What You Won’t Learn from *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne

*A Study Guide with Participant Handouts*

TO USE THE STUDY GUIDE

To use this material for a small group discussion:

1. Prepare by reading this article through all the way.

2. You may want to get a copy of *The Secret* and read it yourself. It won’t take long. It is not necessary for your participants to read the book – this study guide provides handouts and summary material to cover the main points of the book.

3. To lead the group, either read aloud the content or put the material in your own words.

4. Pause to use the discussion questions in the boxes and allow the group to answer, using the prompt questions if the discussion lags.
   
   o There are no right or wrong answers to the discussion questions. They are presented to allow the participants to wrestle with the issues presented and get involved in searching for answers.

5. You can adjust this study to fit your time frame by varying the amount of time for discussion. The minimum time to adequately cover the material is about ninety minutes.
Introduction

*The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne is a publishing phenomenon. It’s been on the best seller list for months, Oprah Winfrey devoted not one but two shows to it, *Newsweek* featured it in a big article on March 5, 2007, there’s 1.75 million copies in print and 1.5 million copies of a DVD version have been sold. All because it promises to reveal a simple, easy way to make all your desires come true.

Is there really a simple way to get “anything you want: happiness, health, and wealth” as the book promises on page one?

**HANDOUT** Distribute the handout with quotes from *The Secret*. Ask different participants to read each one aloud.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:**

What impact do your thoughts have on the events of your life?

Prompt Questions:

- Does your attitude affect your experience of life?
- Can thoughts change physical realities?
- Can you give an example of a time that your thoughts changed reality or influenced an event to happen?

Conclusion:

Summarize what the participants have said and continue with the next paragraph, saying: “Let’s examine the logic of *The Secret* more closely.”

The book’s logic, though seductive and sprinkled with little truths, actually conceals more truth than it reveals.

*The Secret* says that our thoughts have the power to cause positive or negative things to happen to us. There may be some truth in that. Often the root of our unhappiness is in our attitude toward life. It’s as easy as seeing the glass half full, instead of half empty.
*The Secret* extends this rather trite truism to make a faulty claim. It insists that not only can we use our thoughts to effect how we experience reality, but we can actually alter reality itself simply by thinking. Our thoughts can cause events to happen and attract real objects to us like cars and diamond rings. Called the Law of Attraction, the book claims that this is a fundamental if little known law of the universe that delivers directly to you anything that you are thinking about.

An obvious objection to this idea is that if it’s so easy to make good things happen, why do so many bad things happen all the time? *The Secret*’s answer is that without even realizing it, we are thinking about bad things all the time and so are actually causing them to happen. For example, rather than thinking about being healthy, we are worrying about being sick and the idea of sickness is what we are sending out into the universe and so, by virtue of the Law of Attraction, we are attracting sickness rather than health. As the book states, “Most people are thinking about what they don’t want, and they’re wondering why it shows up over and over again.” (page 12) Apparently, the argument goes, the universe is structured to respond to our thoughts. The trick is to be sure our thoughts are focused on the desires we actually want to transform into reality.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:**

Is there anything wrong with this theory?

**Prompt Questions:**

- What does this theory say about people who are sick or terminally ill? Are they to blame for their illness?
- How would you feel if someone told you that the bad thing that happened, for example, that you were laid off from your job, happened because of the way you had been thinking?

**Conclusion:**

Summarize what the participants have said and continue with the next paragraph, saying: “Let’s look at one problem with this theory.”

There are two things terribly wrong with this theory. The first problem is this: What happens if you take a course adjuster to your attitude and your life is still a mess? What if you can’t just think away your unhappiness? The truth is, no matter how much we may want to be healthy, we get sick; no matter how much we want to be financially secure, we get laid off from our jobs; no matter how
much effort and love we put into our relationships, people hurt and abandon us. Telling someone who just had a heart attack, for example, that the cause was in their thinking is cruel and abusive. Or asking someone who has just been a victim of a violent crime or a natural disaster to believe that they could have avoided the problem if they had a more positive attitude is unthinkable. These examples point out the danger of overemphasizing the power of our thinking to control physical reality. Rather than offering comfort, such a belief ends up blaming victims for the bad things that happen to them. The only thing that our thinking can control is, well, our own thinking. To believe that our thoughts have more power than that is misguided and potentially hurtful and destructive.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:**

Have you ever gotten something that you wanted very badly? How did you feel?

**Prompt Questions:**

- Think about children receiving presents – often they lose interest quickly in a toy they simply had to have. Why is that?
- Have you ever felt a sense of disappointment after achieving something or acquiring something that you thought was important to you? Why do you think that happened?

**Conclusion:**

Summarize what the participants have said and continue with the next paragraph, saying: “Let’s look at another problem with this theory.”

The second problem with the theory has to do with the idea of attraction. *The Secret* has indeed stumbled onto a secret, but not one about the universe. At the core of all human relationships is a little understood dynamic that could be called “attraction” and it does have something to do with our desire for happiness. But that is all *The Secret* has understood – the rest is error and confusion. Here’s what this best-selling book does not explain about human nature and how to find happiness:

What the book does not acknowledge is that having our dreams come true can be tricky business. When we get that vacation home we wanted or the big promotion or the long-pursued lover we can sometimes feel disappointed and a bit hollow inside. As soon as we get the thing we thought we so desperately wanted, we may discover that we don’t want it anymore or that it’s not enough. In
practically no time at all we are focused on the pursuit of another promotion, a bigger house – a new lover. *The Secret* promises that the way to happiness is to fulfill all our desires, but that isn’t always true. Fulfilled desires are just as likely to make us melancholy and wanting for more as they are to make us happy.

Why is that? Why don’t our desires, when fulfilled, consistently make us happy? The problem is that there is something else involved in our desires that is not addressed or even hinted at in the book. *The Secret* identifies two players in desire – the individual and the object of desire. It suggests that desire is linear, that there is a straight line between me and the thing I want. What remains hidden, as if it were behind a dark curtain, is a third player who is actually directing the individual’s relationship to the object. The truth is that desire is not linear, but triangular – it has three parts, not two.

The existence of another player in the drama of desire answers the question *The Secret* never asks: Where do our desires come from? Not many people do ask it, because we think we know the answer already – our desires arise from inside of us. They are ours, uniquely our own, and we believe that fulfilling our desires is the surest path to fulfilling ourselves and being happy. As the book says, “You have the power to change anything, because you are the one who chooses your thoughts and you are the one who feels your feelings.” (page 36) But what if we don’t choose our desires? What if our desires do not arise within us and are not truly representative of our deepest self? What if our desires could be borrowed from one another, or shared like a bad cold? If our desires came from somewhere outside of ourselves, then that would explain why fulfilling them doesn’t always make us happy. We might be acting on desires that belong to someone else and so we feel empty inside instead of fulfilled when we attain them.

Before we go on, let’s be clear what we are not talking about. Triangular desire has nothing to do with the instinctual drives for food, water or sex. Experiences of hunger, thirst and sexual arousal are instinctual and inherent in all human beings. Triangular desire has to do with how we satisfy those instinctual drives. In other words, triangular desire answers the question: How will we choose which object to eat or drink or whom to have sex with when we experience those physiological drives?
Here are some examples contrasting linear and triangular desire:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linear Desire</th>
<th>Triangular Desire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Me → Manolo Blahnik shoes</td>
<td>Sarah Jessica Parker (Model)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I think my desire for Manolo Blahnik shoes originates within myself)</td>
<td>Me → The Shoes (object)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(My desire for Manolo Blahnik shoes originates in my desire to be popular, so I imitate someone popular and buy the shoes Sarah Jessica Parker wears.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me → Air Jordan shoes</td>
<td>Michael Jordan (Model)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I think my desire for Air Jordan Shoes originates within myself.)</td>
<td>Me → Air Jordan shoes (object)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(My desire to “be like Mike” leads me to buy Air Jordans.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me → Brad Pitt</td>
<td>Cultural Ideal of Perfect Guy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I think my attraction to Brad Pitt originates from within myself.)</td>
<td>Me → Brad Pitt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(My attraction to Brad Pitt comes from the cultural image of the perfect guy.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**DISCUSSION QUESTION:**  
How does it feel to be told your desires might not belong to you? Can you think of an example from your own life where this is true?

**Prompt Questions:**

- How did you decide on your career? Who or what influenced you?
- Think of your last car purchase – what influenced your decision?
- How does advertising work? Have you ever been influenced by advertisements to want something you might not have wanted before?

**Conclusion:**

Summarize what the participants have said and continue with the next paragraph, saying: “Let’s see what conclusions we can reach about desire and happiness.”

---

**Conclusion**

With linear desire, the belief is that desire arises within me for an object that has value in and of itself. With triangular desire, you see that the desire is borrowed from someone else (or from a cultural idea or belief) who possesses some quality I admire or want and I try to acquire that quality by acquiring the object of his desire. In other words, if I want to be “like Mike” I think that I can acquire his “coolness” by attaining his shoes.

What triangular desire reveals is that it’s not really the thing I wanted but, rather I wanted to be more like the hidden third player in the drama. It explains why, when I get the shoes, but not the ability to dunk the ball, that I feel disappointed. I really wanted to be Michael Jordan, but it just didn’t work out the way I hoped. Is there a Law of Attraction in the universe? Yes, but it has nothing to do with attracting actual objects or events to yourself by thinking about them. What we are attracted to is one another, particularly qualities in one another that we would like to possess.

Can we alter events or attract physical objects to us simply by thinking about them? Of course not, and believing so is a dangerous and destructive philosophy. Can making our desires come true make us happy? Not if we remain unaware of the origin of our desires. The important insight is that
happiness will come from learning to distinguish our own desires from the imitated desires we have borrowed from someone else. *The Secret* does little more than repeat conventional wisdom without offering any valuable insights into the nature of desire or the pursuit of happiness. Because it reassures its readers that the world works in easy, predictable ways, *The Secret* has enjoyed tremendous success. What it has not done is reveal something useful.