

# Spirituality according to Oprah

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**O**prah bounds in, giving high-fives to her studio audience. Today's guest is Gary Zukav, author of *The Seat of the Soul*, *Soul Stories*, and *The Dancing Wu-Li Masters*. I smile as I watch them interact. Despite their distinctly different personalities—Oprah is outgoing and gregarious while Zukav is quiet and thoughtful—their mutual respect and affection for one another is obvious. Their collaboration as host and guest began a few years ago when she sought him out, like a student seeking a spiritual master, after

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she read *Seat of the Soul* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989). Their relationship has evolved to friendship, and Oprah often translates Zukav's more obscure statements into plain language for the viewing audience. They laugh easily with one another.

I began watching The Oprah Winfrey Show a few years ago, when I was struggling with depression and fighting to keep from drowning in feelings of uncertainty and powerlessness. I found solace in Oprah. She comes across as best girlfriend, someone with

whom one can both cry and laugh. Plus, I admire Oprah. In a medium that prefers small white women who keep their minds to themselves, she has succeeded as a large African-American woman with a mind of her own and the will to speak it.

Clearly I am not the only who admires Oprah. Her program is broadcast to 119 countries, including Japan, Norway, Israel, China, the Netherlands, and South Africa. In 1998, *Time* magazine proclaimed Oprah one of the most influential people in the twentieth century. Every week viewers send nearly 25,000 letters and e-mail messages to the show offices. Her web-site, [www.oprah.com](http://www.oprah.com), receives nearly 3,000 visits a day. This past

spring she branched into other media with the publication of her own magazine, *O*. She also is CEO of Harpo Productions, a television and film production company, which recently won an Emmy for “Tuesdays with Morrie,” a made-for-television movie based on the non-fiction book by the same title.

Ah, yes. Oprah and books. In 1996 Oprah decided to begin an on-air book club to encourage people to read contemporary books. Each month she announces a new title, and instantly the selection becomes a bestseller. The National Book Association recently honored Oprah because of her impact on the publishing world through her book club.

As I moved through the turbulent waters of depression I watched Oprah regularly and often read the books she suggested as a way to find comfort. My prayers had become ruminations on my depression, and my Scripture reading provided little solace. Perhaps watching Oprah consoled me because she talks so openly about her own struggles and triumphs. She seems like a kindred spirit in the quest to live a meaningful life, with integrity. Because Oprah grew up within the black church, she is intimately acquainted with the rich tradition of religious language and imagery.

In my years of Oprah-watching I have discovered others in churches who are also touched by her. Just last week a church

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member told me she had discovered Oprah’s web-site and really enjoys it. “I’m keeping a daily gratitude journal on it,” she said happily. Later she e-mailed me that, as recommended on the web-site, she is beginning to try meditation in addition to her regular intercessory prayer practice.

Oprah uses a blend of psychology and spirituality in her media ventures. In 1996, she changed the focus of her television program to reflect the current blend. On her web page, Oprah describes the mission statement of the program: “I am guided by the vision of what I

believe this show can be,’ explains Oprah Winfrey. ‘Originally our goal was to uplift, enlighten, encourage and entertain through the medium of television. Now, our mission statement for The Oprah

Winfrey Show is to use television to transform peoples' lives, to make viewers see themselves differently and to bring happiness and a sense of fulfillment into every home.”

While Oprah does not promote a particular religious faith, she uses language that can fit into the lexicon of a specific religion. Her own religious history gives her language a certain authority. For example, she uses the word “transcend” to describe an effort toward self-improvement: “She is trying to transcend her bad habits.”

Another word Oprah uses frequently is “soul.” She works from the definition of soul provided by Zukav in *The Seat of the Soul*. Zukav distinguishes between soul and personality, believing that our personality serves our soul. He writes, “Your soul is that part of you that is immortal. Every person has a soul, but a personality that is limited in its perception to the five senses is not aware of its soul, and, therefore, cannot recognize the influences of its soul.” Zukav believes our souls make up the universe, exist outside of time, and are therefore simultaneously incarnated. “The perspective of the soul is immense, and the perception of the soul is without the limitations of the personality. Souls that have chosen the physical experience of life as we know it as a path of evolution, have, in general, incarnated their energies many times into many psychological and physical forms. For each incarnation, the soul creates a different personality and body.” In addition to being a frequent guest on her program, Zukav has a column in Oprah’s magazine, and a web-page ([www.zukav.com](http://www.zukav.com)) that her staff helped him create.

Oprah also uses the word “spirit” in all of her media. Included in every episode of her talk show is the “Remembering Our Spirit” segment. In taped testimonials guests or viewers reflect on how they are remembering their spirit. Some segments deal with clear disciplines or spiritual practices such as prayer or meditation or journal writing, while others may involve “finding time for myself to take a bubble bath with aromatherapy candles.” On “About Spirit” on the Oprah web page one reads, “Your Spirit is at the core of who you truly are. We often forget to connect to this part of ourselves because of our busy schedules and full lives. But it is important to take the time to Remember Your Spirit to keep yourself centered and open to all the possibilities and joy you can

bring into your life... How Do You Remember Your Spirit?

Everyone has an activity or process that they do to restore their sense of spirit, peace and well-being. And often, it's something simple that may not take a lot of time." Spirit for Oprah is self-referential. On her web-site she is quoted as describing spirit as "being reminded about the best part of who you are."

The spiritual practices Oprah encourages are numerous and remarkably similar to some classic spiritual disciplines. Oprah routinely urges viewers, and now readers, to practice reflection. She believes in the benefits of journal writing and often refers to her own practice of it. She includes a "gratitude journal," every evening noting five things from that day for which she is grateful.

My gratitude journal was a lifeline during my bleak days, disciplining me each day to identify five things to be grateful for. Recently I re-read those entries and was moved to recall the simple things I thanked God for, like the delightful faces of daffodils pushing through the snow. In the summer of that time I took a small group of youth to a mission work-camp in Harlan, Kentucky. Each night, after the lights were out, I asked the girls in my room to name three things from that day for which they were grateful. This practice became meaningful for us as we shared the things that had touched us, or laughed hard at a funny incident. At the end of the week, when I fell asleep as soon as I crawled into bed, they took the initiative to observe the ritual of gratitude, with my snoring providing a backdrop. Six months later, one of the girls told me she was continuing the practice in her own journal.

Another practice Oprah advocates is giving back to the community. She personally donates millions of dollars to various causes. As a way to help viewers give back to the community, she began Oprah's Angel Network in 1997. During its first year the program raised more than \$3.5 million through spare change and private donations, and provided college scholarships for 150 students in need. Also, the Angel Network has built nearly 200 houses across the United States with Habitat for Humanity. Oprah likes to call this "Giving away our lives."

And reading. Oprah passionately believes in the spiritual practice of soulful reading. In addition to the fiction she selects for the book club, she also recommends other books for her viewers

and readers. One book she has recommended for four years is *Simple Abundance: A Daybook of Comfort and Joy*, by Sarah Ban Breathnach (New York: Warner Bks., 1995).

*Simple Abundance* is a daily guide for women, about finding their authentic selves. This book also became a lifeline for me. In the early pages of the book Ban Breathnach writes, “At the heart of *Simple Abundance* is an authentic awakening, one that resonates within your soul: you already possess all you need to be genuinely happy. The way you reach that awareness is through an inner journey that brings about an emotional, psychological, and spiritual transformation. A deep inner shift in your reality occurs, aligning you with the creative energy of the Universe. Such

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change is possible when you invite Spirit to open up the eyes of your awareness to the abundance that is already yours.” A few days later she continues: “There are six principles that will act as guides as we make our inner journey over the next year. These are the six threads of abundant living which, when woven together, produce a tapestry of contentment that wraps us in inner peace, well-being, happiness, and a sense of security. First there is *gratitude*. When we do a mental and spiritual inventory of all that we have, we realize that we are very rich indeed. Gratitude

gives way to *simplicity*—the desire to clear, pare down, and realize the essentials of what we need to live truly well. Simplicity brings with it *order*, both internally and externally. A sense of order in our life brings us *harmony*. Harmony provides us with the inner peace we need to appreciate the *beauty* that surrounds us each day, and beauty opens us to *joy*.”

*Simple Abundance* has sold millions since it was published in 1995. And it has influenced scores of women, among them women in our churches. About a year and a half ago, I saw a woman sitting near the back of a sanctuary reading *Simple Abundance* during the worship service! Afterward I gently teased her about it. She lowered her voice and confessed, “I get more out of this than I do the sermon or the church service.” I sighed inwardly. I knew this woman was struggling with the worship style

of the congregation but I had no idea how to create a bridge for her between what she was finding in *Simple Abundance* and the congregation's worship.

The spiritual philosophy Oprah promotes is empowering (a favorite Oprah word) for women. She routinely tells women that they have value, that their words, their stories are important. She gives women a voice and encourages them to trust their voice. What saddens me is that this empowerment for women comes from popular culture and not from the church. The church's

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history of empowering women is brief, sporadic, and ambivalent, at best. Although women are filling many pulpits across North America, their voices are still sometimes regarded as suspect. Furthermore, women affirming other women occurs much more in structured settings such as women's retreats, rather than within our congregations—in worship, in Sunday school, even in church meetings. Pastors and spiritual directors ought to pay attention to what Oprah is teaching, to better understand her influence

on the women in our churches. Pastors and church leaders would do well to take lessons from Oprah on creating a safe environment in which women can share their experiences of God. As a pastor, I wonder: How can I communicate to the women in my congregation that they are valued? How can I create places in our worship and community life where women can articulate their stories and learn to trust their wisdom?

I think pastors need to reframe the spiritual disciplines not as “oughts” but as sources of life. Over and over, the testimonies from Oprah's viewers about their daily journal writing and daily meditating underscore the life-giving nature of these spiritual disciplines. I'm convinced that pastors who practice these disciplines will also find that they give us life to minister.

Oprah shows us that people are longing for meaning and significance in their lives. They want to know they have a reason to be, a purpose for existing. And they seek practical help in living out that purpose. In some ways, Oprah addresses our existential dilemmas. How, as pastors, can we follow her lead?

Perhaps one approach would be to return to the question of “call”: What is God calling each of us to do? What gifts do I have, and how can those gifts be used in fulfilling my call? There is something refreshing in the simplicity with which Oprah encourages us to discover our purpose and then just do it.

I don’t watch Oprah so much anymore. I’ve passed through the depression and have energy to relate more deeply with friends. Also, I don’t need Oprah’s affirmation, as I’ve discovered other ways of being affirmed. But I do read her magazine and I am intrigued with the novels she chooses for her book discussions. I continue to admire her and watch, from a distance, her impact on women in our churches and in the rest of the world.