

THE TIMES

SATURDAY, JULY 15, 2000

the times magazine

the story of our lives

by Vanora Bennett

Is it a cult? Landmark Education, which organises self-help seminars, says it is not. But a few of the 180 people beginning their Landmark Forum weekend course in a completely white hall in central London could not overcome the worry that their minds were about to be tampered with. "I know what you've heard: 'Landmark: one of those happy-clappy things'," scoffed David Sherman, the compact, sleek course leader. He smiled, and

in the room knew quite what to expect. Most participants had been persuaded to come along by a friend (or lover, or colleague, or spouse) who had done the same three-day course earlier and found it made their life better. But the language of Landmark is so full of jargon that the previous graduates had been unable to explain in ordinary words exactly what they had found worthwhile. The people now in the room, mostly professional types in their twenties and thirties with a sprinkling of older people and teenagers, were clearly still not quite sure that they had been right to entrust themselves to this place of strip lighting, strangers, strict rules and multiple microphones.

What may finally have dispelled the group anxiety was the obvious anxiety of each individual about what would happen next. As the other participants nervously introducing themselves turned out to be not wild-eyed fanatics, but common-sense mothers or entrepreneurs or computer analysts or nurses or teachers, there was a quiet letting-out of breath. Since everyone else in the room was so normal and so hesitant, it began to seem

he outlined) and ready to "share", or participate. But docility returned as his American accent slipped to reveal the cosy Watford tones of his childhood. At last, the Forum was ready to begin.

Drawing huge diagrams on the whiteboard as he went, and reading parts of the Landmark message from a manual, Sherman explained what he promised would be "an emotional rollercoaster ride". The events in our lives have no meaning in themselves, he said. It is the stories we make up to explain those events that give them meaning. But the stories can take over, becoming "rackets" or recurring complaints, behind which we hide from the full, rich, illogical, unreasonable flow of life. Rackets, Sherman said, kill our lives.

For instance, a woman who hesitates in adult relationships with men because she was beaten up as a child by an alcoholic father is "running a racket" if she continues to blame her behaviour on childhood abuse. Not only is she destroying the underlying love she might still feel for her father, she is also hiding behind the story she tells about him to stop herself from

Whether you've been abused as a child or are going through a divorce, the Landmark Forum claims to be able to bring you to a new level of self-knowledge by unraveling the myths they believe we make up ourselves. Vanora Bennett looks for the catch.

raised both arms and eyebrows in showman's bewilderment at the absurdity of this idea. But the laugh he got back was still tinged with nervousness. As more than one person confided later, in the café, "I was ready to go. I was planning to leave at the first break, and I wasn't going to come back."

There were reasons for the unease. There is no advertising for Landmark courses except word of mouth, so no one

unlikely that they would join in the kind of psychological square-bashing which would leave participants glassy-eyed, uncannily obedient, and willing to sign away their homes and children and individuality.

There was a new frisson of fear at the first jargon, when Sherman explained that the name of the Landmark game was "transformation" and said the group had to be "coachable" (open-minded about accepting the concepts

loving other people. Once she understands her "racket", she should make her peace; apologise to her father for making him the villain of her inner drama, and apologise to the other people whose love she has shut out as a result.

For a day and a half, we chewed this over, discussing our own rackets. Everyone enjoyed the chat-show voyeurism of watching other people confess; more and more hankered after

the chance to do their own spiritual stripteases. Confession-minded crowds jostled at the microphones. One by one, we described how our mother's tone of voice had always irritated us, our parents' divorce had traumatised us, our children's naughtiness drove us spare, our ex-spouse infuriated us, or our sibling's unreasonableness had stopped us speaking for two years. Tears were met with Kleenex. But the pent-up rage of the confessions didn't win Sherman's sympathy.

"You weren't abused by your father. What actually happened? You were eight. He was drunk. He hit you. That's in that circle on that side of the board. What's the story you tell about it? That you were abused. That's in the other circle, on the other side of the board. That's just a story," he said. "It never happened. You were never abused. It's a racket."

Slowly, most of the group came around to the idea. Urged on by Sherman, participants began calling family and friends to confess to their rackets and make their peace with the past. Homework, in the shape of phone calls and letters of apology, was assigned for the hours between midnight and nine the next morning, when we reassembled. The group was split into pairs and small groups to discuss the letters and calls in the session and in the brief breaks between them.

Acceptance of the idea that our miseries had somehow been our own fault brought a new kind of relief. By the second afternoon, the exhausted groups in the cafés around the Landmark building were discussing breakthroughs they had made in re-establishing contact with people they hadn't got on with, or spoken to, for years. Some were tearful, but others were euphoric at their success. By now, no one was scared any more. Behind the eccentric jargon, it seemed, all that was going on was the simplest of therapies. Landmark offered a friendly setting in which to talk through your problems, and a chance to leave them behind.

The more I saw, the less cultish

Landmark seemed. There was no suggestion we should worship Sherman, or even treat him with exaggerated respect. The message he projected was nothing more sinister than "none of us is perfect". The businesslike white room, without logos, images or any of the physical trappings of cultery, also discouraged any tendency towards false worship. Instead, it kept people's attention focused exactly where natural selfishness would dictate it should be — on themselves.

Yet a quick look at the Internet late that night revealed that there are plenty of people worldwide harbouring dark, if vague, suspicions about Landmark. Many worried about its possible similarity to better-known groups accused of mind-bending in the past. One regular point of comparison was the Church of Scientology, an American religious group founded by L. Ron Hubbard whose converts include John Travolta and Nicole Kidman. Another was est, an expensive Seventies technique of group soul-baring sessions and stern discipline that spread like wildfire through the middle classes of America and England until the late Eighties, when scandal touched the name of its founder, Werner Erhard.

Landmark organisers at their headquarters in San Francisco meet such hostility head-on. At the first suggestion I might write about the Forum, I was FedExed a thick publicity pack and phoned regularly with offers of advice and supplementary information. The pack included about 100 written testimonials from Landmark graduates, doctors and psychologists around the world, explicitly rejecting the idea that there was anything cultish or mind-altering about the Forum.

Such defensive PR perhaps stems from Landmark's painful beginnings. Back in the early Seventies, Werner Erhard, a used-car salesman from Philadelphia, set up Erhard Seminar Training (written in lowercase letters as est, Latin for "it is"). He marketed the original notion of weekend

courses in personal "transformation". Detractors suggested that est was preying on the vulnerable by promising a mysterious "it" in life which had, presumably, always eluded those attracted to the seminars — and charging them through the nose for the secret. But est caught on anyway. Although it only advertised by word of mouth, between 1971 and 1973 more than 10,000 people took part in its tough 60-hour sessions of recrimination, discipline and limited toilet access. By 1980, Werner Erhard and Associates had become an international company with hundreds of thousands of graduates. By 1985, Erhard retired est and introduced a new programme — less expensive and less fiercely controlling but still promising transformation — called the Forum.

Erhard paid a high price for his success. Scepticism about his big professional claim that long-term inner transformation could follow a very short period of training was compounded in the late Eighties by personal suspicion, when Erhard was caught up in two damaging scandals. The allegations themselves — of tax fraud and incest — quickly faded away. In the aftermath, he got \$200,000 back from the American taxman, and one of his daughters, who had accused him of abuse on the television programme *60 Minutes*, later said she had been offered millions of dollars to lie. But, fearing mud would stick to his work, the now-controversial Erhard sold the know-how behind the Forum to his employees in 1991, and bowed out.

The employees, who set up Landmark Education Corporation as a separate company, are at pains to make clear that they have nothing to do with Werner Erhard. Staff explain that, although Erhard's brother, Harry Rosenberg, is now Landmark's chief executive officer, that has nothing to do with his family ties and everything to do with the trust he inspires by doing a great job.

Three-quarters of today's 420 staff members never worked for

Werner Erhard and do not know him. "There is no connection at all. But we're not ashamed of Werner," Mark Kamin of Landmark's media department explained by telephone. "He was basically crucified in the media. He was exonerated, but long after his reputation was destroyed. He's kind of a tragic guy. Like many people who do leading-edge work he got put in a box as someone who was out to make money, a con man."

Perhaps it is money that causes all Landmark's image problems. Sooner or later, the suspicious questions about whether Landmark is a cult peter out. But they give way to yet more suspicious questions about how much the self-help gurus are making, for the business of transformation is clearly booming.

Landmark now offers 2,000 courses of different sorts a year, in 100 cities spread over 19 countries. In 55 cities it has offices that do administrative work; these also have meeting rooms and numerous phones from which course participants can call family and friends during the programmes. Overheads are low: Landmark pays 420 staff members, but also relies heavily on volunteer work by 7,500 enthusiastic assistants. Advertising costs are minimal, since word of mouth is the main source of new participants. After a bad year in 1992, when it lost \$167,000 on revenues of \$30 million, Landmark has become a profit-making concern and is fast becoming a global brand name.

Kamin plays down the wealth-generating side of the business. No single staff member owns more than 2.5 percent of Landmark Education Corp.'s common stock. Landmark office buildings are leased, not bought, so no property empire is being built up for profitable resale. Profits are ploughed back into the company, not paid out to the shareholders, Kamin says.

Seen from the receiving end, the arithmetic looks a bit more daunting. The Forum is not cheap. In England, it costs £235 for a course lasting three

long days and one evening. Forum graduates are strongly encouraged to sign up for a subsequent Landmark in Action seminar lasting ten evenings, and after that an Advanced Course over four and a half days (£495). The final step in the "Curriculum for Living" series is a Self-Expression and Leadership programme spread over three months. All in all, an enthusiast can spend well over £1,000 on training.

At each stage of the Curriculum, participants are encouraged to bring more friends into the Landmark network. The Landmark message is not only that the participants themselves are "running rackets" on their nearest and dearest — which they can stop — but that their nearest and dearest are probably running rackets on them, too. The only way to deal with that is for the offending lover or friend to be put through the course, too, and see the error of his ways. Landmark staff sell this idea hard. As David Sherman put it (and you can draw your own conclusions): "If you introduce three people, instead of just one, I can promise you an extra breakthrough in the realm of unreasonableness."

By the end of our Forum, my group of 180 people had collectively been relieved of £42,300. But, as we left the Sunday night finale, we were visibly happier than three days earlier. Our marathon of soul-baring had bonded everyone in the room, as if to an enormous instant family, and left a warm afterglow of affection towards the rest of humankind. While I didn't introduce three new converts to the cause (or even one), I, too, was oddly charmed by the experience.

In the end, there seemed little cause for concern, and some for celebration. Far from being natural victims, the people in my course seemed like representatives of a new Britain looking for belief. It may be a mark of how Britain has changed that this American import appeals to a middle class with brains and earning power — but without the cultural baggage and fear of emotion that have

been the conventional hallmarks of the Oxbridge-educated world. The Landmark graduates that I saw might not have the formal higher education that would give them an instant framework in which to organise beliefs and experiences — but they were looking, and they wanted challenge rather than cossetting.

Smart, practical and full of initiative, they used the course to work out specific things: how to handle divorce negotiations, or deal with a problem boss. They responded to the Landmark message not hysterically, as if seeking the answer to a prayer, but playfully. In their hands, it has become a well-packaged game of belief for the Internet age, with a language of its own, rules of its own, and a lot of pricey upgrades. Players have the freedom to switch off and walk away if they get bored. But those who play on believe the prize of transformation is within their reach. ●

Reprinted from *The London Times Magazine*, Saturday, July 15, 2000.