

Book Review

Hilary Austen.

Artistry Unleashed: A Guide to Pursuing Great Performance in Work and Life.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty, Book Reviews Editor

Hilary Austen has produced an attractive product. It offers cleverly packaged advice. It's a bit of a sham. It remains a question, how it came to be featured by the prestigious Rotman School of Business.

In the interest of full disclosure, I have had an almost preternatural dislike for “self-help” books since what may have been the first (or one of the first editions of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Such volumes normally contain banalities seeking to become profundities and ending up as absurdities. It doesn't matter what the subject may be—How to lose weight; How to make money; How to find love; How to be happy, successful or the life of the party—they all seem to be cleverly constructed to sever the gullible from their cash.

Artistry Unleashed, despite the prestigious publisher, first struck me as just such a book. From the colourful cover to the garrulous snippets of pre-publication praise from executives, authors and educators, it looked like a remarkably attractive instance of a decidedly unattractive genre.

Attractive? Well, her cheerful photo on the back flap of the dustcover told me that she held a Ph.D. in Education from Stanford University. That seemed good. It also said that she is a professional consultant based on an organic farm in Sonoma County, California. Maybe not so good.

Nonetheless, I plunged into it with the closest thing to an open mind that I could manage.

I quickly learned that this book could allow me to make effective progress without a clear plan or destination. That seemed right. The flowers at the roadside are generally more attractive and more real than the imagined garden at the end. I also discovered that I could achieve excellence without sacrificing creativity. That didn't seem right. What excellence, I wondered, was defined by being intellectually insipid, aesthetically wooden, philosophically flat and generally uncurious, routinized and monotonous? And finally, I was told to imagine, if I could, investing passion even as I applied reason and intelligence. OK, I thought, here we have a fulsome package of “feel-good” for the mind!

Despite claiming an MA in Cybernetic Systems (she doesn't say from where), it seems that Austen has a profound scepticism about quantitative measures. She demonstrates this in a pithy quote from Robert McNamara: “Every quantitative measurement we have,” he says, “indicates we're winning the war.” Those of us who remember Vietnam certainly know how well *that* worked out.

We also understand that the “best and the brightest” social scientists from Harvard and other elite institutions profoundly misunderstood not only what the Vietnam conflict was about. They had bizarre notions encapsulated in the “domino theory” which falsely presumed a global communist conspiracy and imagined (or chose to claim) that the Vietnamese independence struggle was an episode in a monolithic communist conspiracy which, if successful, would lead to Chinese dominance in South-east Asia. Even President Richard Nixon understood this canard as early as 1972, when he chose to visit Mao, introduce the politics of “triangulation” and share in his own version of paper-scissors-stone. That childhood game exemplifies to logicians the concept of “transformative preference. It presents the tactical conundrum wherein scissors cut paper, paper covers scissors and stone smashes scissors. More formally, “A” is preferred to “B” and “B” is preferred to “C” but “C” may be preferred to “A”.

Hilary Austin is well-advised to distance herself from such shenanigans, but examples of what others have called a “big lie” do not absolve those who wish to substitute “creativity” for reality. Appeals to artistry may inform “winners” but they do not substitute for cold, hard and unforgiving calculation. Dr. Austin is already in danger of becoming the human face of corporate hegemony.

Still, she has at least a part of me with her as she quotes corporate executives, financiers and entrepreneurs who testify to the importance of nuanced perception and personal meaning in making decisions. And, of course, in the end, she doesn’t denounce rationalism. She just wants it both ways, all at once, and she gets it by calling reason and emotion two sides of the same coin.

Austen also speaks well of knowledge systems that incorporate directional, conceptual and experiential ways of understanding. In fact, she devotes a full chapter to “Angelo’s kitchen,” a real-life cook with a real-life kitchen who passes on bits of wisdom and embodies both the skills, talents and well-developed connoisseurship that makes for mastery. It’s a good fit. Apparently, Dr. Austen is now achieving artistry on her farm where, her website informs me, she and her husband are pursuing the art of cooking in a wood-fired oven.

There’s lots more about “learning loops” and “expressing personal ideals in action.” We are given sage advice on how to deal with ambiguity and learn from failures. There is even a little box that tells us how to handle the clash of ideals. If our directional ideals (pragmatic ideas about what we’re doing) don’t motivate us, she says, change them! This insight is attributed to Thomas S. Kuhn. She also insists that if we find ourselves fighting about which ideals are right or wrong, we must realize that we are trading artistry for judgement. I guess being non-judgemental is a California thing.

Anyway, by the time I’d come to the end of this particular road, if not my life journey or Dr. Austen’s, I was left with a sort of warm and fuzzy feeling. I am not sure if it was the result of the joy of having spent some time with someone who can tell us what a “true artist” knows (she modestly refrains from claiming membership in that exclusive club), or if it was the consequence of being temporarily packed in qualitative cotton batting. This much, however, is pretty clear.

Hilary Austen's sense of artistry can probably be unleashed without doing irreparable harm to the immediate universe. It has some reassuring homilies to deliver, and much of it is certainly not wrong in any devastatingly pernicious way. Who knows? It might even inspire someone to become a trifle more adventuresome or, just possibly to read a book by Alan Watts or Gregory Bateson. So far, so good.

If it does not make up for all the completely ridiculous "how-to" books that offer quick-fixes from everything from loneliness to addiction to the inability to tell a joke, that is not Hilary Austen's fault. If it nudges someone toward some serious works in philosophy, psychology, aesthetics or even fiction, I'll be all for it. It remains a question, however, how it came to be a featured production of the Rotman School of Business, where Hilary Austen has secured a position as an Adjunct Professor. Perhaps she has taken her own advice and is "living at the edge" of what she knows, embracing "surprise, uncertainty, ambiguity, intensity, and change" rather than fearing them. According to Austen, this shift in feeling is "the essential origin both of creativity and great performance." What could go wrong?

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