

Spring

INTO ACTION

MIND OVER MATTER

The Landmark Forum promises to transform your life in just three days, giving you a future you never even dreamed possible. **Amber Allinson** finds out whether it delivers

I've never been in a room this full and this quiet. There are 165 of us, sat in neat rows facing a stage in an unassuming building just down the road from Euston. There are signs of nerves everywhere: playing with hair, fiddling with buttons and jackets. All of us are waiting for someone to take charge, to tell us what to do.

Landmark has been doing just that since 1991, when it launched with the aim of teaching people how to be successful human beings, an ontological education for the modern world. The website promises to transform the lives of its students, giving them access to literally whatever they want in their future – freedom, effectiveness, power, fulfillment, vitality, self-expression, peace of mind. It's an offer that over 2.2 million people have taken up.

Landmark graduates are, almost without exception, full of praise. A very successful friend who works in fashion tells me that it is 'The thing that saved her,' while another credits Landmark with her trademark 'take no prisoners' attitude that I have always admired.

'It's a bit like a secret handshake among successful people,' says the fashion friend.

And so I find myself sitting under harsh strip lighting with a large group of people of various ages and stages, who to my judgemental eye all look like they need answers, which concerns me.

What if they make us hug?

At exactly 9am, Jerry, our 'coach' takes his place in a Director's chair on the stage, and is at once very confident and ridiculously relaxed. He's funny – a self-confessed 'Jew with no eyes and all teeth', it's like he's talking to an old friend, as opposed to a large group of nervous strangers. We can't take notes and don't need to worry about anything – just sit there and leave it to him. 'You'll get there' he reassures us with absolute certainty, he gives the analogy of popcorn – some corn pops earlier than others, but they all pop at some stage. I immediately

decide to be one of the first good pieces to 'pop' early – probably a revealing sign.

The three consecutive days are long and intense – 15 hours each – with just two short breaks and one longer one for dinner. There is homework at each break and when we go home, and time-keeping is essential. After the first break we are reprimanded for our lateness: '12.22 is not 12.20' says Jerry, forcefully. 'It's lazy and you waste people's time – we are training you to be extraordinary, so keep your word – starting with time'. It's tough, but we are promised it will all be worth it on Monday as Jerry asks for 'just three crummy days and one lousy night' to change our lives. It seems a fair enough deal.

Although Landmark claims not to have any allegiance with any philosophical schools of thought, I definitely recognise a few concepts pinched from Buddhism, Freud and even the plot of *Citizen Kane* (which is actually summed up for us in its entirety). Jerry is so convinced by the possibility that Landmark creates, that he argues that it can achieve world peace. More incredibly, I start to believe him.

However, in order to start afresh, we must face what is in our various pasts that has previously held us back, and over the course of three days we are told that our decisions are based on self-preservation and saving face, that our coping mechanisms were developed early on and have been running our lives ever since, and that we are more concerned with 'looking good' and 'being right' than the effect that this is having on our lives. Essentially, we learn that our past informs our future, so we have no choice but to keep living out the same situation over and over again. Landmark promises to help you put your past back in your past.

This is 'tough love' like no other: 45 hours over three days has the effect of creating a hothouse of emotion and normally reserved Londoners are

openly sharing their most intimate fears and regrets. We are offered the chance to go up on stage and share our lives, and Jerry remains unfazed in the face of tales of abuse, neglect and worse.

While not trivialising major life events – some of which are as tragic as losing a child – Jerry helps people to really address these issues, in order to start living their lives fully, as opposed to shrouded in guilt or regret.

'The problem is, you add a story – something happens and you make it about you. Your dad leaves and you decide that you are unlovable, your boss fires you decide you can't be trusted – that's ridiculous. And then you will find ways to prove yourself right – you will play the 'poor me' card until you just accept that events are just that – things that happen. There isn't just one truth.'

Another problem is that we all love to be 'right' and therefore we love others to be 'wrong'. He encourages us to think of any situation that we continually moan about – the mother who is always interfering or the boss who won't get off your back – don't you get even a little bit of satisfaction from that?

'You just *love* to be right don't you?! Love it, love it love it LOVE. IT' Jerry shouts at the terrible people we are. 'Your dad left you, your mum doesn't understand you – this is all a story you tell yourself!' And on the occasions you are right – so what? Jerry tells us to 'get off it' in no uncertain terms – if you've got a problem, sort it. If you can't, then accept it – let it be and move on.

It's nothing we haven't heard before but the intense situation and complete lack of distraction forces us to confront these issues.

It's the most levelling experience I've ever had – we are a complete mix of ages and races, men and women – and yet everyone has something holding them back: the woman who hasn't spoken to her mother in years over a perceived slight, the type-A man who is paralysed by his fear of mistakes, the couple fighting to the point of divorce over changing the toilet roll – you quickly realise that nobody is as sorted as you think they are – a comforting thought.

Before each break we are encouraged to

call loved ones that we have long had issues with.

'WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?' shouts Jerry after every break when people admitted they didn't. 'Make the breakthrough!' As the weekend progresses, and more and more of us make these calls, people start to look visibly lighter. Lines unfurrow and we collectively start to giggle at all of the problems that had seemed inconceivably huge just two days previously.

Post-Landmark, I do notice changes. Work worries, relationship dramas all seem more manageable. I'm more tolerant with my mother, the Pavlovian response to reach for irritation at every supposed dig is gone and suddenly I realise that maybe she was genuinely just telling me about so and so's wedding, or my sister's new house. I call my dad and although I don't actually say it, I realise I have let go of almost three decades of hurt, anger and feelings of betrayal after he left me and my mother. It's not about me anymore, it just happened and now we have a choice to move forward or not.

There are follow-up sessions, helping us to apply the ideas we've learned in the forum to our day-to-day lives. The teachers are enthusiastic and inspiring, and I find myself wishing I'd done this sooner rather than wasting years wallowing in an unholy English mixture of self-pity and self-deprecation.

'Does anyone know Boris Johnson?' says Rachel, our follow-up tutor. 'Imagine how London could look if the mayor was a Landmark graduate?'

'He's not going to come here is he,' says a 30-something student, perfectly summing it the point of all this; of course he won't if we all decide that it's ridiculous from the start, but why not?

And that's what I take from Landmark most of all – the attitude of 'why not'? Why can't I get a better job or boyfriend or house? Why can't I change the world? Some people do.

And I would hazard a guess that quite a few of those who do, have done this course. ■

(landmarkworldwide.com)



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