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The Man With All the Answers

Written by [NY Press](#) on May 8, 2013. Posted in [NY Press Exclusive](#).

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A downtown philosophy guru helps people tackle the big questions in life in a practical way

By Helaina Hovitz

Three weekends ago, as spring finally began to blossom, I saw oodles of couples strolling through Washington Square Park, gearing up for summer love that they undoubtedly hoped would stick around through the fall.

"Hey guys!" I wanted to shout from across the street. "Before you can love each other, you have to love yourselves!"

Why, you may ask, did I want to accost innocent pedestrians with such a tired cliché?

Because I, for one, didn't have a clue about how to actually love myself until I met Mark Muryne, whose office I'd just left.

No, he isn't a love doctor, nor is he a psychologist, therapist, self-help guru or life coach. He's a Philosophical Counselor who helps people grappling with questions that feel too big to answer: What makes me happy? What's my purpose? Who am I? Muryne helps "functional people with rational problems" find true happiness, and make better decisions about their career choices and relationships.

After getting his Master's in Philosophy from the New School in '07 and becoming certified by the American Philosophical Practitioners Association in '08, Muryne started his practice in a quaint little office in the East Village. On weekdays, he's Program Manager at a company that provides management services to non-profits, and on Fridays, he lectures at Molloy College. Weekends are when the magic happens.

If you want a better understanding of who you are and who you want to become, Muryne is the guy to go see. One thing to note: if you need psychological help for medical issues such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder or depression, he can't take the place of a licensed doctor. He can, however, work with you if you're already in treatment.



After experiencing a life-changing 50-minute Q&A session for myself, I decided to turn the tables and show everyone why I consider it to be best \$50 bucks I've spent in years.


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Let's start with the most obvious question: tell me where psychotherapy ends and you begin.

Well, if you have a headache, you take medication to kill the pain. If you're sad, you take medication to feel better. On their own, meds only treat the symptom, while philosophical counseling helps treat the cause. There's nothing I can do to help a headache, but I can help you be happy despite the headache—hopefully. Some people see a psychoanalyst for 15 years and still have the same problem. It just doesn't work. Long rant summarized: psychology isn't bad, but philosophy can also help.

What's the biggest difference between you and a conventional psychologist, in terms of your approach?

Psychologists believe that mind=brain, so they treat mind and brain. But as philosophers, we believe that humans are composed of mind, body, and soul. To a psychiatrist, your past is what makes you who you are. I'm not going to dig up stuff from your past.

How can you expect people to deal with the present if they don't also deal with the past, like a therapist/psychologist would have you do?

Your past is an integral part of who you are—but you can't let yourself become defined by it. It's easy for us to become mired in our history. We have to talk about the past and actually use it, or we will always repeat our mistakes. This is where we start. People are always looking to be reborn, right? Who you are can change, if you're open to questioning yourself and everything you know, or knew.

Do you think people come to see you because it's less stigmatic than seeing a traditional psychologist or therapist?

Well, with me, there's an element of non-judgment. I'm not analyzing you, for one, and I try not to be authoritative because I spend so much time trying to get people to question authority. I don't say, "This is how things are." I say, "This is how things might be."

What are the most common questions people come to you with, in the beginning?

"Am I doing the right thing?" or "Am I wrong in feeling that way?" Also very common are: Who am I? What do I want? How can I change? Can we change others?

How often do people need to come see you before they begin to find answers?

Some people get it right away. I won't try to get you to come every week like a psychiatrist might. I want to be useful, but I don't like to apply any pressure. I want you to want it.

Sounds bad for business.

Yeah, but it's best for the client.

Are you as open-minded with the homework assignments you give your students?

Ha. You know, my students don't listen, but want to look like they are. They think I don't see that they're on their phones, and that if they look up and make eye contact with me for a brief moment, I'll think they're paying attention. I know they're not.

What's your class about?

I'm teaching a Sexual Ethics class at Molloy College. One of the things I have my students think about is this: what's the difference between a friend and a boyfriend or a girlfriend? Is it just sex? What is it that distinguishes between the two, besides physical attraction alone? Try to answer that out loud. Not so simple.

Whoa. Okay, let's talk relationships. I'm sure you get lots of people looking for help in that department.

Absolutely. Most recently, a client, let's call her Jane, came to me for her first session because she fell in love with a girl who was different from the guys she'd always dated in more ways than just gender: good job, life plan, solid family, etc. Twofold, her parents disapproved, and Jane could sense herself sabotaging the relationship, rattling off reasons about why it wasn't going to work.

Yikes.

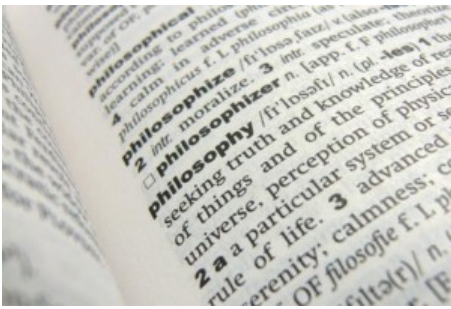
When I asked her, "What does a good boyfriend or girlfriend do," Jane found she couldn't answer. After a while, she realized that the only expectation she had was that they had a stable job, an apartment, all externals. And none of it really came from her, inherently—that's what her mother wanted. Jane came in saying she felt disappointed, but how can someone disappoint you and not meet your expectations if you don't really know what you want?

Isn't that always the way it goes?

You'd be surprised how many of us end up wanting what our parents want without realizing it, and without stopping to figure out what our own ideals are.

Do you typically see a high number of sexually curious clients?

Sex is very tied up in our identity, and that's what I help people find, so yes. Sexuality is definitely becoming



more fluid for women, but not so much men. I think it's always kind of been that way, and that women are more open and willing to identify as bisexual. Men, on the other hand, want to identify with one side or the other, and it's less acceptable to be bi. Female bisexuality is more understandable and natural.

Tell me about your relationships. Do you repeat romantic patterns yourself?

Oh, yeah. For a while, I only dated people I worked with. Everyone I had sex with worked at Disney.

What were you doing at Disney?

I worked there to put myself through graduate school. I sold t-shirts and programs at a kiosk at Beauty and the Beast on Broadway. I also walked up and down the isles selling \$10 silk roses to people.

Tell me something most people are surprised to learn.

Sometimes the solution isn't to end a relationship but to love yourself more.

How?

We don't take the time to identify who we want to be, what we want to be like, or how we want people to think of us. For example, you can say, "I'm a great person." But you'd be surprised at how many people can't start listing off the reasons why. Hence, some of my clients realize they want to volunteer, become philanthropic, help the poor, or just help their buddies or their own families more. The point is, they have to start somewhere!

Did you study psychology? Seems like you know it well.

I took some in undergrad. But mainly, I know when something is rational and when it isn't.

How?

That's what philosophy is.

So how do we become rational?

We have to be willing to be uncomfortable and keep our irrational desires and impulses in control, even when they're hard to ignore. We combat anxiety by living in "the now."

But what if "the now" sucks?

That's when we have to make a decision to say, "I don't mind being hurt, because at least I'm alive."

Wow. That's one way to look at it. Okay, so here's a big one: how do I start to figure out what makes me happy?

You like food? What kind? Do you like comedy? Who's your favorite comedian? Where do you like to go? What do you like to do just for the sake of doing it? Not as a means to an end, but in and of itself? That's how Aristotle defined happiness.

What makes you happy?

For me, ultimate happiness is other people. That's why I work 12 hour days Monday through Thursday, so I can teach on Fridays and work Saturday mornings for little pay.

Well, that's very noble. What else?

Cosmology blows my mind. Just knowing that life on a star is possible makes me happy. I also like a good steak. Oh, and there's this flourless chocolate cake from Il Bambino in Brooklyn. It's to die for, but I don't go often enough. I actually only have it when I go on dates.

If she doesn't like the cake, is it a deal breaker?

I don't believe in deal breakers!

Bring this bad boy home.

With philosophy, you can get dark easily, or you can go the positive route. It just depends on what you want to believe in any given moment.

To contact Mark, email info@markmuryne.com.

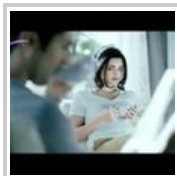
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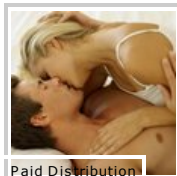
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