



BILL GEORGE

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Oprah!

Oprah Winfrey's excitement grew as she described her passion and her commitment to reading, to promoting great books, and to changing the lives of African women. Attending the Nobel Peace Prize dinner in honor of recipient Dr. Wangari Maathai in December, 2004, Oprah talked enthusiastically about taking books and school supplies to children in Ethiopia and visiting the new Boarding School for African Women that she had underwritten in South Africa with \$30 million in grants from her personal foundation. She went on to describe how pleased she was with the reception of her book club and, in particular, her choice to recommend Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, which subsequently sold over one million copies in six weeks. Oprah credited her grandmother—a woman Oprah said was barely literate—for introducing her to reading from the Bible and igniting her passion to explore the world through literature.

By most estimates the wealthiest woman in the entertainment industry, Oprah had built an entertainment empire—production studio, magazine, book club and the daytime talk show that started it all—on the strength of her authenticity when speaking, her commitment to being herself at all times, and her relentless work ethic. In 2002, *Forbes* magazine recognized her as the first African American woman to become a billionaire, a result of the phenomenal success of her production company, Harpo.¹

Oprah believed in openly sharing the experiences of her youth that shaped her development and enabled her to succeed in the entertainment industry.

Oprah's Formative Years

Oprah Winfrey was born on January 29, 1954, in Kosciusko, Mississippi, on her grandparents' farm. Her 18-year-old mother Vernita Lee had been only briefly acquainted with her father, a 20-year old soldier stationed in Alabama named Vernon Winfrey. While the family had little disposable income, they ate well on the food that her grandmother grew in the farm garden. Oprah recalled standing on the back porch of the farmhouse, watching her grandmother boiling the laundry outside in a large cauldron:

I came to live with my grandmother because I was a child born out of wedlock, and my mother moved to the North. I was left with my grandmother. It probably saved my life. It is the reason why I am where I am today. As a young child, I had a vision, not of what I wanted

Professor Bill George and Research Associate Andrew N. McLean prepared this case. This case was developed from published sources. HBS cases are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

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to accomplish, but I knew that somehow my life would be different and it would be better. I remember absolutely feeling it about around four years old. I remember thinking, "My life won't be like this. It will be better." It wasn't from a place of arrogance; it was just a place of knowing that things could be different for me somehow.²

A precocious child, Oprah learned to read at an early age and was reciting speeches in church from the age of three. These experiences endowed her with a reservoir of self-confidence. She recalled:

All the sisters sitting in the front row would fan themselves and turn to my grandmother and say, "Ida Mae, this child is gifted." I heard that enough that I started to believe it. . . . I didn't even know what gifted meant, but I just thought it meant I was special. . . . My grandmother gave me the foundation for success that I was allowed to continue to build upon. My grandmother taught me to read, and that opened the door to all kinds of possibilities for me. . . . I loved books so much as a child. They were my outlet to the world.³

At age six, Oprah went to live with her mother and younger half-sister in Milwaukee. Her bed was in the apartment foyer because space was so limited. Her mother struggled financially, and Oprah's half-sister was the object of affection that Oprah never received. The arrangement ended after less than a year when her mother sent her to live with her father in Nashville, Tennessee, at the end of her first year in school.⁴

Vernon Winfrey, by then the owner of a beauty salon and adjacent grocery store, provided a stable and strict environment bounded by church and school. Describing her childhood in Tennessee, Oprah remembered:

Church was my life. Baptist Training Union. Every black child in the world who grew up in the church knows about B.T.U. You did Sunday school, you did the morning service, which started at 11 and didn't end until 2:30, you had dinner on the ground in front of the church, and then you'd go back in for the 4 o'clock service. It was forever, oh, it was forever. It was how you spent your life. At a Sunday-school performance—all weekend—they'd say, "And little Miss Winfrey is here to do the recitation."⁵

Her father set a home environment of strict discipline and high standards. "I couldn't imagine a human being so strict," she recalled:

As strict as he was, he had some concerns about me making the best of my life, and would not accept anything less than what he thought was my best. I remember my father saying to me, "You can't bring C's into this house because you are not a C student. If you were a C student you could, because I'm not trying to make you do or be anything you can't be. But you are not a C student; you are an A student. So that's what we expect in this house." It was so matter-of-fact. And I knew he was not faking it one bit. I never even tried to bring in a C because I realized that it was just not acceptable.⁶

Mrs. Duncan, Oprah's fourth-grade teacher, became her greatest inspiration. Oprah idolized her teacher for years afterwards. She had previously wanted to be a missionary or minister, but then changed her aspirations to school teacher: "The fourth grade was when I first began to believe in myself. For the first time I believed I could do almost anything. I felt I was the queen bee. I felt I could control the world. . . . The kids used to poke fun at me all the time. It didn't bother me because I was so inspired."⁷

In the Crucible

The summer after her fourth-grade year in school, Oprah's mother, expecting soon to be married, brought her back to Milwaukee. The environment was still overcrowded and unsupervised, and Oprah suffered. She still excelled in school and obtained a scholarship to a newly integrated private high school.⁸ Yet outside of school she rebelled against her mother and fell victim to sexual predators. She said she was first raped by a cousin while at an uncle's house at the age of nine, the first of several molestations by several different family members that lasted the entire time she lived with her mother: "I was raped by a cousin and then later sexually molested by a friend of the family, and then by an uncle. It was just an ongoing, continuous thing. So much so, that I started to think, you know, 'This is the way life is.'"⁹

She eventually tried running away from home.¹⁰ When her mother could not place her in a juvenile detention center, Oprah was again sent to live with her father. She managed only for a while to conceal from him that she was pregnant. At the age of 14 she gave premature birth to a child who lived only two weeks.¹¹

Back in the refuge of her father's house, Oprah reconstructed her life around the twin poles of school and church. An avid reader, she populated her life with characters from her reading. She said she was particularly affected by Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*:

It was the book that moved me most when I was growing up. . . . I had a tree in my backyard, too, so I identified with her. . . . And then I discovered Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Well, first of all, it was the first time I had ever encountered another woman who had been sexually abused. I could not imagine. I felt that way, too, when I read [Alice Walker's] *The Color Purple*. I read the first page, put the book down, and wept. I could not believe it, that someone had put this in writing.¹²

A Career Talking

Oprah's media career began in 1971 when she was selected as one of two Tennessee students to attend the White House Conference on Youth. As a 17-year-old high school senior, Oprah received publicity that led to invitations to enter talent and beauty contests. During one Nashville contest, Oprah focused on her career goal to be a broadcast journalist:

Everybody wanted to be a nurse, or a teacher, and I made this big speech about broadcast journalism—mainly because I had seen Barbara Walters that morning on *The Today Show*. So I thought, "Well, what can I be? I can't be a nurse, can't be a teacher, because that's what they were." So I said I wanted to be a broadcast journalist because I believed in the truth. I was interested in proclaiming the truth to the world.¹³

She won the contest. When she returned to the local radio station that had sponsored her to collect her prizes, management offered her the chance to listen to herself on tape. Because of her facility at reading news copy offered to her, she was hired as a newscaster, an afternoon job she continued while studying at Tennessee State University. She described the stress she felt working long hours on the job and in school while at the same time being criticized by her peers:

It was very uncomfortable for me at first, because when I first started as a broadcaster, I was nineteen. Very insecure. Thrown into television, pretending to be Barbara Walters, looking nothing like her. And still going to college. . . . I had to take the heat from my college

classmates—I went to an all-black college—with them calling me a token. And I used to say, “Yeah, but I’m a paid token.”¹⁴

Before graduating Oprah left college and took a job at Baltimore’s largest television station. After a short time, she began to fear that she was about to be fired. She was taken off the evening news, and moved to *People Are Talking*, an early morning interview show. There, she immediately felt at home. “I came off the air thinking, ‘This is what I should have been doing,’ because it was like breathing to me. You just talk.”¹⁵

A Media Mogul

Her morning show consistently beat other nationally syndicated talk shows in local ratings, including then-dominant Phil Donahue, and saved her broadcast career. After several years in Baltimore, Oprah began to look farther afield. In 1984 she moved to a Chicago television station to host *AM Chicago*, and was an immediate success. In Oprah’s first syndicated year, her talk show won the first of more than 25 daytime Emmy awards. Within two years, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* was the highest-rated talk show in Chicago and preparations were made for national syndication. At the same time she appeared in the film version of *The Color Purple*, a role for which she received an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actress.

With advice from her lawyer, Oprah bought control of her show and founded Harpo, her closely held production studio, to produce her television and movie projects. In the 1990s she began to invest in other media ventures, including the *Oxygen* cable network and *O, The Oprah Magazine*.¹⁶ Widely recognized as the wealthiest African American woman in entertainment, Oprah felt that her development as a talk-show host and businesswoman had been strongly guided by the lessons she learned in coming to terms with her early life.

The Oprah Winfrey Show became the most popular television show in the United States and held its number-one spot for more than 10 years. It was seen each week by 21 million viewers in 105 countries. In 1996, Oprah launched Oprah’s Book Club to spread her passion for reading fine literature among all her viewers. She was awarded a “Lifetime Achievement Award” by the National Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1998, and the following year *Time* magazine named her one of the 100 Most Influential People of the 20th Century. In 2000, she launched Oprah’s Angel Network, a foundation that granted \$100,000 “Use Your Own Life” awards to people who had made significant differences in the lives of others.¹⁷

Oprah Reflects on Her Message

When asked about the theme of her show, Oprah generally replied, “The message has always been the same: You are responsible for your life.”¹⁸ To her, taking responsibility meant overcoming the experiences that led a person to create or accept situations that they did not want. In the case of her own life, Oprah explained:

The lesson that you learn from allowing yourself to be abused as a child is an ongoing lesson. What . . . causes a child to be abused is the same thing that causes you to be abused as an adult. I was the kind of child who was always searching for love and affection and attention, and somebody to say, . . . “Yes, you are worthy.” . . . That, to me, has been the greatest lesson of my life: to recognize that I am solely responsible for it, . . . and not living my life to please other people, but doing what my heart says all the time.

I know *many, many* women who were sexually abused, internalize it, and then allow themselves to abuse themselves later on in life. You just don't allow yourself to be all that you can be . . . I don't believe that anything happens without a reason.¹⁹

The talk-show medium showcased her talents while simultaneously fueling her own self-discovery. In overcoming the scars of her history of sexual abuse, Oprah described an episode while hosting a show in which she had her most profound breakthrough in coming to terms with the experience:

I was in the middle of an interview. It was on that day that for the first time I recognized that I was not to blame. I became a sexually promiscuous teenager, and got myself into a lot of trouble, and believed I was responsible for it. It wasn't until I was thirty-six years old, thirty-six, that I connected the fact, "Oh that's why I was that way." I always blamed myself.²⁰

While Oprah had found enormous professional and financial success, she looked at her own personal growth and development as her greatest success:

It's very difficult for me to even see myself as successful because I still see myself as in the process of becoming successful. To me, "successful" is getting to the point where you are absolutely comfortable with yourself. And it does not matter how many things you have acquired.

The ability to learn to say "no" and not feel guilty about it is the greatest success I have achieved. The fact that I have, in the public's eye, done whatever, is fine. It's all a part of a process for growing for me. But for me to have the kind of internal strength and internal courage it takes to say, "No, I will not let you treat me this way," is what success is all about.

It's okay if you say "no," and then people don't like you. That's really okay. The important thing is how you feel about what you are doing, how you feel about yourself. It's a long struggle, though. And I'm just hoping that in the work that I do on the show, and in the speaking that I do around the country, that young people can get the lesson sooner than I did.²¹

Finding Her Voice

The lessons of authenticity were slow to take root, said Oprah, chiefly because of her preoccupation with creating a professional persona rather than finding her own authentic voice:

When I first started out . . . I was pretending to be somebody I was not. I was pretending to be Barbara Walters. So I'd go to a news conference, and I was more interested in how I phrased the question, how eloquent the question sounded, as opposed to listening to the answer. Which always happens when you are interested in impressing people instead of doing what you are supposed to be doing. And it took me a while.

Having failed in venues ranging from individual broadcasts to being demoted from co-anchor, Oprah in time found that the most reliable indicator of success entailed the fit between her role and her "natural instinct." She explained:

The most important thing to get ahead is the ability to seek truth in your life. You have to be honest with yourself. You can be pursuing a profession because your parents say it's the best thing. You can be pursuing a profession because you think you will make a lot of money.

You can be pursuing a profession because you think you are going to get a lot of attention. None of that will do you any good if you are not being honest with yourself.

Honesty comes from your natural instinct telling you when you are doing something, whether or not this feels right. You feel a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment and worthiness to the world, in such a way that you know that you are doing the right thing. You don't have to ask anybody. From the very first day I did my very first talk show, I knew it. I knew it was the right thing to do.²²

As a result of these lessons, Oprah committed herself to being immersed in every aspect of her business operations, from negotiating deals to signing even the smallest business checks.

When you get me, you are not getting an image. You are not getting a figurehead. You're not getting a theme song. You're getting all of me. And I bring all of my stuff with me: my history, my past, Mississippi, Nashville. I'm coming with the sistahs in the church, I'm bringing Sojourner Truth with me.²³

She acknowledged that this style may have narrowed the field of possible business deals, but claimed it had been a defining element of the deals that were made. "She's definitely on a different plane," said a participant in a business deal. "It's all about character with Oprah. We investment bankers do the same sort of thing—trying to figure out what people are made of—but with Oprah, it's like someone is looking into your soul."²⁴

Oprah said she recognized that she had an incredible opportunity to influence the lives of her listeners:

The greatest thing about what I do is that I'm in a position to change people's lives. It is the most incredible platform for influence that you could imagine. (I want) people to see within each show that you are responsible for your life, that although there may be tragedy in your life, there's always a possibility to triumph. The ability to triumph begins with you. Always.

The one thing that has allowed me to achieve both material success and spiritual success is the ability to listen to my instinct. I call it my inner voice. It's the ability to understand the difference between what your heart is saying and what your head is saying. I now always go with the heart. . . . I am where I am today because I have allowed myself to listen to my feelings.

I truly believe that the reason I've been able to be so financially successful is because my focus has never, ever for one minute been money. . . . I would do this job, and take on a second job to make ends meet if nobody paid me. Just for the opportunity to do it. That's how you know you are doing the right thing.²⁵

Giving Back

Oprah was committed to using her financial wealth to reach out and help others. For most of her life she donated 10% of her income to charitable causes.²⁶ In later years, most of this was channeled through the Oprah Winfrey Foundation, which focused on education, most visibly in support of historically black colleges and universities in the United States and in Africa. Beginning in 2002, she announced her \$30 million endowment of the new Boarding School for African Women, an effort to which she was devoting a lot of her personal time.

Reflecting on her own experience and her goals for her philanthropy, she said:

When you educate a woman, you set her free. Had I not had the books and education in Mississippi, I would have believed that's all there was. I don't think you ever stop giving. It's not just about being able to write a check. It's being able to touch somebody's life in such a way that Mrs. Duncan touched mine. It's being able to make a child see the light in him or herself.²⁷

Endnotes

- ¹ Patricia Sellers, "The Business of Being Oprah," *Fortune Magazine* (April 1, 2002), p. 50.
- ² Quoted in Academy of Achievement, "Oprah Winfrey Interview," Academy of Achievement Web site, <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/win0int-1>, accessed February 2, 2005.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Helen S. Garson, *Oprah Winfrey: A Biography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), pp. 15–16.
- ⁵ Quoted in Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, "The Importance of Being Oprah," *New York Times Magazine* (June 11, 1989), p. 54.
- ⁶ Quoted in Academy of Achievement, "Oprah Winfrey Interview."
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Garson, *Oprah Winfrey*, pp. 22–23.
- ⁹ Quoted in Academy of Achievement, "Oprah Winfrey Interview."
- ¹⁰ Garson, *Oprah Winfrey*, p. 22.
- ¹¹ Quoted in Harrison, "The Importance of Being Oprah," p. 48.
- ¹² Quoted in Academy of Achievement, "Oprah Winfrey Interview."
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Sellers, "The Business of Being Oprah."
- ¹⁷ Oprah.com, "About Oprah," Web site of Harpo Productions, Inc., <http://www2.oprah.com/about/about_landing.jhtml>, accessed February 3, 2005.
- ¹⁸ Quoted in Academy of Achievement, "Oprah Winfrey Interview."
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Quoted in Lynette Clemetson. "'It Is Constant Work': Oprah on Staying Centered, Ambition, Letting Go—and Pajamas," *Newsweek* (January 8, 2001), p. 44.
- ²⁴ Quoted in Sellers, "The Business of Being Oprah."
- ²⁵ Quoted in Academy of Achievement, "Oprah Winfrey Interview."
- ²⁶ Sellers, "The Business of Being Oprah."
- ²⁷ Quoted in Academy of Achievement, "Oprah Winfrey Interview."