

Can you give your witness?

Unfamiliar territory: Unfamiliar territory

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 25, 2002](#) issue

I must confess I had never heard of Oprah Winfrey before she appeared in the role of Sofia in the 1985 film version of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*. It was a difficult and demanding part, and I remember being impressed with the power of her portrayal. Roger Ebert called Oprah's Sofia an "indomitable force of nature." I also recall learning that Oprah's own experience had prepared her, in some way, for the role.

Since that time, Oprah has become one of the most influential people in America. Her book club successfully encouraged people to read serious books. She lives in the neighborhood where the church I serve is located, and people around here compare notes on occasional Oprah sightings. I actually met her once when she very graciously attended a reception for her friend Maya Angelou, who was speaking at our church's Arts Festival.

If, like me, you have regarded Oprah as simply another day-time talk show host, Marcia Z. Nelson's article may change your mind. And you might find that Nelson's list of ten reasons why Oprah is compelling offers useful material for a clergy job description.

I am also intrigued by Nelson's suggestion that Oprah's show is "not just talk, but talk that's been refined in life's fires—talk as testimony." It reminds me of something I learned and experienced listening to James Forbes lead a preaching workshop a long time ago. Forbes, now pastor at Riverside Church in New York, began by having a little fun with us mainline-denomination types. He said some sermons have about as much passion as a corporate CEO's report to the stockholders. And then he started to talk about "preaching as testimony." "How long has it been since you gave your testimony?" he asked. We all shifted uneasily in our seats, sensing where

he was going.

“Let’s have testimony time,” he said. “Right here, right now, no notes, no pulpit to hide behind. Just stand up and give your testimony. Tell us what the Spirit has been doing in your life recently.”

What followed wasn’t, as they say, very pretty. We did it, but we were not in familiar territory. After we had each managed to say something about what the Spirit was doing in our lives, Forbes remarked, “You don’t have to do that from the pulpit. But if you don’t believe the gospel and have some experience of its truth, you have no right to expect your people to.” I’ve never forgotten that lesson about the power of testimony.