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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ SELF-HELP

Controlling Your Future: Six Steps to a Better Life

Richard Norgaard
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To author Richard Norgaard, the two most important components of a balanced life are fitness and discipline. In this ambitious book aimed at helping people lead more fulfilling lives, the author suggests that readers work on six key areas: controlling the body, improving nutrition, improving the brain's performance, maximizing work, managing finances, and controlling distractions.

As an avid mountain climber and competitive runner, fitness is near and dear to Norgaard's heart, and he devotes nearly half the book to physical fitness and diet, arguing that they are the cornerstones of a good life. He extends the concept of "fitness" to other areas, including the brain, and in true military style, he emphasizes the need for discipline in all areas of life. "Our greatest problem," the author writes, "is weak discipline that leads us to accept simple solutions to complex problems."

Norgaard approaches his subject by exploring the macro view of trends such as the history and effects of financial and health care issues. He then zooms in on how best to handle things like investing for the future, retirement, and debt management. He concludes with specific advice, for example: "You should purchase a low-cost common stock index fund."

The book attempts to cover a huge territory; any one of the six steps could be a book in itself. Norgaard's counsel is practical and will appeal to readers who appreciate common sense, but he occasionally oversteps his expertise. Some of his diet advice is inaccurate and too general ("Fish is better than meat…the goal is to eat as little fat as possible…if your diet is balanced you don't need vitamins…"), and advocating daily aspirin therapy for everyone is risky.

Clichés, the absence of contractions, and clunker sentences like, "I believe if you are involved in mountains, you may find them more appealing than the ocean," detract somewhat from a valid message. Also, the page numbers of chapters in the table of contents are incorrect.

Norgaard's advice is a back-to-basics approach to crafting a life well-lived. His overall message about being more disciplined in all aspects of life is a good one, but he devotes too much time encouraging readers to do exactly as he does, a formula which may not work for everyone. Some of his suggestions are impractical for the general public; he advises everyone to take up mountain climbing and get a dog, for example.

The author, who served in the military and had a career in higher education, clearly has a great deal of wisdom to share from his own full life. The world would indeed be a better place if people followed even some of his advice. Readers just have to wade through the spectrum of suggestions and details that bog down the book.
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