

# If It Looks Like a Cult

by [Crystal Baik](#)

Music blasting, strobe lights flashing, frenzied crowd cheering – he runs onstage, a hulking figure at 6' 7", and right on cue, as the cheers grow louder, sings: "Life will *never* be the same." His deep, husky voice resonates from the speakers, and he resumes clapping and hyping the crowd as the camera pans to capture the fevered energy pulsing through the room (*I Am Not Your Guru* 12:07-13:37). A Tony Robbins seminar has begun.

Tony Robbins is a motivational speaker, life coach, author, and philanthropist. He has molded an empire out of hope, with remarkable business savvy. Robbins' list of private clients includes former President Bill Clinton and tennis record-breaker Serena Williams (Felson; Mulpeter). Robbins also hosts a variety of seminars, one of which – "Date with Destiny" – is the focal point of the 2016 Netflix documentary *Tony Robbins: I Am Not Your Guru*. Tickets range in price from \$650 for general admission to \$2,995 and above for VIPs ("How Much Does it Cost"). The intense, passionate environment is a trademark of Robbins' seminars, which specialize in themes ranging from money management to healthy living. According to his official website, these seminars, audiobooks, and books are driven by Tony Robbins' core philosophy of personal power: "Each of us has everything we need to succeed within ourselves if we can only learn to access and maximize it" ("Tony Robbins Quotes").

In *I Am Not Your Guru*, Robbins attributes the suffering he endured as a child as the fuel stoking his internal fire to prevent the suffering of others. "It's my obsession," he declares. "It's an obsession to break through, it's an obsession to help. I'm addicted to it. It makes me feel like my life has deep meaning, not just surface meaning. Everybody's got their thing, and this is my thing" (*I Am Not Your Guru* 1:04:24-1:05:19). Robbins characterizes his passion in terms of a desire to help others. But considering the lucrative empire, celebrity status, and devoted following he's also built over the past few decades, could his "thing" be as uncomplicated as he claims?

The desire to help others achieve their potential or become enlightened lies at the heart of many forums for personal development, be they secular or religious. Self-help experts like Tom Bilyeu, whose podcast is called *Impact Theory*, and Mel Robbins, another bestselling author and motivational speaker, profess this desire, as did twentieth-century religious figures like Billy Graham, who advised American

presidents from Harry S. Truman to Barack Obama. Like Graham used to do, many motivational speakers still travel around preaching to large crowds in the tradition of nineteenth-century American evangelists. Understanding the revivalist history that all these figures are part of helps to situate them, and particularly to reveal the complicated relationship between spirituality and commerce in Robbins' unique brand of self-empowerment.

Nineteenth-century America gave rise to many reform societies, where religion and reform were conjoined in a wave called the Benevolent Empire ("Religion and Reform"). Preachers espoused various views of Christianity, but these outlooks shared a common impetus to spark social reform. For instance, the radical revivalist Charles Grandison Finney endorsed the "perfectionism" movement and "encouraged his converted followers to join reform movements and create God's kingdom on earth" ("Religion and Reform"). The idea of "disinterested benevolence," as well as preachers' advocacy of postmillennialism, spurred followers towards social reform work. From pushing postmillennialism, which foretold that "it was the duty of converted Christians to improve the world around them in order to pave the way for Christ's redeeming return," to organizing the American Temperance Society "to help spread the crusade [of temperance] nationally," nineteenth-century religious leaders molded their religion to fulfill their social reform agendas ("Religion and Reform"). In fact, although "ideological and theological issues [ . . . ] divided Protestants into more and more sects, church leaders often worked on an interdenominational basis to establish benevolent societies and draw their followers into the work of social reform" ("Religion and Reform"). As they consistently influenced churchgoers to embrace secular reform agendas as part of the church's mission, religious leaders blurred the line between preaching the word of God and advancing their own ideology of salvation.

Perhaps it was the thought of being saved that first drew me to Tony Robbins in my sophomore year of high school, as I transitioned from a foundationless tween to the semblance of a person. Confused and empty, I chased after everyone and everything, searching for someone from the outside world who would fill my void. I was failing academically, and I slept every moment I could to escape the weight on my chest. I was lonely, anxious, desperate for a lifeboat, something to help me feel grounded. I suppose my mind was ready for planting, and Tony Robbins' audio clips gifted me with seeds that flourished into roots that ground me even now. He revolutionized the way I saw the world at sixteen, showing me that I had to be my own lifeboat, and initiating my journey into deep introspection. The Robbins quotes that I taped onto my bathroom mirror were my Bible.

As I sought answers from Robbins, I simultaneously threw myself into Christianity. Looking back, I see that religion and self-help offered me similar promises, and similar complications. Both traveling preachers and self-help speakers may genuinely believe

their agendas line up with society's best interests: achieving greater social harmony and, particularly for Robbins, helping individuals tap their innermost potential. Yet often their professed ideas become mixed up with their own desires. Robbins has capitalized on his desire to help people by amassing a great personal fortune. Religious figures like Graham built up large followings and encouraged an almost cult-like devotion to their person as well as their teachings.

The term 'cult' has been used to describe everything from beauty websites like "Cult Beauty" to sex cults like Angel's Landing, whose leader is serving life in prison for murder, rape, and aggravated assault (Choiniere). Self-help organizations can fall into this category too, with New York State's NXIVM a prominent recent example. In an article for *Business Insider*, Rachel Gillett argues that NXIVM (pronounced 'Nexium'), while purporting to be a center for personal and professional development, contained the classic elements of a cult: "a charismatic leader . . . [.] brainwashing . . . [ and the] economic, sexual, and other exploitation of group members by the leader and the ruling coterie" (Gillett). Keith Raniere, who founded NXIVM in 1998, developed a technique he termed "Rational Inquiry," which forensic psychiatrist John Hochman called in his 2003 evaluation of the organization "a form of expensive mind-control 'aimed at breaking down his subjects psychologically'" (Hochman qtd. in Kranc). The charismatic Raniere charged exorbitantly high program fees, with a price tag of \$2,700 alone for his first Executive Success Program course. NXIVM also had a secret, exclusive all-female organization called Dominus Obsequious Sororium, which roughly translates from Latin to "lord over obedient female companions" (Kranc). This society included practices like physical branding, regular use of words like "master" and "slave," and sex trafficking (Kranc).

Bikram Choudhury, the founder of Bikram Yoga, a style of hot yoga, and eventual owner of about 650 yoga studios spanning three continents, also ran a program that contained malicious cult-like characteristics similar to NXIVM's (Rushe). Choudhury, who regularly integrated profanity into his teaching vocabulary, as well as expressing racist, homophobic, and antisemitic sentiments, could often be seen at the front of the class in nothing but Speedos, shouting or gesturing in ways one might now consider inappropriate but which at that time fueled his students' reverence for him (Godwin). Micki Jafa-Bodden, Choudhury's former legal advisor, recalls to *The Guardian* the shameless way Choudhury spoke. Jafa-Bodden remembers one instance where she told him he couldn't lead trainees into his bedroom. In response, he mocked her to the class: "He stood up on his podium and said: 'My lawyer tells me I can't have a girl in my room. So I'm now going to have two!'" (Choudhury qtd. in Godwin). Photos depict Choudhury standing or sitting on top of female students in his Speedo as they stretch in order to 'help them' (Larson). In his book on Choudhury titled *Hell Bent*, Benjamin Lorr likens Choudhury's gift for drawing people in despite his controversial actions to an even more divisive figure: "Choudhury's ridiculousness only added to his charisma. . . . 'You see it with Donald Trump, too – it's this unscripted responsiveness. . . . Bikram has

an incredible ability to zoom in on specific people, combined with an ability to act as if he's being true to himself" (Lorr qtd. in Godwin). Choudhury, too, was eventually accused of sexual assault and rape.

Both NXIVM's Raniere and Bikram Choudhury created organizations that were personality-driven and made it difficult for followers to leave. Promising personal growth and fulfillment, they instituted harsh practices and charged a premium for their 'products.' In the 2019 Netflix documentary *Bikram: Yogi, Guru, Predator*, former followers reveal the ideas Choudhury had deluded them into believing: "He was a teacher that was going to make me perfect . . . He saw potential in you that you might not see" (00:05:50). These organizations preached that their leaders' eccentricities were integral to their effectiveness and that participants needed to feel intense discomfort in order to grow, which licensed the blurring of boundaries and the exploitation that occurred. Sarah Edmondson, a former NXIVM member, recalls buying "into the principle on which much of the cult life is based: If you feel uncomfortable or want to bolt, that's good news – that means it's working" (Shea).

All of this leads me back to Tony Robbins. Is he a modern-day version of a nineteenth-century traveling preacher, or a cult leader? Robbins' empire has features that blur the two, for which he has received criticism. He has been known to use strong language, a tactic he openly discusses: "I use language in a very direct way. In every culture, there are taboo words. And when you use them, you're able to interrupt the noise in people's heads. I want to provoke people back into the reality of this moment. That's how they change" (*I Am Not Your Guru* 36:05-36:22). Notwithstanding Robbins' justification, however, *BuzzFeed News* has reported on several troubling instances of Robbins employing this tactic.

In December 2018 at a Palm Beach "Date With Destiny" seminar, while responding to a woman's revelation that her husband had emotionally abused her, Robbins said, "What the fuck is emotional abuse? Are we that fucking weak that someone can't tell you with passion what they fucking feel without them abusing you? . . . We've not heard one thing in the last twelve minutes about his needs. And we're already characterizing it as emotional violence. There's no fucking thing" (Robbins qtd. in Bradley and Baker). Robbins later goes on to ask, "Has he looked out for you, does he put up with you when you've been a crazy bitch? Have you ever been a crazy bitch? Ever?" (Robbins qtd. in Bradley and Baker). Robbins' actions can be read as aligning with his stated desire to break through the patterns that make people feel powerless with shocking language in order to help them change their mindsets. In fact, this woman "later published an account thanking Robbins for his teachings [and said] [ . . . ] the experience helped her discover her own agency and sever ties with her husband for good" (Bradley and Baker). However, when domestic violence experts read over this transcript, they express concerns about Robbins' method . Commenting on other

instances, Leigh Goodmark, a professor and director of the Gender Violence Clinic at the University of Maryland Carey School of Law, goes further, arguing that “In some ways, the dynamics of Robbins’ relationships with the women in these workshops is essentially the same as the dynamics of the abuse that may have brought them to him in the first place” (Goodmark qtd. in Bradley and Baker).

After reading over these accounts, I feel conflicted. Just as the eccentric environments of Bikram yoga and NXIVM attracted their respective followers, Robbins’ atypical methods may be exactly what keeps people coming back for more. Like Choudhury’s genuine yoga knowledge, Robbins’ intimate understanding of the human psyche is clear; it’s evident from his live interactions with seminar attendees, prominent clientele, and growing empire that he wields an effective expertise. I also agree with Robbins that people tend to fall into disempowering thought patterns, and I don’t doubt that, among his seminar attendees, there are many people who believe they had exhausted every other resource and who leave feeling that Robbins has been uniquely effective. Also, I agree that growth is impossible without discomfort. But when I read about his use of the inappropriate and taboo, I start to see red flags. Then, the more I contemplate the connection between discomfort and personal growth, the less I understand the line between meaningful guidance and the abuse of power, eccentricity and exploitation.

Even more serious than Robbins’ verbal techniques are the sexual assault allegations against him. A former member of Robbins’ organization who went from volunteer to employee spoke to *BuzzFeed News* (under the alias Marie) about her experience of recurrent sexual harassment from Robbins (Bradley and Baker). Her story is not unique: others recall the various suspicious ways in which Robbins would interact with female employees and attendees. Yet Marie recalls not being able to “tear herself away from Robbins’ world—a common theme among people who said they had experienced behavior that crossed a line but continued to work with him for years” (Bradley and Baker). According to Marie, Robbins’ message “saved my life,” and she stayed in his organization because she wanted to be a part of that change for others (Marie qtd. in Bradley and Baker). Hence, another similarity emerges: the followers of Robbins, Bikram, and NXIVM all have difficulty leaving the organizations. Marie may have stayed because of her beliefs, and not under threat; nonetheless, she recalls feeling like she had been “ostracized by many of the people she was close with in Robbins’ orbit [and like she had been] ‘disfellowshipped from a religion’” afterward (Marie qtd. in Bradley and Baker).

Unlike Marie, my flirtation with Tony Robbins has been exactly that: a not-too-serious flirtation. I was a high-school sophomore living at home without a thousand-dollar budget for self-help seminars; thus, my dive into Robbins’ world wasn’t too deep. If I had had the money, I might have thrown it down at my first chance. However, I got what I needed from Robbins’ free audio recordings on YouTube, learned about

reorienting my life toward self-empowerment, and left the rest behind. Even now, although I see how Robbins' empire borders on the realm of a cult, I wouldn't completely disregard him as an option for self-discovery. I've never considered the self-help world in a totally negative light, and I still don't, even after writing this essay. But in a world where people are constantly searching for *more* – more meaning, more depth, more passion, I can see how easy it would be to fall prey to someone wishing to take advantage of – and even criminally exploit – people who are desperately in need of help.

Currently, there is no guarantee of protection or redress for such exploitation. The law has struggled to define the boundaries between a consensual personal or professional relationship and entrapment or abuse. Since no legislation explicitly prohibits or regulates cults, people can seek legal protection only when the organizations cross the lines of existing criminal or civil law (Boyle-Laisure 27). One bill currently pending in the New Jersey Senate – the Predatory Alienation Prevention and Consensual Response Act – concentrates on the definition of “predatory alienation” to address this lack (Boyle-Laisure 39). The bill comes as a response to a “groundbreaking report [that] included policy recommendations on addressing the manipulative tactics that [...] individuals and groups use to isolate, control, and exploit people of all ages,” and defines predatory alienation as “whenever a person or group uses predatory behaviors, such as entrapment, coercion, and undue influence, to establish a relationship with a victim and isolate the victim from existing relationships and support systems [...] with the goal of gaining and retaining sweeping control over the victim's actions and decisions” (Boyle-Laisure 39). If such legislation becomes a model for a larger legal movement to prohibit predatory behavior by cult-like organizations and support their victims, we may find Tony Robbins' methods falling under the definition of predatory alienation, and breaking the law.

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