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We need to talk about gurus

Event organiser Jane Stephenson has gained a unique insight into what motivational speakers have to offer, writes **SYLVIA THOMPSON**

IF YOU'VE ever gone to public lectures in Dublin given by inspirational speakers such as Eckhart Tolle, Deepak Chopra or Caroline Myss, the event was probably organised by Jane Stephenson.

The founder of seminars.ie has met more gurus than most of us in the past 15 years and now she's decided to give the public a chance to hear what she has gleaned from meeting these individuals who tour the world to spread their wisdom.

In Gurus in a Nutshell, her talk later this month, Stephenson promises to give people the best of what the great teachers she has worked with have to offer and her own eclectic top 10 tips for harmonious living. But, before we get started on that, one can't but wonder how these people ever became gurus in the first place.

"Most of them had some kind of cathartic, life-changing, road to Damascus moment in their lives," explains Stephenson. "For instance, Eckhart Tolle and Byron Katie were both very depressed and close to suicide and something changed for them," she says.

"Tolle did seriously consider taking his own life, but worked out that his difficulty wasn't not being able to live with himself but not being able to live with his thoughts.

"And, when he realised there was a wise part of him saying he was not his thoughts, he woke up in a state of bliss. He sold all his possessions and spent two years living on a park bench in London and studying in the University of London library.

"People were drawn to him and, from that time on, he became a philosopher and teacher and began writing books."

Stephenson says that no matter how many books written by their favourite gurus that people read, they still want to see them in person.

"It's so much more powerful for people to be in their presence," she says. For instance, Eckhart Tolle has drawn crowds of up to 3,000 to events Stephenson has organised in Dublin and up to 4,000 in London.

"He's very powerful and his message is very simple – turn off the busy mind and get in touch with your higher self. He sits quietly and changes the atmosphere of the room. One actress friend of mine says she was amazed how he holds people and drips wisdom into the room."

However, not all gurus perform like this, according to Stephenson. Medical intuitive Caroline Myss, she says, is more like "an American comedian bullying you into thinking about collective responsibility. She believes if you do something bad, you do it to the whole world.

"And Deepak Chopra is a very good orator. He qualified as a medical doctor and was then adopted by a maharajas and became a teacher of Ayurvedic medicine," she says.

"People have their favourite guru and they will follow them and say that that person has changed

their life,” says Stephenson.

“Some people are drawn to Deepak Chopra or Eckhart Tolle and others are drawn to Marianne Williamson, or Lorna Byrne, Irish mystic and author of *Angels in my Hair*.”

But are these gurus really conning people into believing their lives can be changed for the better just by listening to them?

“I don’t think so,” says Stephenson. “I think people need to listen to the same people over and over again. When they hear their favourite speaker again, they get a surge of inspiration and that feeling of ‘I get it’. I like to give people that ‘I get it’ moment.”

On Chopra, she adds, “His message is to live to the best of your being, but he often couches this in obscure ways. I’ve had people walk out of his talks bewildered and confused.”

And Stephenson doesn’t deny that many of these gurus have amassed a lot of wealth along the way.

“Deepak Chopra charges up to \$60,000 for each talk and Eckhart Tolle works for 60 per cent of the gross takings of the event,” explains Stephenson.

So how has she fared out of the work herself – personally and professionally?

“Well, I came back to Ireland in 1995 divorced with two young children. I had worked with motivational speakers in London, so I began that work here too, first with business mentors and then more and more in the area of personal development and spirituality.”

She says she has “made a living out of the work” and has benefited on a personal level too. “I had to start again when I came back to Ireland. It was very hard but I’m very grateful for what I’ve learned. I also believe that attitude is incredibly important.

“Positive thinking is such a hackneyed term, but I think if you stay away from misery literature and misery radio, you’ll feel better – and that will have a huge effect on everything in your life.”

And so, Stephenson’s top 10 tips for a contented life include such things as finding and following your passion (consider what you’d do free and work from there); never complain, criticise or condemn; be grateful for all the good things in life; and, yes, life is short, so enjoy every moment.

Gurus in a Nutshell, a public talk by Jane Stephenson, is on in the Stillorgan Park Hotel, Stillorgan, Co Dublin on January 25th at 7.30pm. Admission €15. Details on seminars.ie or at tel: 01-2875524.