

Practicing Oprah; or, the Prescriptive Compulsion of a Spiritual Capitalism

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THERE IS SOMETHING RATHER RELIGIOUS ABOUT OPRAH WINFREY. Recent episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* advertise ways to “awake Spirit”; headlines in *O, The Oprah Magazine* advocate methods of meditation and prayer; and in her treatment of books from “The Oprah Book Club,” Winfrey frequently encourages her reading audience to “find truths for your revolution.” Every product of Winfrey’s empire combines spiritual counsel with practical encouragement, inner awakening with capitalist pragmatism. But how can we begin to tackle such an ephemeral empire, a subject unaffiliated with any explicit theology, institution, or explicitly ritual enactment? This object is, at its root, a *commodity*. An analysis of Winfrey’s world necessarily begs fundamental questions about the study of market culture: How should scholars interpret the practices of capitalism that are inflected with spirituality?

In this article, I argue that “practice,” that sneaky, slippery, and thoroughly frustrating trope of cultural studies, may be the perfect prism for our evaluation. Not only does Oprah programming incorporate an avalanche of practical encouragement, but her episodes and articles also serve as paradigmatic profiles in the spiritual practice of capitalism. Consider a 2003 episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* titled, “Princess for a Day.” As suggested by this headline, the entire episode was devoted to making four women “princesses” for a day. “I love surprising people,” Winfrey said in her opening voiceover, “I love making them happy.” That day, she made four women ecstatic. The first, Ashley Smith, obtained an audition for the television talent

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competition *American Idol*; the second, Fannie Eugene, got weekly Merry Maids[®] service for a year, a deluxe trip for two to New York City, a luggage set, and a \$23,700 Ford Windstar minivan; the third, Linda Feinstein, received a total home makeover, including wall-to-wall carpeting, a new dining room set (china, silverware, linens, pots and pans, all courtesy of Crate and Barrel), and a new washer, dryer, dishwasher, refrigerator, and microwave; finally, Laurie Mullick received a complete wardrobe from Dana Buchman. None of this was unusual; Oprah Winfrey has made herself famous through her benevolent peddling of dreams and goods. It is the *practice* of her generosity that is so resonant to the cultural observer.

Everything is conducted with a giddy ritual solemnity: each time a new princess is announced, she is crowned, and asked to sit on a center stage “throne.” Then their individual montage is screened. Each princess is described as unendingly kind, marvelously deserving, and somehow financially inadequate. Though ostensibly diverse (Ashley is a 16-year-old white high school student; Fannie is a middle-aged African American nanny and housekeeper; Linda is a white small-town waitress and middle-aged mother; and Laurie is a young white urban school-teacher), they are made analogous in their generosity and financial poverty, in their kindness to others at a material cost to themselves. Through the Oprah-produced montage, they become mini-saints in the landscape of America, deserving of some divine intervention (the world simply cannot be the sort of place where such goodness goes without reward).¹

Once the montage is over, the cameras return to Oprah and her princesses. Now the unveiling begins. A Vanna White-type pulls back a curtain to reveal Sears appliances; an army of models file out in Laurie’s new wardrobe; Paula Abdul takes a seat in the front row, awaiting Ashley’s performance. Each gift is presented with a touch of awkward irony: Aren’t these crowns extreme? Isn’t this more than is necessary? And where did these twenty elf-like “helpers” come from? Winfrey is never anything less than demonstrably self-deprecating. Yet, the sincerity of the donation, and the honesty of the reception are undeniable. “Wow,” Oprah says after viewing Fannie Eugene’s montage, “So it sounds like—you deserve a break, ma’am.” And after all that you’ve heard (Fannie has adopted seven children orphaned by relatives, she nannies two wealthy white New Orleans families, and she tends to her ailing husband), you believe she does. She not only

deserves a break, but she deserves an *Oprah* break, complete with luxury hotels, indulgent respite, and spiritual salvation.

Every guest is similarly sanctified and reified, blessed and made bountiful. This individual reformation is the hallmark of the *Oprah* show. "In all cases," wrote anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, "ritual makes constant use of two procedures: parceling out and repetition" (672). This is precisely the process Oprah offers her guests: a repeated benefaction. Every episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* incorporates repetition (repetition of advice, of personal revolution, of individual self-sacrifice, of suffering) and parceling (of luxury goods, of extravagant physical makeovers, of spiritual guides, of Oprah-prescribed books). Conducted within the peach and lilac walls of her Chicago studio, the ritual—the regulated parceling of goods and repeated revelation—functions as a corrective to the despairs and inequalities of the world outside her kingdom.² Although the show was filled with dreamscapes and impossible wishes ("A \$23,000 car? For *me?*"), it closes with a clear program guide. *These dreams are yours for the taking*. All you need is the money, or the right family member writing the right sort of letter, and the right martyred profile. It is all so perfectly enacted, so clearly stated, that it's impossible to imagine *not* buying a tiara.

Although Winfrey's topics and language betray an affiliation to subjects well within the purview of scholars within religious and cultural studies, no study of her movement has been published.³ Had Winfrey emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, she most certainly would have been incorporated into William James' roster of spiritual heroes in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. However, the combined effect of scholarly classificatory inhibition and the overwhelming morass of contemporary "spirituality" talk has muted precise intellectual appraisal. This does not mean that Winfrey has abated in her spiritual mission, nor does it mean that media observers have failed to tackle her efforts with caricaturing abandon.

Change Your Life Television

In order to fully appreciate the contemporary prescriptions of Winfrey's empire, a brief history of the enlightened Oprah will be necessary. By 1994, there was little dispute about the immensity of Oprah Winfrey's economic and cultural might. Since the debut of her daily talk show,

The Oprah Winfrey Show, in 1986, she won every rating sweep and would eventually reach ten million viewers worldwide. Her estimated net worth was nearing one billion dollars, and she was widely described as the most powerful female entertainer in the world. By the mid-1990s, despite the tabloid insults and intense overexposure of her every move, Oprah Winfrey reigned supreme as the paradigmatic instance of the enduring efficacy of American dreaming.

At the moment when it seemed Winfrey's position was secure, cultural shifts suggested that her appeal might be fading. By the mid-1990s, it was clear that talk show television was changing. The market was flooded with hosts offering carnivals of absurdity: encounters between incestuous relations, cheating romantic partners, and criminals with their victims. Violence and mayhem seemed to be the visual intent, a blending of professional wrestling and soap opera, made up as therapeutic "reality." Just as the culture of her medium seemed bent to new extremes of exhibitionism, Winfrey found herself in the midst of multiple personal transitions. As with everything in her life, these were played out as open-door national psychological exorcisms. In 1992, her fitness trainer, Bob Greene, confronted her with her own unhappiness, and, in so doing, inspired their coauthored work, *Make the Connection: Ten Steps To A Better Body—And A Better Life*, a best-selling book and fitness program that emphasized the connection between psychological despair and poor physical health. Then, in 1996, Winfrey was sued for \$12 million by a group of Texas cattlemen after she proclaimed that she would never eat another burger during an episode on dangerous foods (including a segment on mad cow disease). Beef futures fell dramatically the following day, and Winfrey found herself in Amarillo, Texas, fighting a defamation suit.

Her experience in Amarillo, the sharp shift in talk show tastes, her own psychological revolution, and an increasing professional restlessness led to a slow metamorphosis of her own programming. "I really am tired of the crud," proclaimed Winfrey in 1994:

The time has come for this genre of talk shows to move on from dysfunctional whining and complaining and blaming. I have had enough of people's dysfunction. I don't want to spend an hour listening to somebody blaming their mother. So to say that I am tired—yes, I am. I'm tired of it. I think it's completely unnecessary. We're all aware that we do have some problems and we need to work

on them. What are you willing to do about it? And that is what our shows are going to be about. (Adler 76)

Note the combined despair: Winfrey is disgusted by both talk show television, and her position as talk show host. She can't bear to hear another disgruntled daughter or beleaguered wife, nor can she stand to be associated by genre with the fistfights and sexual extremities of Jerry Springer. "I started this because I believe people are ultimately good," she said, "I think television is a good way of opening people's hearts" (Jeffs 1997). In order to return to the "good," she decided to completely reform the style and substance of her programming.

Between 1994 and 1998, Winfrey slowly evolved the *Oprah* show into what she termed, "Change Your Life Television." Included in this change were major alterations to the show's format. Episodes included two-minute spots titled "Remembering Your Spirit," that included inspirational testimonials from celebrities and everyday folk on how they learned to live "a more spiritual life." Show topics switched from political debates and family dramas to individually oriented spiritual adjustment exercises (Garrett 34). "I am talking about each individual having her or his own inner revolution," Winfrey explains. "I am talking about each individual coming to the awareness that 'I am Creation's son. I am Creation's daughter. I am more than my physical self. I am more than this job that I do. I am more than the external definitions I have given myself . . . Those roles are all extensions of who I define myself to be, but ultimately I am Spirit come from the greatest Spirit. I am Spirit'" (Welborn 2002). Talk of spirits and souls and dreams pervaded the new programming, and alongside such talk came new name-brand programming tropes. In September 1996, "Oprah's Book Club" began as an attempt to expand the sorts of conversation tolerated on network television; in 1997, her Angel Network encouraged others to become involved in volunteer work ("Build An Oprah House") and charitable giving ("The World's Largest Piggy Bank" was the depository for her viewers' "spare change"). With "Change Your Life Television," Winfrey found a way to make the message of her biography (take responsibility, and greatness will follow) the substance of the show.

Critics abounded, with many reacting adversely to "Deepak Oprah." In 1997, *Newsweek* reporter Wendy Kaminer commented that the "pop-guru business is certainly flourishing" and quoted Oprah Winfrey

saying that gurus are here “not to teach us about their divinity but to teach us about our own.” Kaminer criticized this self-description, countering that gurus “are paid to talk while we pay to listen” (60). A year later, *New York Times* columnist Jeff MacGregor underscored Kaminer’s point, arguing that *The Oprah Winfrey Show* was “about nothing so much as Ms. Winfrey herself, and her pilgrimage toward a more rewarding state of Oprahness.” MacGregor further indicted Winfrey’s format switch from standard talk show fare to “Change Your Life Television” as a “psychospiritual Reformation, in which any attempt to entertain has been abandoned in favor of a search for Truth, Wellness and Reduced-Fat Snacks That Still Satisfy” (2.30). Writing for *Our Sunday Visitor*, Amy Welborn concurred with MacGregor’s cynicism, highlighting the “un-Christian” elements of Winfrey’s spiritual work:

So, in short, here’s what Oprah’s spirituality is about: a higher power, spirit, soul, “authentic power,” meaning, healing, affirmation, helping, miracles, meditation, journaling, and angels. An unremarkable New Age hodge podge. Here’s what Oprah’s spirituality is not about: sin, redemption, sacrifice, conversion, humility, worship, holiness and Jesus Christ.

Of course, for Welborn, what Winfrey isn’t, is precisely what she *should* be.

Such a vehemently Christian polemic against Winfrey is not as enunciated in LaTonya Taylor’s careful *Christianity Today* article, “The Church Of O,” but it is nevertheless lurking beneath the surface. In this 2002 piece, Winfrey’s work is carefully broken down into the particulars (her biography, her magazine, the book club, the journaling, and spiritual counselors) and interpreted as a wholly new spiritual movement, led by a “postmodern priestess—an icon of church-free spirituality.” After reviewing several interpretations of her religious contexts and ideologies, Taylor determines that the brand of spirituality Winfrey advocates is “ultimately unsatisfying.” “The question for Christians is this,” Taylor writes, “What can we do to help Oprah and her disciples find what they are ultimately seeking—the power, grace, and love that can only be found through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?” (38) Taylor casts Winfrey as the nemesis to Christianity, a Pied Piper distracting the children from their righteous spiritual work. Some viewers have, since Winfrey’s program change, expressed similarly religious dissent from her unorthodox theology.

Disgruntled fans began a Web site in 1998 devoted to deconstructing Winfrey's spiritual power. One turned-off viewer, Katherine Coble, wrote that the show was now like church, "But a bad church with no God . . . Instead of God, God is Oprah" (Ryan 1998).

At first, it seemed as if perhaps the critics might win the argument: Winfrey's ratings suffered during the period immediately following her switch to "Change Your Life Television," suggesting that the more righteous format did not foster righteous financial rewards. Indeed, in February 1998, Jerry Springer briefly stole her number one spot in the rankings, and for a moment it seemed as if America would fall into pits of crud. As is often the case, however, critics misapprehended the potency of Winfrey's mission. Although her television ratings did experience a three-year slump, Winfrey busied herself with the multimedia diversification of her empire. By 2000, Winfrey had successfully created the most comprehensive charismatic conglomerate of the contemporary era, managing holdings that included a cable network, a magazine, a series of made-for-television movies, and the dogged persistence of her daily television show. Under the rubric of changing people's lives, she widened her hold on the national imagination from a daily hour of convivial girl talk to a full-scale spiritual occupation. This occupation paid, and paid big. The launching of her magazine—the most successful launch in the history of the industry—provided liner notes to her televised therapies. If you had problems, Winfrey had answers in several different formats, on multiple channels, in manifold media, and with an army of experts to validate her strategies. Taken together, her show, magazine, and Web site provide the text of her movement, the instruction manual for viewer consumption and her inner revolution.

The Method

"Behave your way to success" is one of the oft-repeated maxims recited by Oprah Winfrey and her cohort of guest psychologists, columnists, and spiritual gurus. Any study of the products of the Oprah Winfrey empire (represented by her daily television show, her Web site, and her monthly magazine) quickly reveals that prescriptive behavior dominates the substance of Winfrey's message. "Live Your Best Life" columnist and meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg wrote in the January

2002 issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine*, “To be able to make an intense effort—to heal, to speak, to create, to alleviate our suffering or the suffering of others—while guided by a vision of life with all its mutability, evanescence, dislocations, and unruliness, is the particular gift of faith” (28). Another month, in the same column, Cathleen Medwick made a similar argument that “faith is actually something you *do*” (Medwick 131). Viewers/readers are told to “Make the Connection” and “Get with the Program” in an effort to “Change Your Life.” Here I argue that “connections” are made, “programs” are designed, and lives are “changed” through Oprah’s multimedia advocacy of specified, routine practices, such as buying, reading, and writing.

The hunt for prescribed practices within and among the products of the Oprah Winfrey Empire—the hunt for those repeated gestures and activities encouraged within her television program, magazine, and Web site—provides an appropriate starting place for the resolution of the diverse questions sparked by Winfrey’s wide-ranging enterprises. Winfrey’s Spirit-talk, slogans like “Working Spirit” and “Minding Your Body,” and episodes on the efficacy of prayer, obviously puts her work on the religious studies radar, yet her talent for multimedia management frequently suggests a crafted incorporation—a preference for making money over saving souls—that turns away scholars pursuing the “genuine” religious article. Winfrey is quick to defend her spiritual instincts against insults of those who perceive her as purveying mere slogans: “A lot of people think when I talk about spirituality that I’m talking some pie-in-the-sky stuff. But it’s not. I’m talking about how you get women to look at their lives differently and see that through the stories of people” (Granatstein 74). I follow Winfrey’s own lead, then, by approaching her as a potentially *religious* subject, as someone committed primarily to spiritual change through material means.

Following the work of several contemporary scholars of religion, I believe that the initial labor of the researcher should be to identify the subject, then to identify the main means of classifying that subject within broader schematics (Bell 1992; Jonathan Smith 1987, 2000). Here, the broader classificatory term is religion, and it is my intent to pursue *practices* in order to pursue the potential *religion*. I borrow this interpretation of “practice” from French historian and cultural theorist Michel de Certeau (1925–1986). De Certeau began his academic career as a Jesuit historian of religions, but the calamitous failure of the student rebellions in May 1968 motivated a shift in his scholarship

toward the study of contemporary culture. Was there any potential for liberation or change within the mechanism of mass capitalism?

De Certeau believed that there was. By isolating the tactics of practice within consumer society, he believed one could observe the disciplined mechanism that fostered subversive action. Consider how an individual selects a brand of toothpaste, or walks down a city street, or reads a book: according to de Certeau, these are tiny enactments of social strategy, of capitalist ideology writ small. "Many everyday practices are tactical in character," he explains, "and so are, more generally, many 'ways of operating' victories of the 'weak' over the 'strong'" (xix). Observing the prescriptions of Oprah points us to those moments where ideology feeds action, where her rhetoric of change is manifest in individual lives.

Proffering Practice

After watching an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, leafing through *O, The Oprah Magazine*, or scanning Winfrey's official Web site (<http://www.oprah.com>), it seems imperative to *do* something. Inevitably, the stories of triumph make you wonder why you haven't; the endless precise advocacies (eat breakfast, spot prevaricators, write more letters, choose a better dentist, employ more fauna as a decorating strategy) and psychological counsel (discover your relationship sin, reconcile with your estranged relative, find your dream, love realistically, work passionately) make you vow to do something, even something small, somehow better. Her magazine is the how-to manual for these prescriptions, with each section devoted to some step of self-improvement. For example, if you have trouble finding ways to schedule your spiritual revolution, each issue of the magazine includes a calendar. Such a document should be familiar to anyone who has picked up a contemporary magazine named for an iconic female. Rosie O'Donnell and Martha Stewart also opened their eponymous magazines with similar schedules of daily aspiration. Whereas Stewart emphasizes the right day to tend perennials or varnish porch chairs, and O'Donnell satirized the genre, Winfrey uses the calendar as a framework for enacting her message in coherent steps. Approximately half of the days of any given month include either inspirational quotations or prescriptive counsel. In the latter category, one might find suggestions about the formation

of a support group, or a topic to focus upon during meditation, or an idea for extending your generosity into the world. On July 28, 2002 the reader is told to “Dare to go out alone (and enjoy it). Start with a play or concert; work up to a dance club or singles bar. After that, who knows?” (“July Calendar” 31). On June 26, 2002: “It’s a privilege to hear someone’s confidences. Practice ‘open’ listening, without interrupting or passing judgment” (“June Calendar” 35). The calendar is a map of suggested practices, littered with details about the precise, minor ways that women can take claim to their time. There is even a dotted line with a scissors on these monthly maps—a place for women to cut it away from the magazine, and post it on a refrigerator. The days of the calendar are prayer beads for Oprah, with each day opening the possibility of difference.

Winfrey’s voice pervades throughout these instructions, simultaneously ordering and modeling her suggestions. It seems as if her every success demands that you wake yourself to *her* levels of alertness and action. She is the paradigmatic result of her prescriptions: it is her body, her business, her couture closet, her favorite novel, and her latest breakfast marmalade that stand as the ideal demonstrations of the successful enactment of *her* advice. The message is made manifest in each of her media modes: here’s what to do, here’s some sage testimony as to the utility of your newly chosen habit, here’s where to go to get it done, and here are some smart products to assist and decorate your process of self-realization. And in case you don’t remember all Winfrey has told you to do, she provides three modes of reminder. The point of this media assault is clear: don’t just watch, *do*. This advocacy of action demands the practical attentions of her viewers; after all, they turned to her in the beginning for some story, some answer, and some community that their own lives had not yet found. The products of her empire are the trail, her advocacies therein the drops of candy, pointing her audience to the correct path. In the space remaining, I will focus on three groupings of practice catalogued within her empire: buying, writing, and reading.

Buying Spirit

In *The World of Goods*, Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood define goods as “ritual adjuncts” and consumption as “a ritual process whose primary

function is to make sense of the inchoate flux of events" (65). This anthropological rendering of consumerism is amply demonstrated in the geography of Oprah Winfrey's empire. Despite her own proclaimed allegiances to the impoverished echelons of society, Winfrey's program tends to propagate a fairly high standard of consumption, recommending everything from lipstick brands to tank tops, honey, pens, computers, and butter trays. Since her shift to "Change Your Life Television," Oprah has used her media outlets to recommend countless objects. She has no fear of specific brand endorsement, and has designed entire shows ("Oprah's Favorite Things," "Transform Your Closet," "Instant Room Makeovers"), columns in her magazine, and segments of her Web site ("Food and Home," "Mind and Body") to advocate the purchase and delighted enjoyment of these brands. Every *O* magazine includes the "O List," a three-page assemblage of a "few things" that Oprah thinks are "just great." Deluxe footwear, beauty products, gourmet snacks, and containers for things you never thought needed containment (such as a bag for airplane slippers) are some of the genres of objects regularly included on this list. For every object posted on the list, there is an accompanying photo and short quote, ostensibly straight from Oprah, describing the highlights of the product and, frequently, a recommendation of the ideal way to use this object. All of the actions proposed alongside objects on the "O List" are actions related to self-indulgence, self-discovery, and shopping.

So, if you decide to pursue the September 23, 2002 *O* magazine monthly calendar recommendation to "Create a notebook labeled Big Dreams. Give each dream its own page and action plan. Every day take a step toward realizing one of your dreams. Track your progress," you will need a notebook to complete this recommendation ("September Calendar" 59). Of course, you could use a 59-cent Mead notebook. However, should you want to feel the dream as you draft it, you may want to splurge on the practice. Check out the August 2002 "O List," which includes just the right "Launch pad" for such a journal—alligator-embossed leather notepads with interchangeable pewter snaps, \$28 and \$54. "These were a gift from my pal Robin McGraw," Oprah writes, "The small one is just right for jotting notes, the big one for jotting dreams" (95). Now you need a pen for "jotting." In January 2002 Oprah recommends a stationary set for \$30 that includes a mock quill pen: "Who knew stationary could be so sensual?" reads the accompanying quote, "Each sheet of paper is handmade, and the quill

pen somehow makes writing more interesting” (69). Every object is listed with its price, as well as the telephone number and Web site for the business that sells the good. “Buying” then is not a mandated practice, but a suggested accompaniment to your overall practice of self-indulgence. “You owe it to everyone you love (including yourself) to find pockets of tranquility in your busy world,” reads Oprah’s introductory comments to her October 2002 issue (“October Calendar” 43). “Buying” is one way to both legitimize independent time (goods must be bought to tend the home) and construct a situation of comfort in your leisure.

The right goods, according to Winfrey’s advocacy, encourage self-indulgence and relaxed reflection among individuals who spend too much time on others, not enough on themselves. “Maybe you’re like so many women I’ve talked to over the years who have suspended their deepest desires in order to accommodate everything and everyone else,” Winfrey writes in *O* magazine. “You ignore the nudge to finally get on with what you know you should be doing.” (“What I Know For Sure,” July 2002, 196) It is tempting to toss Oprah Winfrey’s product endorsements into the ever-expanding pile of contemporary lifestyle outlets including magazines like *Real Simple*, channels like the Food Network, and stores like Pottery Barn and Metropolitan. Yet while those businesses do share Winfrey’s knack for affiliating individual products with holistic lifestyle fantasies, they do not offer the same moral injunction toward consumption. Her encouraged practices of consumption are intended not only to improve an aesthetic or to perfect social position, but also are means to change the experience of living for her viewers. The practice of buying proposes internal and external change for such women, dressing and surrounding them with a material beauty that should be reflected in their spiritual interior.

Writing Spirit

On her Web site and in episodes of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* the practice of journaling has been promoted by Oprah and her team of testimonial experts as a way for women to “discover what you love and then find a way to offer it to others in the form of service, working hard, and also allowing the energy of the universe to lead you” (“Calling All Dreamers” 55). Oprah’s Web site includes extensive descriptions of the

journaling process that might assist this “discovery.” There, women can read how to get started, what to write about, how often to write, and the benefits of journaling.⁴ As women follow Winfrey’s writing assignments, they are told that they will “find” themselves on the page, and discover their truest selves. Winfrey recommends writing as a key motif in the interrogation of the spiritual self.

Winfrey’s Web site suggests that you keep *six* different journals: the daily journal (for “general daily thoughts”), the gratitude journal (“write five things you love every day”), the Spa Girls journal (for your exercise regimen), the discovery journal (“get to know yourself by looking back”), the health journal, and the “create your own journal” (“you can name it whatever you like. It’s yours!”). Obviously, for Winfrey, journal keeping should be a central spiritual practice for her viewers. The ultimate benefits of all this writing are bulleted on the same Web page: self-discovery, less stress, courage to pursue your passion, understanding your past, acquiring a greater sense of peace, and general “awareness” (http://www.oprah.com/journal/journal_howto.jhtml). Winfrey places writing at the center of her commentaries on the spirit and the self. Writing is the first step to an overall process of renewal, transformation, and self-actualization; it is the primary means by which Oprah viewers practice their faith. Daily writing exercises function as the local catechism within the broader auspices of lifestyle “makeovers,” improvements in “attitude,” and the pursuit of “female empowerment.” With the help of “spiritual counselors” Gary Zukav and Marianne Williamson, Oprah Winfrey propagates an entire program of revelation and rejuvenation bent on spiritual fulfillment.

In the hundreds of online journals posted by Oprah viewers, certain tropes reappear that mirror the paradigms established within the conversion narratives of evangelical Puritanism. Scholars agree that these narratives have had an analogous structure, moving from contrition (“I’m sorry for my wayward ways.”) to humiliation (“Everyone can see how awful I am.”) to volition (“I must and can be better.”) to exaltation (“Glory to the God that placed me on this holy path.”) (Stout 39). Religious journals are thus a primary tool of “volition” within evangelical Protestant circles, as they facilitate the process of committing to a better life. In the world of Oprah Winfrey, journals function similarly, as viewers are instructed to write and rewrite in an attempt to demonstrate their loyalty to this new mode of spiritual revelation. On the show, these journals are then condensed into conversion narratives:

they are transformed into montages (in which the writers often read from their journals as the voiceover narrative), and spiritual counselors are called upon to provide interpretations and translations of these testimonial texts. The guests thus serve as confessors to priest-like spiritual counselors, who in turn defer to the divinity (Oprah) for affirmation and the occasional confirming (“oh, that happened to me”) anecdote.

This pattern occurs episode after episode, year after year. Take any given topic—miraculous weight loss, for example—and the majority of that day’s subject will be consigned to first-person testimonial montages, preproduced and collated into the program. On average, there are four testimonials in any given show, each chosen for their diverse sameness—for their physical and cultural dissimilarity (“we all look different”) unified through experiential similarity (“but we all have the same feelings”). Likewise, the narrative trajectory of their experience is programmed into analogy. Case in point: a massive man or woman struggles with obesity due to childhood trauma and/or self-loathing as the result of childhood trauma; this man or woman has a “wake-up call” or an “Aha! Moment” which effectively motivates “change.” The man or woman then loses an enormous amount of weight “the right way” (through balanced diet, exercise, and daily journaling) and emerges spiritually enlightened and psychologically secure. Also, they look much better (assisted in this last step by a Winfrey-funded total makeover). The man or woman spends time thanking God and Oprah for their never-ending support, but ultimately confessing that yes, it was they themselves they have to thank for “taking responsibility” for their lives.⁵ You could fit any sort of person into this narrative—a rich black woman, a poor Asian woman, an unemployed white woman—and still the moral would remain the same.

Reading Spirit

Oprah Winfrey’s relationship to reading is perhaps her most publicized practice. Throughout the well-publicized travails of her book club, Winfrey always recommended nonfiction work on her show and Web site, as well as a large amount of contemporary fiction in her magazine with columns by celebrities on “Books That Made A Difference” and the extensive “Reading Room” with reviews of new books. In addition, her magazine frequently includes tear-out bookmarks with quotations

by famous authors (and readers) to adorn the texts consumed by her consumers.

What is striking about Winfrey's literary advocacy is her choices. Nearly every one of the novels she selected for the original book club followed the same narrative trajectory: a woman, usually of eccentric yet compelling character, experiences an enormous trauma (or has a driving dilemma, such as obesity or a cruel mother). The remainder of the novel follows the woman as she manages the psychological, material, and social aftereffects of this trauma. Usually, the stories conclude on a neutral note: the central character (again, usually a woman) is wiser for her experiences, though on the whole not entirely happy with the way her life has resolved. Obviously, Winfrey believes this paradigmatic plotline will not only resonate with her viewers, but also expresses a universal truth critical to her spiritual work: the suffering of women is universal, unabated, and endured only through solidarity with other women.

To the expanding body of literature on the topic of her success and the substance of her elected literary choices, I would like to suggest that the reading of books under the Oprah umbrella does not go without instruction (McClymond 173–92). Her Web site provides “reading guides” for her monthly picks; her magazine suggests ways in which particular books can help women with particular problems. It is clear from these messages that there is an “Oprah way” to read, with the problems of the reader being negotiated alongside the problems of the characters. This is not peculiar to Oprah, or to most readers: we all read texts in part to find comfort, commonality, and resolution through the fictions of others. “Our stories order our world,” wrote Michel de Certeau (87). Yet reading the Oprah way is to read *only* with the intent to solve the *reader's* dilemmas. The solipsism of the reader is emphasized over the aesthetic of the text, or the potential social critiques offered within the texts. In Oprah's Book Club, social change and literary beauty are appendages to the primary duty of any text: to make the reader feel better.

There are also intimations that the best read is a situational read. Done in the right place, in the right clothes, with the right pillows, the transformative power of reading is maximized. Consider the following description from Oprah's monthly “What I Know For Sure” column in *O* magazine: “In the evenings right before sleep I don't read or watch anything—including late-night news—that would add anxiety . . . I

also keep a gratitude journal and, at the end of a workday, I ‘come down’ by reading a great novel or just sitting with myself to come back to my center—it’s what I call going mindless.”⁶ Notice that here, books are seen as a relaxant. “Great novels” can make one “mindless” as they take a busy woman back to her “center.” In other places, great books are also said to “inspire” change and “comfort” women trapped in unhappy personal plots. The point: Reading is a practice, encouraged to be regular, strategic, and situational. By apportioning “down time” and offering alternate worldviews, reading successfully enacts the principles of the Oprah project.

From the study of this reading as *practice*, I’d like to suggest that through her Book Club, Winfrey has offered a world of women a ritual of dissent—dissent against traditional aesthetic standards and rituals which frequently bar the poor from cultured literary consumption. In this position, I lean on the work of German literary critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). In his “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin attempted to explain how the art market would be changed by mass industrialization. Unlike many of his intellectual peers, Benjamin did not think that increased levels of technology necessarily obliterated the individual value of art. Rather, Benjamin argued that by offering more people the opportunity to consume artifacts of culture, mass production could be seen as a revolutionary, rather than dehumanizing force of intellectual change.⁷ By proffering accessible tactics for literacy consumption, Winfrey may have established reading as liberation; however, by consolidating the plots of her varied choices into her homogenized moral universe, she may have constructed a whole new aesthetic prison. Textual interpretations outside those affirmed by Winfrey are condemned as willfully indifferent to the spiritual revelations highlighted by her sermonic renderings.

The Religion of Oprah?

This is only the beginning of what must necessarily be a broad exploration of the themes, ideologies, and practices embedded within the documents of the Oprah Winfrey empire. Yet, we began with a simple concern—how do we determine the religious—and we are left no nearer to an answer. Through a study of prescriptive language, we

certainly found a porthole into potentially doctrinal language and ritual behavior. Yet Winfrey herself would resist our cataloging, and it is difficult for the scholar to evade her loathe for talk of “religion.” She eschews the label constantly, saying that she believes in a “spiritual” path, not religious doctrine. But for scholars of religion, this is a delicious duplicity: talk of spirituality is often a means to whitewash newfound dogma. Consider the following encounter:

The October 5, 2001 episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, “Islam 101,” included an interview with an American University professor of Islamic studies, a teleconference with Queen Rania of Jordan, and a profile of a reporter with the *Chicago Tribune*, Noreen. Introducing the segment on Noreen, Winfrey said, “Take a look at how Noreen incorporates Islamic traditions into her modern life.” The audience then followed a day in Noreen’s life, observing her affinity for rock music and commitment to family, her observance of *hijab* and careful application of make-up. Noreen used the phrase “just like any other American” four times in her video monologue.

After the Noreen montage, Winfrey opened the discussion to the audience, which included several other Muslim women in analogous professional and domestic situations. Their conversation emphasized the universality of women’s issues regardless of religious affiliation, and the prejudicial threats facing Muslim-American communities since the September 11 attack. As Winfrey closed her show, she thanked all of her guests, giving particular attention to her Muslim women:

Winfrey: And thank you, Queen Rania of Jordan, Ambassador Maleeha Lodhi, Noreen and Minal, thank you modern Muslim women. [*Smiling, hands outstretched.*] Modern Muslim women. Join us online at Oprah.com. [*Fist in the air.*] Modern Muslim women!

Such an odd moment of televised gratitude. Any regular viewer of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* could report that “modern” is not a standard Oprah idiom. More to the point, her enthusiasm about the adjective was noteworthy. On this day, being modern mattered. These women were not ordinary Muslims, they were *modern* Muslims, Muslims who worked and raised children and bought Victoria’s Secret lingerie. Religious yet accessible, faithful yet earthly, moral yet hip: modern Muslim women!

While there are several questions appropriate for the scholar of religion about the phrasing of Oprah’s exclamatory, I would like to

focus on the adjective. The juxtaposition of “modern” with “Muslim” is intriguing, suggesting that for the speaker, not all Muslims are modern. What differentiates a modern Muslim from a Muslim without such an adjectival honorific? Recall the focus on Noreen’s career, her egalitarian marriage, and her enjoyment of Bruce Springsteen. Noreen is “just like” any other Oprah viewer, with sweet but exhausting children, a demanding but meaningful job, and a passion for the perfect lip color. Thus, the *modern* Muslim woman is not merely a Muslim who wouldn’t hijack a plane or toss a pipe bomb, but she is also a religious believer who does not allow religion to interfere with her love of country or consumption. Oprah’s Muslims are “just like any other American,” except with different accessories. Religious difference in Oprah’s America is a fashion choice rather than a theological commitment, a translatable cultural context rather than an exclusivist worldview. The difference between a “modern” Muslim and a Muslim lacking modernity is that modern Muslims do not do anything that would disrupt the cult of capitalism. For Oprah, modern religious identity is an afterthought to middle class life.

Thus, Oprah’s disavowal of religion and religious doctrine is a slight of hand: she endorses some modes of theological existence, but dislikes many more. For her, religion belies control and oppression and the inability to catalog shop. The only way religion or religious belief works for Oprah is if it is carefully coordinated with capitalist pleasure. Thus, the turn to “spirituality”: the non-dogmatic dogma that encourages an ambiguous theism alongside an exuberant consumerism. All religions can be “spiritual,” says Oprah, if you just look hard enough. Thus, in Oprah’s religious cosmos Buddhism isn’t about meditation and renunciation, it’s about beaded bracelets and yummy incense; Christianity isn’t about Christ’s apocalyptic visions or the memorization of creeds, it’s about a friendly guy named Jesus and his egalitarian message. As long as you can spend, feel good about yourself, and look good, your religious belief will be tolerated on Planet O. The Religion of Oprah is the incorporated faith of late-capitalist America.

But is it a *religion*? If we lived in the intellectually suspicious era of late-nineteenth century scholarship, there would be no question that Oprah Winfrey defines her own religion. It was during this epoch that British historian and essayist Sir John Robert Seeley (1834–1895) confidently asserted that the “elementary state of religion” is a

“habitual and permanent admiration” (87). With her ritual reception of adulation, Winfrey meets Seeley’s most elementary expectations. Yet, we live in a more opaque definitional moment. Today we are so uncertain of how to define religion that we either argue against its very existence (Smith 1963, Fitzgerald 2000), decide that its definition is our only job (Arnal 2000), or attempt to allay all methodological anxiety with the summary comment that religion is whatever we want it to be (McCutcheon 1997). No matter your position in the wars of definition, the empire of Oprah Winfrey remains a necessary topic for our dispute and discussion. We, as scholars, must continue to seek common classificatory vocabularies for our analysis of topics within the incorporated morass of popular culture. Winfrey’s disdain for institutions, anxiety about all forms of tradition, and her advocacy of an ostensible spiritual “pluralism” (not to mention her status as the CEO of a very for-profit corporation) suggests that by contemporary legal and academic standards Harpo Productions is not a choate religious organization. Nevertheless, Oprah Winfrey continues to practice her own self-perfection, leaving in her multimedia wake a trail of prescriptive liturgy for all who hunger to follow.

NOTES

1. This is the brilliance of the montage: it produces your favorite vision of yourself. Have you ever wondered what will be said at your funeral? An *Oprah* montage gives you your fantasy funeral oratory, with everyone you love crafting compliments they were unable to articulate in your presence, but can express with the help of a camcorder, a polished producer, and a makeover. Note that here, the eulogy has a peculiar end: although the montage scrupulously documents the sacrificial labors of the woman—labors which can obviously never be “repaid,” according to her family’s testimonies—the montage also serves as a tunnel to material reward. Oprah’s excessive material generosity is received as an overabundance (“it’s all too much”), even though the spiritual testimony of the montage seemed to argue that nothing can repay female martyrdom.
2. Anthropologist J. C. Heestermann describes an analogous process:

[The ritual] has nothing to say about the world, its concerns and conflicts. It proposes, on the contrary, a separate, self-contained world ruled exclusively by the comprehensive and exhaustive order of the ritual. (3)The world of Oprah Winfrey is that self-contained world, that world apart from the mundane and arbitrary rules of ordinary existence. When women enter her studio, they are merely mothers, wives, workers, and tenders. They leave as princesses. Every one—even those without the crown—can now imagine the possibility of coronation if only they gave just a little bit more. Or, if they shopped at the right places:

WINFREY: We have so many people to thank for helping us pull off our very first ever Princess for a Day extravaganza—Joe Rizza Ford, Sears, Roebuck & Company—There’s Sears—Crate and Barrel and NYC and Company for putting together Fannie’s trip to the

Big Apple. Thank you to Debi Lilly from Perfect Event for making our studio look so beautiful. Also our thanks go to Tiaras.com. And get yourself a crown yourself. It makes you feel very special just to wear one.

Winfrey closes every “makeover” show (and “makeover” shows comprise about 18% of her product roster) with this practice of product recognition.

3. The major exception is Eva Illouz’s *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery: An Essay on Popular Culture*, which uses the terms of contemporary cultural studies to argue that Winfrey is a “moral entrepreneur.” Whereas Illouz tends to emphasize the psychological impact of Winfrey’s message(s), my own focus is on the prescriptive adamancy of Winfrey’s products. Other scholars have also tackled the therapeutic evangelicalism of Winfrey’s television show; see in particular the work of Kathryn Lowney and Janice Peck.
4. After “finding a comfortable position in a chair” and “clearing your mind,” you should let your “thoughts and emotions flow freely . . . be risky. Be daring. Be you.” To women “struggling to get started,” journalist Michele Weldon offers the following advice: “When the fear of writing is upon you, write anyway; move beyond the superficial; quiet down; check out the flip side; and re-read your work.” *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. July 14, 2004. (http://www.oprah.com/tows/pastshows/tows_2002/tows_past_20020624_b.jhtml.)
5. Take, for example, the story of this woman, who lost 190 pounds:

My name is Ginny San Pollard. I was a size 26 and XXXL. Being over 340 pounds, it was miserable. Anything that I did in my life on a daily basis, whether it’s pushing a grocery cart or going out in the street to get your mail, everything was a struggle. I let a lot of my life go by, and all from overeating. Then, I went to the doctor and he told me I would die if I didn’t make a change. Oprah helped me with my weight loss journey because she encourages her audience not only for weight loss but to keep a daily journal. I wrote my daily caloric intakes and I would weigh myself and I would have different graphs of how I lost my weight. I would put pictures of me fat and as I lost weight I would—would put thinner ones in there. In one of my journals I wrote a letter to Oprah. “It amazes me that someone from so far away who has never met me could change my life.” (“Incredible Weight-Loss Stories”)

It is important that you imagine this testimonial read over a set of photographs from Ginny—photographs that show how she transformed herself, and images of the motivational collages she made that incorporated photos of Oprah. This is a conversion narrative facilitated by Oprah’s prescriptions and Oprah’s symbolic omnipresence in Ginny’s life.

6. “What I Know For Sure,” (0, *The Oprah Magazine* Oct. 2002: 296). Oprah frequently provides images of herself in comfortable contexts for her readers to enjoy and emulate. In a column about her belief in miracles she writes that a miracle is “having pomegranate, kiwi, and mango on a pretty tray for breakfast.” (“What I Know For Sure,” 0, *The Oprah Magazine* June 2002: 230.)
7. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, Ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968). For further analysis of reading practices in capitalist culture, see John Storey, *Cultural Consumption and Everyday Life* (London: Arnold, 1999): 61–75.

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