

The Guru in Me

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to deconstruct guru Tom Peters for his religion of management, and its mass worship. In the work presented, my intention was to confront myself with own assumptions, attitudes and perceived values. In my opinion every individual is following a vision of reaching a certain level of wisdom. There are numerous Gurus that our modern world is promoting and because of their status their ideas might have a huge influence on us.

HOW DO WE RECOGNISE A GURU IF WE SEE ONE?

The term guru derives from the Sanskrit and stands for a religious teacher. People not only hold the person, the physical appearance of the guru, as being sacred, but also the knowledge and the conduit of self-realisation. When broken apart the word guru becomes:

'gu' which represents darkness and
'ru' meaning remover.

To make sense of the above one has to understand that the term "darkness" represents lack of knowledge, avidya.

In seeking moksha, the liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth believers can seek a relationship to a living guru, since gurus are the embodiment of god. In modern use of language and writing a guru, especially in the west, has extended its metaphorical meaning to "expert".

The question that arises is "Why do we follow Gurus?"

One explanation can be the search for meaning in life. They offer fulfilment and promise a peaceful and happy life (www.wodiq.com, 2004).

Herein the emphasis lies on management Gurus. How can we transfer the above to a Management context?

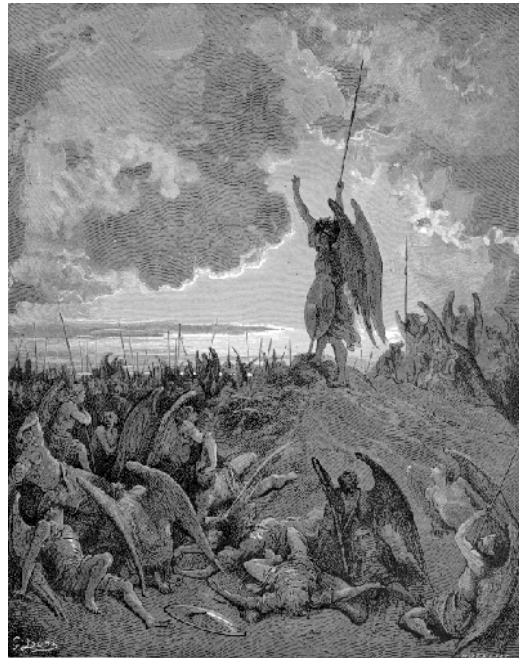


Figure 1 - "Peters is ... the father of the post-modern corporation."

Los Angeles Times (www.stedwards.edu, 2004)

If we accept religion as a framework of rituals and symbols we can apply the idea of religion to Management. In Management we follow rules, rituals and symbols. Every morning we are called to the holy mass, worshipping the corporate identity manual and confessing our companies inability to keep the promise of short delivery times to our customer (Thomas, 1993, pg. 63-66). Our Consultant will teach us by showing us how we can improve quality, reduce wastage and improve happiness in our jobs.

THE CHOSEN ONE - TOMAS PETERS, THE PREACHER OF A NEW RELIGION

In order to answer the questions of the given task it was necessary to choose one particular Guru. Because of the methodology used (Appendix A) the choice was to focus on Thomas Peters (Tom), co-author of *In Search of Excellence* and many other books. His book *In Search of Excellence* is another source of inspiration for the findings presented herein. To understand the rationale behind the choice it is important to explore the reason as to why Tomas Peters can be seen as a Guru. It is worthwhile mentioning that Guru Rankings exist and are male dominated. In Accenture's Guru Ranking Peters came in second only outstripped by Porter (www.accenture.com, 2004).

WHAT MAKES THIS PERSON A GURU?

Given we accept the application of the religious term of Guru to the modern world of corporate culture a Management Guru can be seen as a teacher with expert knowledge. By demonstrating his superior knowledge he will guide the way into wisdom. His book was revolutionary because it identified the key concepts of success of what he called *excellent companies*. If we the believers would now follow these concepts everyone should have an understanding of what it takes to transfer a company from mediocrity to excellence. In this particular case the world of corporate business was awaiting the advent of a new bible (Peters et al, 1982). Peters was able to deliver because he identified what needed to be written. In his own way he gave his idea meaning by writing *In Search of Excellence* (Derrida, 1978, pg. 11). Peters became a Guru because he had the gift to present his work in a time where Managers strived for solutions. It was the right thing to do since there was a demand for his expert knowledge (Kennedy, 2004; Whitford, 2004). I will discuss, later in the piece, the importance of the timing to enforce this statement.

Being a teacher is not good enough to make

someone a Guru. Where are the Management Gurus Nirvana? What is the ultimate stage of completion and wholeness? For us to judge over a Guru it is unavoidable to create new and obvious criteria which in return are subjective. The following samples are used to assess why Peters is presented as being a Guru:

Sales figures can be used as an indication of the wisdom of the Guru. If the knowledge is able to dispel the darkness from our minds it is surely an indication of his wisdom. His book, being reprinted a number of times, is one of the bestselling books in the field of management world-wide (Kennedy, 2004).

In a recent survey (www.accenture.com, 2004) the status of the 50 most popular Gurus was assessed using the number of hits for Gurus names on the internet. In addition an extensive search was conducted on how many citations and references were made to each individual Guru and their work. Again, a huge amount of citations and references would hint at the wisdom of the Guru.

Another criterion that can be used is the influence the Guru is exerting. Are there significant changes following the knowledge dissemination of the Guru? In the case of Peters we can surely answer this question with "Yes". Not only had his book a high influence on the world of business, but it also inspired other authors to follow his concept (Collins, 1992, pg1-16). Not only is he said to be the initiator of the Guru-Gaze (Kennedy, 2004), but *he is the Ur-Guru!* (Whitford, 2004).

ME WITHOUT YOU

Clearly Peters has used writing as an extension of the spoken word in order to reach more followers for his message. He himself is a de-constructor. In his work he analyses the factors that make companies successful by looking at the components they are built from. But can Peters exist as a Guru by himself? In my understanding the Guru

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exists in a vivid environment. The *self* is more than just the Guru, but includes his environment too. De-centring the self therefore means to extend this method to the environment too. I will demonstrate a number of traces that unearth the non-visible elements that unify the Guru with his environment.

As we hold the books that Peters has written in our hands we see him as the author. However, an author can not exist without its audience. Peters is described as a Guru, a teacher. Like any other teacher, his lessons would be senseless if there wasn't any audience. The audience needs to be specific, not just any audience. The Guru requires the audience to be thirsty for *his* wisdom. There needs to be appreciation of this new religion taught by this preacher of management practices. Here, one Author is having a massive number of worshippers. *In Search of Excellence* has sold more than three million copies. It is us, the audience that is the centre of attention of the author, not vice versa. However, it is the author that is perceived as a Guru; so clearly, audience is more important than he himself and he has written his books for us, those who want to learn. We are his centre of attention. Our absenteeism is a clear statement of our presence.

Another trace that we can follow derives from the content of his book. Peters is talking about "Excellent Companies". The pure existence of these excellent companies hints at the existence of non-excellent companies. Why would one want to learn about these excellent companies? The answer is obvious: To become excellent too. Since there are less than 50 companies identified as being excellent there are unnumbered companies that do not fall into the excellent category. Which companies did Peters write his book for? - for the excellent companies? It is rather more he wrote it for those not mentioned, those which are absent in his book. At this point the author, the Guru, is embraced by two groups that are highlighted by writing about two other groups.

Maybe the most important trace we can follow is "Time". A book is written at a certain point of time. However time does not stand still. Peters, like any other author is only capable of capturing a point in time. Perhaps the point in time is stretched for the time of writing, which can take a number of years, but after the book is finished it stands still. Time here is important since it affects the companies involved, the readers (becoming worshippers (?)) as well as the Guru. First of all time will pose the ultimate test for the companies identified as being excellent. Will they persist to be excellent? As time passes by the readers may change their attitude. When first reading the book we can make our own assumptions and might adopt the ideas presented. This might take time; it is a period not a point in time. Finally time and the belief of the community around him will transform the author into a Guru. Time is needed to acknowledge the wisdom of the Guru and promote him (It is invariably 'him' as we only find one female Guru in the ranking!). Looking at a Guru ranking now fails to show us the most evident: Gurus did not exist since the beginning of time. It took them time to become Gurus.

This particular book has been written by Peters *and* Waterman. Talking about the success of Peters we have to think of Waterman as well. Would Peters have been as successful without him? What happened to Waterman? Why doesn't he rank among other Gurus on the Fortune 500 Olymp? As the audience it is our responsibility to search for the lost co-author, completing the team again as the one can not exist without the other in this context. However, Waterman is not the supplement as such. These two just make the team of authors complete. The supplement is the team behind the team. Here Waterman as a missing link to Peters' success is used to identify the others that were needed to make Peters successful. Editors, publishers and shop assistants selling his book are just a few that we can name. They all seem to be left behind when Peters was lifted to his Guru status, we take

them for granted but they are part of the myth.

The last point I will present is focussed on what we may call the gender issue. The Guru chosen is male which inherits the presence of another gender. As an audience (absent in the notion of the author as a Guru) we consist of both genders, male and female. In our polar world we cannot ignore the other gender as both supplement each other. Would the book look different if it had been written by women?

A lot of time (The third splinter) has passed and nowadays Peters is writing about women in Management as well.

In the introduction we have learned that a Guru is a teacher who can expel darkness. His presence has indicated the way to find other parts necessary to make him a Guru. He himself is a signifier, not only giving his ideas meaning but also identifying what is absent with his presence. If we look at the Guru and the wisdom he dispels we will find splinters that have been broken apart from him, contained within him. These splinters represent the real self; they are the centre, not Peters.

THE MAKING OF A GURU OR WHAT I HAVE LEARNED ABOUT THE GURU

The insights I have gained about the Guru chosen are not limited to this case study only. As soon as I started to look at the Guru in this particular way there were a number of things that I learned about Gurus in general. First of all a Guru is telling me a story. As a reader I can decide whether I believe in this story or not. More than three million copies sold and the fact that his writing has been highly influential should convince us that the story told is a true one. However, 20 years later we find that the excellent companies did not stand the test of time (Doyle, 2000, pg. 2). He, Peters, still remains a Guru even though his findings might have failed in the end.

Secondly I have experienced that it is the

missing parts (Splinters) that make a person a Guru. It requires more than just an author with a good story. There are co-authors, publishers, reviewers and perhaps other Gurus to make someone a Guru.

Third I have experienced that persons are perceived as being Gurus after writing a book or article, making their wisdom visible to the world. I raise the question: "How about the real Gurus? Those who have the wisdom, but do not debase it by selling it"

In addition I question the real reason for writing books. Maybe Gurus are just able to identify which story the world needs to hear? This story found the right audience then and with the advent of a new generation he might be able to seek out new audiences. In Peters' case, why did it take so much time to write about women in Management? The 'Gender issue' is very popular in our time and Peters used his reputation to get a foothold in this area as well.

What we can experience is that everyone has gained. The audience benefited from his wisdom and Peters himself has gained status, respect and, of course, money.

In Summary, I have learned that it requires an audience and other parts that are not obviously presented when referring to the person as being a Guru. A Guru can only become a Guru because the splinters hidden in time and space allow him / her to become a Guru. In addition I have learned that it's crucial to think critically about the wisdom presented by the Guru. As we have seen in the case study presented, the wisdom of Thomas Peters made him a Guru, however; his findings did not stand the test of time. Every time I will be dealing with a "Guru" from now on, I will be very sceptical and perceive them in a different way as they will not be able to become a Guru without me. I am a part of them, sometimes even without their knowledge. Beyond this I found that the idea of Management Gurus might only be applicable to the western civilisation. Further investigation is required to prove that the

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message of Tom Peters is well received in eastern cultures as well.

METAMORPHOSIS

At the beginning of my exercise I have embarked on a journey together with Tom Peters. We have both changed. By means of using metaphors and images from religion I am reflecting on what was going on inside me:

Metamorphosis: Peters becomes my devil "*Lucifer* is a **Latin** word derived from two words, *lux* (light; genitive *lucis*) and *ferre* (to bear, to bring), meaning *light-bearer*. Lucifer does not appear in Greek or Roman mythology; it is used by poets to represent the Morning Star at moments when "Venus" would intrude distracting imagery of the goddess. "Lucifer" is Jerome's direct translation in his *Vulgate* (4th century) of the **Septuagint's** Greek translation, as *heosphoros*, "morning star", literally "bringer of the Dawn", of a phrase in *Isaiah* that originally intended no reference to Satan (see below). In Christianity, Lucifer has become synonymous with **Satan**, nevertheless. From the Christian viewpoint, Lucifer was second in command to God himself, he was the highest archangel in heaven, but he was motivated by pride and greed to rebel against God and was cast out of heaven with the angels who followed his lead. Then he became the Devil and his followers were known as demons." (en.wikipedia.org/wiki.Lucifer, 2004)

In the first part light was defined as the Metaphor for wisdom used to dispel darkness. Lucifer, the bringer of light, is perceived to be evil. Would that not be a contradiction? Not in this case.

Peters has transformed in my view. He was my Guru and morphed into something that is stigmatised as being evil. However, during this process he has lifted me to a higher level. On our 'joint venture' he has taught me more than he might have intended. But not only can

I question HIS teaching. Now I can question all management Gurus that there are in the western culture: If these management teachings are our religion, do our views apply to management in Eastern cultures equally? As Peters is identified being the second-highest Guru in Accenture's Guru ranking (www.accenture.com, 2004), does this signify that he is a devil and his followers, his demons?

INSIGHTS ABOUT THE PROCESS

At first glance the idea of jointly decentring the self by means of différance seemed to be a very difficult one. During the process, the task at hand proved to become easier the further it took me into to the depth of the research. As there are other key concepts available different combinations would be possible to re-visit the task again. Doing so would result in a new perspective and would open new insights. At the end of this epic journey (Hassard et al, 1993) I would like to note the following results:

I have created for my self a powerful tool. This tool can be used for an infinite scope of other issues, problems or matters. The tool as such can be re-configured with other extensions to produce a different result.

By means of the process used I was able to gain knowledge beyond the wisdom provided by the Guru that I have chosen. To de-centre the self in this particular case it was necessary to access various other sources of knowledge. I might call the knowledge base I have reached now "Knowledge Plus". Additional knowledge gained included ideas from various files such as religion, management and architecture (Architecture of Deconstruction).

One of the underlying concepts was to be critical. Critical here is not equivalent to resistance at all cost. One should be thinking critically before adopting an idea from someone else. After this exercise I will not be an expert on critical thinking however, I have made a first step. I have experienced that I

can find points of criticism in a highly appraised work of a reputable source.

The last point might be the most important one. Whilst using the tool I found that there needs to be an audience or participants or any other second party to transform a writer to a reputable source. Without anyone buying and acknowledging the work of a writer it will be meaningless. Any author will ask us to participate in his / her story. How much do we want to get involved? In the end an Author will be elevated to Guru status by *others*. It is not the person them-self.

REFLEXIVITY - IN DOUBT OF MY SELF (Hassard et al, 1993)

My "Critique-tool" enables me to gain a lot of insight. However, the process has also shown me its limitations (another great example of the polar world we live in and that one trace will show us the hidden part). At this point I realise that there is no second person that will gain the exact insights. As I am guided by my own assumptions I was able to unearth a number of "Splinters". However these are *my* assumptions and therefore the next person can exert critique on my findings. It is impossible to make all factors equal and that a group might come up with 100% matching results. What is left is discussion, which in turn is another story being told by the author (here me) plus the reader, who I invite to engage to join my storytelling. If I now do not believe in what the Guru tried to teach me, will anyone believe *my* story I am telling here?

THE REAL ME

(Townsend, 1973; Pertz, 1973) The intention was to choose a tool to de-construct any management Guru. This exercise should give me insights into the Guru and the process. Eventually there is a lot of insight that I have gained about my-self as well. In decentring the self by means of Différance I found another splinter. As soon as I found the Guru and started to deconstruct him I have found a

strong trace leading to someone that it required for this exercise - The real centre of the self: **ME!** In order to deconstruct the Guru I needed to do the same with Stefan Pertz. I had to challenge my own assumptions, question what I have read, what I had accepted as being the truth.

Criticism exceeds the person / object in the centre. Criticism will involve me as well as the one exerting critique. Not only do / did I have to learn how to be critical towards the issue at hand but also against myself. However, the Guru-image did suffer a lot. My perception has changed. I will now stand up and challenge wisdom sold by Gurus. In my head my personal Guru - Peters - has been expelled from the Guru heaven. He became my fallen angel.

As said above, there is more to gain than just the wisdom of a single book. This journey was supposed to lead me straight from A to B. Every diversion I took was actually resulting in another fraction of knowledge that I have gained. It became clear that critical thinking is not purely destroying another persons work or opinion. It is a way of asking questions and to go out and learn more. Eventually, Tom Peters has not only shown me his wisdom, but he allows extensive research in other areas.

APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

In the work presented, my intention was to confront myself with own assumptions, attitudes and perceived values. In my opinion every individual is following a vision of reaching a certain level of wisdom. There are numerous Gurus that our modern world is promoting and because of their status their ideas might have a huge influence on us.

To me, *In Search of Excellence* poses an example of an icon that, brightly lit, guides our way through the darkness of the management world. Looking back 22 years after it has been first published it still glows, does it? If Thomas Peters has made an impact with his book and his work has been highly

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influential, I raise the question: Why do companies still fail despite his wisdom? How can he insist on being just lucky while telling us that companies can make their success happen?

To explore my Guru I have combined two approaches from post-modernism. Not only will I be deconstructing the self (The Guru) by means of decentring the subject, but also applying the notion of "*Differance*". To look at the individual parts that are visible to us implies a separation. However the splinters presented, can not exist without the parts that are invisible for us, thus making it a whole. In identifying visible pieces I capture the missing ones. These missing pieces will be the centre of my attention, pushing the obvious subject (The Guru) into the background focussing on the splinters hidden

in time *and* space. The structure of the essay is based on ideas found in "Architecture of Deconstruction - Derrida's Haunt". Individual pieces are made visible to explain the entire work. In "The Real Me" I am using *Reflexivity* to look at my relation with the Guru based on the insights gained from the process. The lack of coloured pictures is intentional and there are connections which might not be obvious at the first glance.

In the course of my self-analysis it becomes evident how my attitude changes and a significant shift in my perception of the Guru becomes reality. Maybe the lesson my Guru wanted to teach me is a different one and not the obvious presented in his work? What can I really learn from him?

Source: Accenture.com 2004¹

A Leading business guru must be highly visible on the internet (as measured by hits on the Google search engine), publish work that is widely known in the academic world (citations in the ISI Social Sciences Citation Index) and be frequently mentioned in the media (mentions in LexisNexis). Rankings in each of these individual categories were given a corresponding numerical score. overall guru rankings are based on the sum of these three scores. From a list of more than 300 names, here are the Top 41.

Guru Rank	Name	Google Rank	SSCI Rank	Media Rank
1	Michael E. Porter	13	2	8
2	Tom Peters	6	25	7
3	Robert B. Reich	7	27	5
4	Peter F. Drucker	2	15	33
5	Gary S. Becker	32	1	26
6	Peter M. Senge	14	12	34
7	Gary Hamel	30	18	22
8	Alvin Toffler	3	63	6
9	Hal R Varian	19	23	43
—	Daniel Goleman	28	36	21
11	Rosabeth Moss Kanter	41	10	37
12	Ronald H. Coase	42	7	51
—	Lester Thurow	36	40	24
14	Charles Handy	37	41	29
15	Paul Romer	57	11	42
16	Henry Mintzberg	52	6	57
—	Stephan R. Covey	10	96	9
18	Michael Hammer	47	29	40
19	Bill Gates	1	118	1
20	Warren Bennis	29	56	36
21	Jeffrey Pfeffer	60	4	60
22	Phillip Kotler	34	26	66
23	Robeert C. Merton	84	19	31
24	CK. Prahalad	44	21	76
—	Thomas H. Davenport	45	34	62
26	Don Tapscott	21	94	28
27	Malcolm Gladwell	22	104	20
28	John Seely Brown	40	62	45
29	George Gilder	18	119	14
30	Kevin Kelly	24	106	25
—	Chris Argyris	54	13	88
32	Ester Dyson	11	137	11
33	Robert S. Kaplan	61	44	56
34	Edward de Bono	26	114	23
—	Jack Welch	4	156	3
36	John P. Kotter	49	49	73
37	Ken Blanchard	15	141	18
38	Edward Tufte	27	57	96
39	Kenichi Ohmae	58	70	54
40	James MacGregor Burns	59	75	49
41	Alfred D. Chandler, Jr	95	20	69
—	Edgar H.Schein	53	7	124

¹ For a list of the top 50 Business Gurus see http://www.accenture.com/NR/rdonlyres/5E8084AD-8C12-4B63-A426-010DE0910111/0/outlook_topfifty_guru.gif

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