

The Highlights - Draw Me a Pie Chart Powerfully

Some call it a cult. Some call it magic. Some call it an innovative and effective approach to life. Whatever it is, the corporate global educational enterprise called Landmark Education now has 55 centers in 20 countries. Since 1991, over 1,100,000 people have completed its introductory course, the Landmark Forum. The Forum, as it is affectionately nicknamed by its graduates, covers three intense thirteen-hour days and one three-and-a-half-hour evening. As part of Landmark's recession special, the Forum currently costs \$440. For that money, Landmark promises that you will receive *anything you want out of life*. In fact, they guarantee it. After three days and one evening, so it goes, the world will bloom with "the possibility of possibility."

Landmark's roots reach back to a group called EST that was founded by Werner Erhard in 1971. EST, an acronym for Erhard Seminars Training, took place over two weekends, and was meant to allow participants to achieve a sense of personal transformation in a very brief time. EST was extremely controversial, even in the live-and-let-live days of the early 70s. Stories of psychological manipulation and intimidation abound. In those days, you didn't even get to leave the building, let alone catch a catnap. Having undergone several curricular and philosophical transformations, Landmark has developed a modern identity that is decidedly more business luncheon than Heaven's Gate.

I am a Yale-educated artist in my early thirties. I enrolled in the Landmark Forum the weekend of November 6th, 2009. My father had died, recently and suddenly, from a "massive coronary event." My girlfriend had just left for graduate school in the Midwest. I was preparing, a little too late it seemed, for my first solo show. I was plagued with anxiety, and obsessed with thoughts of the meaninglessness of existence in the face of an inevitable death. But I was also obsessed with making it in New York as a professional artist.

Many of my friends from California had taken the Forum and *loved it*. Few could help themselves from jabbering on about it every chance they got. It creeped me out. But I thought the Forum could perhaps give me a much-needed shot of adrenaline at this particular crossroads in my life. Might there be a way in which corporate networking and greater "authenticity" could enhance my rank within the incongruous gears of the artworld?

I made a commitment to carry out all of the assignments and to listen to everything that was said in the Forum with an open mind. The following essay details my experience.



Anything you want for yourself or your life is available out of your participation in the Landmark Forum.

DAY ONE

"None of what you are about to hear is the truth," Rudy, my Forum leader, announced. "We made it all up. Just think of this as one possibility."

An ex-professional dancer from L.A., in his late fifties, Rudy was the first to point out that he had "no eyes," but a full set of wide teeth to compensate. Squinting at us from the front of the windowless, 100-seat conference room in the basement of 317-A West 33rd Street, he resembled a shaved rat. I walked in late, but a padded folding chair was placed before me along one of the three aisles covered with industrial-strength grey carpet. Every chair was filled and meticulously arranged. Under each, a single wooden pencil and information form had been placed, all pointing toward Rudy.

"It is possible," Rudy continued, practically lying sideways in his director's chair on stage, "that what I will talk to you about over the next few days, makes sense. Anything is possible. And anything you want out of life is possible out of your participation here. By Monday morning, you guys *will not be the same people*. And let me tell you, I'm excited for you."

I was already trying to back away from Rudy in my seat. I snorted audibly. Rudy's cocky demeanor didn't help my belief in what he was saying. He was flanked by an Indian man in a sharp suit, who, Rudy explained, was training to be a seminar leader. "You'll hear from

Manish, later," Rudy said. "You'll be hearing a lot from both of us. But let's get started, you guys, I'm so excited I can hardly wait!"

After an ambiguous explanation of the curriculum over the coming days, Rudy offered us all a chance to leave, and get our money back, which I considered. This offer, of course, was well-rooted in public humiliation theory, as Rudy asked anyone who did not wish to continue to "please stand up." Not surprisingly, no one stood. "Can I get a show of hands of the people who are *choosing* to be here? I want you to realize this is a choice you've made." All hands went up. "Fantastic!" chortled Rudy, "Then I would like to take this opportunity to welcome you to the LANDMARK FORUM!"

Applause is big in Landmark, and this was no exception. We thundered enthusiastically as Rudy began to articulate the first of many Landmark "distinctions".

"Do you know what all of life consists of?" he beamed. I did not. "Do you know what the most basic need in life for every human being is?" A few hands went up. *Safety. Sex. Money. Survival. Fear. Love. Domination. Power.* Rudy looked like a man about to reveal a marvelous secret. He showed his teeth. "Looking good and avoiding looking bad," he said. "Looking good and avoiding looking bad."

Would I end up a Landmark drone like my cronies back in Cali? After a couple of days without sleep and this weird rat-man half-yelling at me, would I succumb to the hypnosis that already seemed to be numbing the gazes of my fellow participants? No, I decided. I am an artist--an intelligent observer immune to evangelism and pyramid schemes. I was here to superimpose these ideas, this "technology," onto a career in the arts. The artworld, with its unsettling menu of social waltzes and hyper-sensitivity to hustling, was about to meet its match. I was here to pinpoint artistic success.



You can have any result for yourself or your life that you invent as a possibility and enroll others in your having gotten.

DAY TWO

After a sleepless night of paperwork locating the areas in my life in which I was "lacking power" (I lacked financial independence; my art dealer was a bully; my relationships with my brother and sister needed work), I fumed visibly the next morning as Rudy suggested that Landmark could cure incurable diseases, reverse the aging process, and bring an end to alcoholism. People lost weight because they "altered their relationship to food." They fought off cancer by "refusing to accept its power." He trumpeted that if everyone in the world took the Forum, no more war. "This is powerful, powerful stuff," he said. "This is cutting-edge technology." After all, war was simply "I'm right; you're wrong thinking," he said, and in Landmark we would learn to circumvent that.

The Forum is punctuated with participants sharing their successes, fears, and failures over

one of three microphones situated around the room. My jaw dropped when one woman about my age tearfully recounted her early childhood as the victim of sexual abuse. Rudy asked her what she had had for breakfast that morning. "Cheerios," she sniffled. "I had Cheerios."

"O.K. You were molested and you had Cheerios for breakfast," said Rudy, with a lazy smile. "Say it."

"I was molested and I had Cheerios for breakfast!" the woman sobbed.

Rudy told her to sit down. "See? No big deal. You guys are living with your pasts in front of you. Just let it go. Put the past back where it belongs. *In the past.*"

I was becoming more disillusioned as the hours dragged on, but this woman would stand up the following day and tell all of us how light she felt, how free.

How you behave in the Forum, they claim, is how you behave in life. "How is that working for you?" they ask. If you are suspicious and doubtful here in this drab seminar room, chances are you are suspicious and doubtful in life. In other words, built into every objection you might have to Landmark Education as an entity, is your own failure as a human being. In the moments of frustration or anger that many of us experienced, Rudy would intone: "Wherever you are in the Forum is *exactly* where you are supposed to be." How do you argue with that?

Another Landmark tenet is that you are personally responsible for *absolutely everything* that happens to you. If your marriage is in freefall, what are you doing to cause that? If your job is making you miserable, you are thinking about it the wrong way.

Thus, we were encouraged to use our fifteen-minute breaks to make effusive calls to loved ones, and to anyone else with whom we were not "complete." We were told to phone up three people who we felt had wronged us in some way, and apologize to them.

I called my art dealer in Berlin and tried to explain how I was sorry that I had once led him to believe that I wanted to make a certain type of marketable work, when really I didn't want to make that type of work at all. It was a bad connection and he seemed not to understand what I was talking about. We hung up and I went back inside.



Enrollment is causing a new possibility to be present for another such that they are touched, moved, and inspired by that possibility.

DAY THREE

From Day One, Rudy had been prepping us for Sunday afternoon, by which time we were all expected to have "popped." Some of us were to have begun popping as early as Saturday morning, but by Sunday at 5:20 p.m., popping, it seemed, would be pervasive. By this point, I wouldn't have been surprised if Rudy had showed us his horns. I was completely fed up with his tireless promotion of the Advanced Course, the twice-as-expensive sequel to the Forum. My brain felt mushy. I kept shaking my head and catching my jaw slightly slack. I was annoyed with how blissful everyone seemed and was hoping for a summation that would tie the whole weekend together so I could get the hell out of there and back to my stumbling life. So far, none of the ideas presented in the Forum had seemed that revolutionary to me. As my girlfriend put it later after I'd described the whole affair in detail, "It's like a weekend philosophy course for people who've never read a book."

"You're all wondering when it's going to happen, aren't you? It's 5:20, you're thinking. He's got another 25 minutes. This better be good. This is what I paid my four hundred and forty dollars for. Well, guess what." Rudy paused magnificently, baring his teeth in a triumphant grin. "There's nothing to learn! Life doesn't mean anything. *It doesn't mean anything.* And YOU keep making it *mean something!*" He stomped his foot on the stage to emphasize his point. "You want to know what life is? I'll tell you what life is. Life is you sitting in a room

in a basement with no windows, devoid of sleep, in a cheap uncomfortable chair, while a man with no eyes and all TEETH IS SCREAMING AT YOU! THAT'S WHAT LIFE IS!" He went on to speak for the umpteenth time about the Advanced Course. "You can take it," he said, "but there's nothing to learn there either. There's nothing to do and nothing to learn." I filed this away somewhere.

But then, at last, came Rudy's signature dizzying performance of the weekend, where he runs laps around the room, panting, pretending to be a hamster on a wheel, dangling his microphone in front of his nose, pretending it is different goals in life. First, the microphone is college. He speeds around the room, tongue dangling, and catches up with college, only to find "that's not it." Then the microphone is career. More panting, more running. Life turns out not to be career either. Then the microphone is a beautiful spouse, sex, and then money, and then kids. It turns out *definitely* not to be kids. Then it is a big house, several sports cars, grandchildren. But happiness, much to my chagrin, is none of these. "And then," Rudy announces, "you die." And Rudy makes the awful skreeching sound. "We are the hyphen separating the two dates on our gravestones," he says. Our lives are a hyphen! He gestures in the air the length of the hyphen, and it is not long. "Nineteen-oh-eight to nineteen-eighty-five. *Screeeck!*" I hadn't thought about it like that before. "And YOU'RE going around UPSET because you THINK your FATHER doesn't want you to SUCCEED!" The whole thing took about ten minutes. I was stunned. If that were all I had paid my money for, it was worth every penny.



The results you get out of your participation in the Landmark Forum are a product of the possibilities that you invent for yourself and enroll others in your having gotten.

LIVING LIFE POWERFULLY

Along with the price of your Forum, you get a "free" ten-week seminar. You meet once a week with most of the participants who were along for your weekend ride, and revisit the concepts you learned in the Forum, most of which make sense to me. One should develop *relationships* with people, as opposed to tenuous networks with the powerful few who might someday reach down a hand. It is necessary to "keep action alive" through scheduling. Don't be a flake. Do what you say you will do. "Who you are is your word." Show up for things on time. I agree with all of this, but don't *always* do any of it. Still, did I need to throw bags of money at Landmark to remind me? I'm about halfway through my seminar, currently. Still, I am not aware of having had my "breakthrough."

Breakthrough is common parlance down in 317-A; it seems to preface nearly every participant's speech. "I called my Dad and had a breakthrough...I talked to my boss and had a breakthrough...I think I had a breakthrough with my dermatologist..." It was so common I was beginning to wonder if something was wrong with me. Was this specific to being an artist, I wondered--mindfully observing from the sidelines, note-taking for the final critique? A familiar pang of envy rose in my stomach.

I remember having had a similar experience as an adolescent, at Bible camp. We were constantly invited to ask to be saved, and were asked to raise a hand if we accepted Jesus into our hearts. Someone up front was playing songs on a guitar. People around me were crying and speaking in tongues; whatever it was seemed intense and I wanted some. I ended up saving myself again and again, under various circumstances, because I never felt anything when Jesus was supposed to come in.

My trouble with Landmark is its collapsing of my success onto the success of the enterprise. Not one Forum hour went by without Rudy reminding us to bring guests to the next meeting: "Do it for your friends and family! Don't you want to share this with them?" Thus far, I did not. We were encouraged to be vehemently persistent in our attempts to "enroll" others. "The first response to a new possibility is the word 'no'," Rudy proclaimed. "Embrace that 'no.'" Week after week, new faces appeared in the room as my classmates were lauded for their brazenness at bringing, for example, the entire office en masse to one of the meetings.

Now, you can't just go around asking art dealers to accompany you to the Landmark Forum. In the artworld, these corporate hard-sell techniques do not apply. *If* you're talented, and lucky, and *If* you attend the right school, *and* manage to get picked up by the right gallery, *and* the market is good, and a couple of good museums catch onto to your work, then, *If* the stars align, you will be relevant. And then you will have critical attention and fame and the

hole in your heart and stomach will be full. But if you're over thirty, like me, and you weren't already in the Whitney Biennial, or *Younger than Jesus*, or, for heaven's sake, at least *Greater New York*, its time for Plan B. Or so my logic went. Or still goes, depending on the day.

Landmark's logic goes like this. If you want to get somewhere in life, you can't do it alone. You need other people's help. You are also encouraged to help other people as much as possible, without any expectation of reciprocity. According to Landmark, those who've taken the Forum are more likely to help other people. So, logically, the more people in your network who have taken the Forum, the more likely you are to succeed. Landmark gets more participants and more money, and you get more support. Everybody wins. If this argument holds water, then the only thing holding back your life from falling into place, is you.

If I fully embraced the tenets of a Landmark Education, what *would* my artistic life look like? If I gave up looking good (read: avoiding the shame of inviting guests to the Forum), would I be living more powerfully? Or was it possible to embrace my life and my artistic career using the tenets of Landmark, without embracing the corporation itself? And was drawing this line really worth the trouble? There are worse companies out there, to be sure. Christians are doing a lot more socio-political damage than Landmark ever did.

At a certain point in my seminar, Rudy's subtle disappointment at my not having brought along guests each week became downright disapproval. If I really took on dragging in ten befuddled friends to sit with us each Monday night, instead of quietly resenting Rudy *every single time* he suggested I have an "enrollment conversation," would I have the support I needed? What was I really doing down there each week anyway, spending life's precious moments in that dingy basement, if I wasn't participating? Perhaps this was how I took on life in general, passive as the boat drifted downstream. Curious, but reserved; open-minded while quietly judging.

I never shared at the microphone, nor did I ever get around to having an "enrollment conversation." I did not emerge a smiley convert like my California friends. But love it or hate it, Landmark gets people riled up. For some of my classmates, this meant signing up for more courses and spreading the word. But paradoxically, what I found most inspiring about Landmark was my own resistance to it. In this, perhaps, Rudy was right after all-maybe my stubborn reserve was "just where I was supposed to be." Once I identified my resistance, I did not want to give it up-but I was also ready, perhaps, to acknowledge some of the self-protective reservations that had been holding me back in certain areas of my career as an artist. Why, for example, did sending out invitations to my shows always make me a bit queasy? Why was inviting people to my studio so painful?

I have a close artworld friend who claims being an artist is about one thing: hustling. I think

this is half-true. Being an artist requires the balance of several simultaneous impulses: the impulse to create, the impulse to share, and the impulse to weigh and to consider. This balance, this tempering of the hard sell with stepping back, is something I feel I have an innate sense of, and something that cannot be overvalued in the artworld. While networking certainly can get you *some* things here, the Landmark doctrine is that it can get you *everything, everywhere*. I would like to believe in this, in much the same way as I would like to believe in prayer, but experience has shown me that faith can only go so far.

Landmark provides no space for an artist's careful tempering of self-promotion with subtlety. There is no room for etiquette. It's all push, push, push. One assignment we had was to collect fifty "no's" over a weekend (try it sometime-it's harder than it sounds). Besides proving that a lot more is available to you than you may have imagined, something else emerges from this exercise. You *annoy* people.

I decided I would take from Landmark what I could use and discard the rest. I have since-subtly-adjusted my stance toward self-promotion. The word "no" no longer seems like such a dead end, nor as inevitable as it once did. With the knowledge that as a professional artist, I cannot make it alone, a newfound resiliency has crept in around the edges of my thinking. I feel better equipped to spring back from my recent difficult circumstances.

At Rudy's behest, I have "invented a possibility" for myself: it is that anything that was "possible" out of my participation in the Landmark Forum, is also possible without it.



EPILOGUE

I showed up on the final evening of the ten-week seminar to find I had been demoted. As I searched for my crisp nametag on the familiar table of pin-backed laminated cards, I could not locate my own. I asked the nametag volunteer what gave, and he told me to write my name down on a list. He handed me a sticker wet with the inky all-caps letters of my first name.

"What is this?" I asked.

"Well, you know, you missed five classes, so...you're a *visiting* graduate now," he explained. I thought I caught a hint of embarrassment on his face. I lowered my head and shuffled into the room, where, I discovered, a third of my fellow participants wore the same ignominious stickers.