

# Martha Beck

Guiding readers and clients out of the darkness and coaching by starlight

By Eve Menezes Cunningham

**M**artha Beck appears regularly on Oprah and is well known for blending humour and compassion with science and psychology. Her latest book, *Steering by Starlight* is out now. Her other books include *Finding Your Own North Star*, *The Four Day Win*, *The Joy Diet*, *Leaving the Saints* and *Expecting Adam*.

In her typical funny and self-deprecating fashion, Martha shrugs off her sense of humour as “something I had to develop to cope with the fact that people were always laughing at me. My family had a very British sense of humour. I grew up obsessed with British radio and TV humour. I love comedy. I love things that make me laugh. If you’re not going to laugh, life’s going to be pretty grim.”

Martha’s background is very eclectic. A Harvard educated social scientist, she also studied Chinese and became drawn to Buddhism. Now she uses elements from these and other influences to help people. In *Steering by Starlight*, Martha blends social science, neuroscience, Buddhism and even Shamanism to get her message across.

She says, “I didn’t set out to be a coach and had been coaching for several years, calling it ‘life design’ or ‘career advice’. I didn’t know about coaching. I’d never advertised.” Martha says she only found out she was a life coach when she heard herself referred to as “America’s best known life coach” by USA Today. She has since been called the same by Psychology Today and National Public Radio.

Her practice started when her business school students started asking her if they could pay her to help them with their lives outside of class. Martha says she couldn’t believe that she

was being paid to do something so enjoyable but “they kept coming. Since I was a child, I was obsessed with people’s lives. I wanted my students to be happy and that was alien to them.”

Other clues that her gift for bringing the best out of people wasn’t something everyone shared, were when friends would tell her that they felt inspired and wonderful after talking to her. She joked, “That’s so interesting because I don’t feel like that about you at all!”

Like many people who help so many people, Martha had a rough start in life. She says, “I spent a lot of my early life in a lot of emotional pain. People would tell me ‘It’s all in your head’ and I’d say ‘I completely agree. Please tell me how to get it out!’” Now she says, “Suffering is

a gift to motivate us.”

Now Martha says coaching is “practically becoming a social movement. I think it’s because all cultures have run into each other so there’s no one set of rules. If we don’t start behaving differently, we’ll ruin the planet. There’s a sense of urgency and people don’t go to religion so much. Psychology is reiterating old stories which is only effective up to a point. Medicine takes something unhealthy and tries to get it healthy. Coaches take healthy people and try to get them even better. I’m excited by some of the things that have been coming out of new psychology, understanding of the brain, the origin of problems.”

As her coaching practice has evolved, Martha says, “Now I know you don’t need to talk about how the wound occurred, you just need to get rid of the wound.” She tells the story of the guy who was wounded by an arrow and, rather than asking what colour the



bow had been or where the arrow had come from, the healer focused on healing the wound. Martha says, “I was spending hours and hours and hours with clients, talking about how their mother had done this and so on. Now we just get rid of it.”

Martha’s most controversial book, *Leaving the Saints*, is a memoir about leaving the Mormon Church she’d grown up in. It’s a moving and inspiring read and, in spite of the heavy subject, surprisingly laugh-out-loud funny in parts. It must have taken so much courage to write, I wondered if it had been a way of healing her past and if she now thought she needn’t have written it.

Martha says, “I didn’t write the book as therapy. I came to the conclusion that it was impossible to believe some of these teachings and be a happy functional human being.

I didn’t write the book until I felt healed. When something that intense happens to you, there’s a reason. You have to decide what you’re going to do with it. I didn’t want to overwhelm anybody but wanted both sides to be represented.”

When Martha described the crippling illnesses she was dealing with at the time and the realisation that the only way she could heal her body was by writing the book, her decision to face the wrath of the religion she’d grown up with makes more sense.

I always turn to Martha’s coaching column in Oprah magazine as soon as it lands on my doormat. Packed with humour and solid advice as well as scientific theory, Martha says she really struggles with the writing. “I’m struggling

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with a magazine article right now. The discipline of forcing myself to boil down my thoughts into a linear form never gets easier.”

The perfectionist in her has learned to “Get it on the green. I’m not a golfer but I understand the concept of trying to get a hole in one. The first time I had to do some creative writing, I was at school. I had to write a poem at 15 and they literally had to put me on Valium.” So over the years, Martha has decided to take some of the pressure off herself.

She says, “It’s never going to be fabulous but I just need to get it on the green so people understand.”

Although she’s excited about the growth in coaching, Martha’s quite alarmed by some of the “different techniques and standards. I’ve heard some people presenting things as coaches that makes me want to stab myself: All the stuff about goal setting and positive thinking, RaRa enthusiasms.” She hopes that more coaches will “integrate what’s being done

in new psychology.”

With her own clients, Martha uses some kinesiology to figure out how they really feel about what they’re telling her (and themselves). She says, “The first thing I do is a muscle test. When they say ‘I love to vomit!’ with great enthusiasm, they become weak.” This is her way of illustrating that positive thinking doesn’t always work. Martha also uses the muscle testing to help her clients express the truths they already know. ●

### Quick decision making – Does this option taste of freedom?

Martha tells a story about how you can tell if any body of water originated from the ocean because it tastes of salt. Likewise, enlightenment always tastes of freedom. So to find out if you’re steering by starlight in your own life, take any element of your day (it might be today’s To Do List or a party you’ve been invited to) and ask yourself how you feel. Is it a “shackles off” (freedom) feeling? Or is it a “shackles on” (prison) feeling? Which decisions are you going to make more of?

### Martha’s quick guide to life coaching:

**Client:** I have no idea what to do with my life.

**Coach:** Yes you do. [Pause while looking deeply into their eyes]. You know exactly what to do.

