herself. “We like to have a relationship and a career, but we know this internal search is a priority, too,” she said. “It’s one of the most important things you can do as young woman. You don’t have to wait until you are middle aged.”

Her pitch line for the film — “ ‘The Secret’ meets Buffy the Vampire Slayer in a dark alley, naked” — has attracted notable figures to be interviewed, including Tom Robbins, the author of “Even Cowgirls Get the Blues.”

And Meggan Watterson, 34, a former teacher of world religion at the private Collegiate School for Boys in Manhattan, is using \$11,000 she has raised from the Sister Fund, a women’s foundation, and others to start an annual conference. She said she wants to bring together women like Ms. Carr, Ms. Beak and others active in the Sikh and Muslim faiths. “We want to hear the stories of how young women experience and name the divine,” the conference Web site proclaims.



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At Ms. Bernstein's session on Tuesday night, a 27-year-old client shared her fears about having her boyfriend move in with her in the coming days. "I'm afraid that him being in my space won't make us be friends anymore," she said.

Ms. Bernstein suggested an exercise in which the woman write her ideal version of the story of her boyfriend moving in, something along the lines of: "It's really lovely. He shows up. There's tons of love. The move is effortless. There's plenty of space for all his things."

"Write the story the way you want it to happen," Ms. Bernstein said. "Re-read the story every night until he arrives."

To the skeptical, this visualizing a future one hopes to make manifest is reminiscent of the simplistic power-of-positive thinking movement that began in the 19th century, part of what is called "New Thought," and which was repackaged in recent years by the best-seller "The Secret."

And yet, there is something worth noting about Ms. Bernstein's vision board, a large bulletin board that runs nearly the length of her living room. It includes news clippings, journal entries and photographs that represent her and her clients' wishes for the future.

"There is an amazing man out there for me," someone has written. There is a postcard of Dora the Explorer. And there is a cut-out banner of the Sunday Styles section of The New York Times.

Asked about it, Ms. Bernstein said she had put it up three years ago.

"I've been manifesting this story," she explained.