The Guru Gap

By Deborah Tannen

WASHINGTON

Last week, in the same issue that excerpted Bob Woodward's account of Hillary Rodham Clinton's conversation with the psychologist Jean Houston, Newsweek reported that Dan O'Brien, an Olympic decathlete, had "found redemption" after he failed to make the Barcelona team. The magazine described how he had consulted a sports psychologist who trained him to "free up his mind" in order to focus better.

Successful men in sports and business regularly hire consultants and psychologists to guide them and even to help them tap into their own inner wisdom. They keep a straight face when they tell stories about using visualization and other mind exercises. And the press takes them seriously.

The corporate world is replete with such gurus. The mostly male executives who hire them win respect — even if it means (according to a recent account in the business press) being led blindfolded through the foothills of the Colorado Rockies as part of a $7,400, five-day "Leadership at the Peak" course.

What about those brisk-selling business books that draw management insights from the minds of professional sports coaches? Books like "Everyone's a Coach" by Don Shula, "Sacred Hoops" by Phil Jackson and "The Winner Within" by Pat Riley have all found their way onto corporate shelves.

Indeed, such business favorites as Anthony Robbins ("Awaken the Giant Within") and Stephen Covey ("The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People") are among the authors the Clintons have met at the White House, according to Mr. Woodward's book, "The Choice."

These meetings didn't come in for much ridicule. So how did a short conversation in which Hillary Clinton imagined herself talking to Eleanor Roosevelt get so blown out of proportion last week?

Why was this interchange between the First Lady and a respected psychologist compared to Nancy Reagan's consultations with an astrologer about her husband's schedule?

Perhaps because the stereotypical image of a woman consulting a guru for spiritual guidance is too delicious to pass up, whether the facts add up or not.

Ridicule is often based on such images, and those that come to mind for women and for men are different. Business-book writers don't fit into

Men have 'leadership sessions.' Women have 'séances.'

the risible stereotype of women seeking help through earnest self-reflection. Indeed, when it turned out that Ms. Houston, who holds a doctorate in humanistic psychology, had been a consultant to such companies as Xerox, the corporate imprimatur lent her credibility — and nobody laughed at Xerox.

But by then Dr. Houston had already been tarred as a "spiritual adviser," a "guru" and a "psychic." That's how her short talk with the First Lady (according to Dr. Houston, it lasted "four minutes — *maybe*") became a séance in the news accounts based on excerpts from Mr. Woodward's book.

As one chagrined journalist, who asked for anonymity, told me: "I had to write a story under deadline, so I didn't have time to check it out, and I took Woodward's word for who she was. Now it turns out she isn't a psychic at all, but is a much more serious person."

To me, Hillary Clinton's conversation with Jean Houston sounds less like consulting a guru than like something much more mundane: talking to a friend about a problem. This activity may seem odd to many men, since it isn't the way they tend to deal with troublesome issues.

Besides, for them problems dealing with feelings are just less serious than the really grave questions — how to win at sports or get ahead in business.

The "séance" characterization has turned out to be baseless, and therein lies a lesson for reporters and commentators: ridicule, which often draws on stereotypes, is always likely to distort the facts.

It's time to leave the stereotypes behind. That's what will help us get closer to the truth.

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