

# Oprah on a mission: Dispensing a gospel of health and happiness

by [Marcia Z. Nelson](#) in the [September 25, 2002](#) issue

The entertainment business is not usually thought of as a missionary enterprise, but talk-show host and media queen Oprah Winfrey is a woman on a mission. It says so right in her magazine's table of contents: "This month's mission . . ." The mission themes of the month in *O*, the Oprah magazine, are not exactly part of orthodox Christianity ("Fun," "Couples," "Freedom," "Strength"), but Oprah does refer to God a lot (as in her April column: "I used to ask God to help me master a new virtue every year").

At the center of Oprah's mission, of course, is her daily TV talk show, which entered its 17th season this fall. Amid its hodgepodge of topics—female war correspondents, the decorating challenged, moms who are mean to their kids, crime victims who forgive their assailants, and, oh yes, the quest to lose weight—Oprah stresses a message: Make yourself happy.

Oprah's work is about maximizing happiness for oneself and thereby for others. Make yourself happier, make your family happier, make your community happy, and better, by "using" your life. Far from being distinct, "happier" and "better" are pretty much synonymous in Oprah's world. From a biblical standpoint, her teaching is idiosyncratic, like her name—a misspelling of Orpah, Naomi's other daughter-in-law in the Book of Ruth.

Oprah has a prominent pulpit from which to preach. Her TV show has an audience of 22 million viewers. Her two-year-old magazine has a readership of 2.5 million and is generally hefty with advertising. (The May issue, for example, hit an astounding 304 pages with around half of them occupied by advertising.)

Authors and publishers would also testify to her golden touch. Of the 46 works of fiction picked by Oprah for her book club (which she recently closed down), sales averaged 1.5 million in 1999, the club's biggest year. In this arena, Oprah's roles as saleswoman and spiritual guru blend. She prescribed edifying books, many of them

by women or people of color. The stories were strong on plot, character and moral awareness.

Phyllis Tickle, who was editor of religion books for many years at *Publishers Weekly* and likes to describe religion books as “portable pastors,” characterizes the Oprah books as “morally sound material, by and large, that is credible and enriching . . . Like most of what she does, you’re the better for having read them. Her tastes are very pastoral as well as literary.”

“I have enormous respect for Oprah,” Tickle continues. “Anybody who can better the living experience of thousands of people has to be respected. She may not be ordained but she sure is pastoral, and pastoral at a level that has a vast impact.”

With her conversational ease and casual style, Oprah comes across the TV screen as personal and personable, both pastor and best friend, authoritative yet approachable. “She is like a personal institution,” says Judith Martin, who teaches religious studies at the University of Dayton and has written on feminist spirituality.

It was somehow not surprising, then, that following the World Trade Center attacks, when New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani wanted someone to lead a multifaith service to provide hope and solace to a devastated city and a stunned country, he turned to Oprah.

Oprah is, of course, preaching mostly to the nation’s mamas. Oprah’s magazine and TV show advertise products for women. Her TV audience is overwhelmingly female. Most of her book club readers are women, as author Jonathan Franzen understood when he worried that her endorsement might shoo male readers away from his National Book Award-winning novel *The Corrections*.

Oprah is preeminently the voice of women in the middle: middle-class, middle-American and, like Oprah, middle-aged. They are people caught in the middle of families, interpersonal conflicts, too many good intentions, and an overlong to-do list. These are women trying to manage busy lives and households, address personal and social concerns, and maybe also lose some weight.

Oprah offers lots of things to help. She is an encourager. “Live your best life” is the Oprah slogan, almost a verbal logo. Oprah offers tools for living your best life: books to read, people to emulate, material things to help (an eclectic assortment of goods that make up a monthly “O list” of belts, shoes, vases, towels and other

accessories). The magazine contains “O to Go” paper goodies—note cards, postcards and bookplates for readers to tear out. The feature “Something to think about” is another tear-out page for jotting down reflections on questions related to the issue’s mission. “How would you create an ‘inner-strength’ team?” “How can you be forceful without using violence or harsh words?”

The timing of the TV show, at least in the Chicago area —Oprah’s home turf—has a whiff of morning service. It’s an hour-long ritual each weekday at 9 a.m., adding up to a lot more pulpit time per week than the average pastor enjoys, and in front of a lot bigger congregation. (Oprah herself used to attend a large Chicago church—Trinity United Church of Christ, pastored by Jeremiah Wright. But according to Wright’s secretary, Janet Moore, Oprah hasn’t attended in 12 years.)

On one recent show, Oprah took viewers via videotape inside the homes of moms who say they are mean to their kids. These mothers had written to Oprah about their problem and asked for help. It’s painful to hear the children repeat, when interviewed, the insults their mothers have heaped on them. It’s painful to watch the mothers being grilled on TV by Oprah’s resident psychologist, Phillip C. McGraw, swearing they want to change but can’t. Dr. Phil and Oprah give no quarter, repeatedly insisting on nonabusive treatment for the children. The message is clear: change your behavior.

On Good Friday, Oprah’s topic was miracles. Her guest was Richard Thomas, the host of PAX-TV’s *It’s a Miracle*, which every week presents in re-created docudrama form “miracles”: incredible and inspirational real-life stories of odds beaten, quirky coincidences, triumph mined from defeat, unaccountable survival. A videotape unrolls the story of a baby born very prematurely, with no apparent signs of life, who despite all clinical signs and assessment begins to breathe on her own. Two years later, the same girl now toddles onto Oprah’s stage holding her mother’s hand, offering a flourish of dramatic proof for doubters. The obstetrician is in the audience to say authoritatively that the girl’s coming to life is wholly inexplicable from a medical point of view. The miracles show closes with three generations of the gospel-singing Winans family belting out hymns, exactly like a church service. (The Winans offer their own miraculous testimony—Ronald Winans survived a severe heart condition and is on stage to signal his return to the touring circuit.)

Another typical show features Gary Neuman, therapist and author of *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce*. A divorced couple sits on stage with their two sons between

them. Videotapes unfold the story of the parents' divorce from different family members' viewpoints. The mother and father watch a videotape of their sons talking to Neuman about how they feel confused and caught in the middle between the parents. Right on the televised spot, this situation is going to be fixed. Mom and dad pledge out loud that they will get along better and not place their sons in the middle again. "Now that," says Oprah as the segment concludes, "is worth staying on the air for."

Oprah's show contains amazing tales and amazing candor. Confession is the show's signature. Talk is crucial, even salvific, says Oprah. "The expression of your feelings is like magic," she says. But expression isn't the ultimate aim of the show. The aim is to make things better.

Martin offers a feminist reading of Oprah's mission. "I really think of Oprah as caring," she says. "If you compare her with somebody like Geraldo [Rivera], she has wealth and influence, but she uses it to empower others—and that's a big feminist thing."

When Oprah has a message she wants guests and the audience to grasp, she will ask fewer questions and give more advice. She tells divorced parents who are unable to get along to stop forcing their children to pick sides in parental disagreements.

She often talks about "light bulb" moments or "aha!" moments (a recurring feature in the magazine also), moments of life-changing revelation. She's explicit about wanting to provide help and resources: "What I want everybody to get . . .," she says, referring to what she learned about managing her own health in a conversation with Dr. Christiane Northrup, author of the best-selling *The Wisdom of Menopause*. When she questions pop star Brandy about the young singer's "spiritual journey," which included an abusive relationship in her teenage years, Oprah observes, "You're gonna save a lot of girls today."

Oprah is a fixer. Which brings us to the role of Dr. Phil. The psychologist appears on the show every Tuesday to cut through people's excuses. Dr. Phil works with moms who are having problems with their kids, people who need to make peace with their past errors, people having difficulties with their sex lives.

What's your payoff? he will ask when guests on the show tell him they want to change some behaviors but just can't succeed. People apparently love this

bluntness. Dr. Phil's own show premieres this fall.

Oprah has a whole team of fixers in addition to Dr. Phil: "life coach" Martha Beck, personal trainer Bob Greene and financial adviser Suze Orman appear regularly on the show and in the magazine. Whether it's encouraging dieters or redecorating a living room, Oprah offers solutions to nagging problems that are blocking someone from living her best life.

"As a moderator of discussions and someone who can generate and respond to ideas, she does great work," says Scotty McLennan, dean of religious life at Stanford University and author of *Finding Your Religion*. "I think of Oprah as a very intelligent woman who is able to draw people out and engage people in a way that is educational and helpful."

Oprah wants to fix communities as well as individuals and their families. She is a consistent philanthropist, with her own as well as other people's money. *Fortune*, one of the very few media outlets to which Oprah has granted an interview, reported in April that Oprah has donated, mostly anonymously, at least 10 percent of her annual income to charity. Oprah's Angel Network, promoted on her show and Web site, raised \$3.5 million in 1997, its first year of operation. The Angel Network is supported by viewers. It has funded scholarships and Habitat for Humanity homes.

Oprah also sponsors Use Your Life Awards—\$100,000 awards to those engaged in social change. (Use Your Life funds are also underwritten by actor Paul Newman, already renowned for the philanthropy from Newman's Own, his food line, and Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon.com.) These awards showcase compelling stories and send out inspirational messages. Recipients include the Red Feather Development Corporation, founded by former clothing manufacturer Robert Young. He became interested in housing for Native Americans, and has built affordable housing on reservations in the northwestern U.S. Former prostitute and drug addict Norma Hotaling's organization SAGE (Standing Against Global Exploitation) works with prostitutes in San Francisco, many of whom have been abused and are addicted to drugs. Twenty-two individuals have received Use Your Life Awards for their organizations.

Oprah wants to do fixing her way. She turned down President Bush's request in late March to visit Afghanistan to help highlight some of the post-Taliban changes for women and children, refusing to let herself be used for someone else's purpose. She

has done shows before on the conditions of Afghan women, but she wants to teach on her own terms.

Some Oprah observers have called her shrewd; others have described her as a control freak. She would probably call it independence. In her April “What I Know for Sure” column in her magazine, Oprah writes: “The irony of relationships is that you’re not usually ready for one until you can say from the deepest part of yourself, ‘I will never again give up my power to another person.’” Personal conviction shades into professional application. The empowered woman is likely to be confident and decisive in business and in personal life.

What has etched Oprah’s identity most clearly in the public mind is her readiness to draw on her own experience even while exposing others to public scrutiny. Just as she encourages confession from others, she is willing to engage in it herself. She has talked about being abused as a child, and her ongoing battle with weight amounts to a running story on the show. Her current concerns about the approach of menopause are also grist for the show.

“She brings a down-to-earth approach,” observes Wade Clark Roof, frequent commentator on American religious trends and author of *Spiritual Marketplace* and *A Generation of Seekers*. “I think she talks out of experience and relates to people talking out of experience. Spirituality talk is talk that arises out of experience.”

In other words, it is not just talk, but talk that’s been tested in life’s fires—talk as testimony. As Oprah would say, this is about getting real. A preference for the freshness and immediacy of experience in reaction to the meaninglessness or venality of traditional faith is hardly new, of course. Spiritual renewal has ever been thus. Quaker founder George Fox wrote in 1647 of the inadequacy of the teachings of established religion: “But as I had forsaken all the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those called the most experienced; for I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. Oh then, I heard a voice which said, ‘There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition,’ and when I heard it my heart did leap. . . . And this I knew experimentally.”

The show is founded on people testifying. For example, in developing a show on women who waited to have children, Oprah and her staff sought people whose experience tells the story. People obligingly write, e-mail and call. Oprah’s Web site receives 3,000 e-mails daily.

The show doesn't stop when the TV hour ends. Discussion and questions continue after the cameras have stopped rolling, and "After the Show" is available at the Web site, prolonging the shared examination of the topic and providing resources to pursue the issue.

If Oprah's spirituality is nontraditional, pick-and-choose what works from the world's religions, its roots are in African-American Christianity. Jamie T. Phelps, O.P., who teaches at Loyola University of Chicago and the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University of Louisiana, identifies significant elements of traditional black spirituality, as well as postmodern eclectic elements, in the Oprah phenomenon. Authentic black spirituality, says Phelps, "understands we are all human beings. If you're generally into black spirituality as holistic you have to love everybody—that makes white people very comfortable."

Phelps suggests another reason for the comfort level of white viewers and fans with Oprah. The figure of the nurturing television personality echoes the historically and socially accepted figure of the nurturing black female. "She is the good black mama who takes care of white kids," Phelps says.

L. Gregory Jones, dean at Duke Divinity School, agrees that Oprah's roots in the black church experience lend the television personality some of her authority. "It enhances her credibility on issues of spirituality, given the prominence of the black church," he says. "There is a cultural presumption of credibility that she can trade on."

Oprah's attempt to transform community by promoting individual transformation is also a way of placing individuals within a larger community. There can be no separation, no isolated search to individual perfection. The individual's betterment leads to community betterment. Individual spiritual life, and renewed life, is expressed in community and community renewal. The traditional black church has always addressed community ills, expressed community cohesion and been a refuge of liberty that is personal, social and spiritual.

"There is a personal relationship to God that has to flow over to concern for community," says Phelps. "It's not a personal 'getting holy' but getting into right relationships with the community."

I close, Dr. Phil-style, with a little list: ten reasons why Oprah is a compelling and successful spiritual teacher in spiritually eclectic and ever-practical America:

1. Oprah is easy to understand. She uses little words. You'll never hear "postdenominationalism" or "hermeneutics" or churchy jargon on the show. Her regular magazine column, called "What I Know for Sure," is simply written, and filled with her experience and reflections on that experience.
2. Oprah is very human. She admits to struggles with human temptations, like food. This distinguishes her from lots of other religious figures on television.
3. Oprah acknowledges the reality of suffering and also wants to do something to relieve it. At her prompting, people regularly tell wrenching stories of being abused or victimized. The woman known as the Central Park jogger, attacked 13 years ago in New York by a group of teenage boys, broke her public silence for an interview with Oprah in the April issue of *O*. Oprah's 9-11 six-month anniversary show featured World Trade Center survivor Lauren Manning, a victim of serious burns. Suffering happens. Talking about it and exploring survivors' resilience seems to help.
4. Oprah provides community of a sort. You can log on to [www.oprah.com](http://www.oprah.com) and pick from dozens and dozens of chat and support groups and message boards. (It's true that virtual community and actual community are not the same things and have different benefits, but that's another topic.) You can go to a bookstore and look for a book with an Oprah Book Club logo. Lots of others are reading that very same book.
5. Oprah encourages self-examination. The traditionalists might call it examination of conscience. A daily examen is a technique encouraged in Christian contemplation. Oprah would call it journaling or "something to think about," her magazine's feature that presents questions for reflection.
6. Oprah teaches gratitude. St. Paul says: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:6). Write those requests in your gratitude journal. "The gratitude journal is a wonderful idea as a supplement to people's already formed spiritual life," says Jones at Duke



Divinity.

7. Oprah is a reminder service: a reminder of what is good, what is important, what one person can do. In this info-glutted culture, the busy need reminders. Remember what's important. My husband, a pediatric nurse in a suburban Chicago hospital, gets an occasional small dose of Oprah. In patients' rooms during morning hours, the Oprah show will sometimes be playing, watched by moms sitting with their sick children. He recently asked one Oprah watcher what she liked. She watched, she told him, for the information: safety for children, decorating, etc. This information was not necessarily new, she explained, but she liked to be reminded.

8. Oprah teaches morality by highlighting and encouraging role models. Oprah profiles those who make a positive difference. She and her viewers also bankroll some of them, through her Angel Network.

9. Oprah listens. Being heard is good for well-being. Catholics put this to work institutionally in what is popularly called confession and formally known as the sacrament of reconciliation. This same principle is at work in the 12-step program, which requires confession of character defects as a foundation for responsible change. Confess, repent and be healed. In Dr. Phil's words, own it.

10. Oprah promotes forgiveness, and tries to demonstrate that it is possible and how it is possible. She regards it as a tool for survival. She has regularly spoken with survivors of crime—people who lost loved ones or were themselves victimized—and returned years later to check on their progress.

A recent show featured Sharmeta Lovely, a victim of rape, whom Oprah had interviewed ten years earlier. Oprah expressed amazement at Lovely's stated willingness to sit down to dinner with her assailant. Yet Oprah often repeats a variant of this observation: "Forgiveness is something you do for yourself." In closing her conversation with Lovely, Oprah urged, "Preach, girl, preach to me."

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See also Marcia Z. Nelson's [review](#) of Dr. Phil's Self Matters: Creating Your Life from the Inside Out