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When generosity becomes entertainment

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

In case you haven't heard, this year marks the final season of "Oprah." And she promises that it will be the biggest season *ever*.

She isn't kidding. Just before Thanksgiving, Oprah hosted her annual "Favorite Things" episode. This year's giveaway continued the tradition of the effusive giving of gadgets, clothing, jewelry, cars, and vacation packages. Each audience member walked away with over \$20,000 in gifts.

Screams, tears, sobs, and hyperventilation greeted the announcement of each new item. Oprah even had a team of paramedics waiting backstage, equipped with oxygen and AED machines should the surprises turn out to be truly heart-stopping.

It's an outlandish, frenzied celebration of excess. And nuns may be to blame for all of it.

Oprah has credited her grand generosity to a gift given to her family by a group of nuns. When Oprah was 12 years old, her mother told her children that they would not be having Christmas because she had no money for food or presents. That night, at the last minute, three nuns showed up at the door with a turkey, a fruit basket, games, and dolls.

It was an act of giving that she would never forget. "I remember feeling that I mattered enough to these nuns ? who I had never met and to this day still don't know their names ? and what it meant that they had remembered me," she recalls.

It is remarkable to think that this act of faith and charity helped to form the mind and heart of a woman who now has a greater impact on ethical questions and spiritual longings than the church who fed her.

Effusiveness can be a wonderful thing. In the form of love and compassion, it can teach us a lot about God, whose mercy and kindness far exceeds any human understanding of such virtues. But these giveaways seem more of a collision between unbridled generosity and rabid consumerism.

Taking her cue from Oprah, the co-reigning queen of daytime, Ellen DeGeneres, is equally notorious for her extraordinary gifts. During her biggest event, December's "12 Days of Giveaways," audience members go home with flat screen TVs, video game systems, major home appliances, and vacation packages. Again, hysteria ensues.

Both Ellen and Oprah have made a habit also of paying off the bills of some exceptionally needy folks who were lucky enough to have their letters land into the hands of a staffer who found their story especially moving. They announce the good news to the recipients with guerilla filmmaking tactics or through surprise phone calls. A year's worth of rent and utilities are paid off, as are loans and tuition bills.

There is no doubt that this kind of giving can be life saving for a struggling family ? there are millions of them in our country right now. But if we can detach ourselves from this giving craze, we might start to question the motivation behind a celebrity's desire to air her generosity before millions of people. Has charity been reduced to another form of entertainment? If this is the case, are these acts of giving genuinely generous?

It is uncertain who actually pays for all of these gifts. Many product makers donate their goods to Oprah and Ellen, knowing that it is a small investment to make for advertising that quickly goes viral. Even if the talk show host or production company foots the bill, network executives know the payback in ratings and buzz is worth the expense.

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Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of these televised giveaways is the way in which the cameras relish the revelry of those receiving the gifts. They react like wrongly incarcerated prisoners being set free, or mourners who see a loved one raised from the dead. The gifts appear to induce almost religious fervor.

Oprah is very careful about whom she showers with gifts. All of the audience members who received her favorite things were people who had given years of service to their community. Apparently, to those who have given much, an abundance of high-end products should be given.

The purpose of these giveaways seems to transcend charity and enter into the perilous realm of the therapeutic. The talk show personalities invite the audience to share in the illusion that fame, power, and material treasures are somehow salvific. It feeds the distorted notion that an excess of free, high-priced, in-demand objects makes for a more fulfilled life.

The talk show hosts revel in the mounting euphoria. One wonders if the giveaways don't also help celebrities assuage their guilt for having such an inhuman abundance of money and means at their disposal.

The saddest part of the situation is that media titans like Oprah and Ellen have done a significant amount of good for society. Ms. Winfrey has introduced women and men into themes such as gratitude, self-care, and healing. She has built schools and given many other gifts to the children of South Africa. She was one of the first to introduce AIDS into public conversation, confronting a firestorm of fear and

misinformation.

Ms. DeGeneres continues to raise awareness of the human toll of natural disasters and hunger. Her courageous honesty has done much to demystify and empower the lives of gay and lesbian people.

Cultural forces like Oprah have become moral authorities and spiritual guides for so many women and men who find themselves adrift from traditional architects of spirituality and ethics, like churches and religious leaders. Today's television personalities have extraordinary influence over the consciences of millions of people from a diversity of socio-economic, racial, and religious backgrounds. They cling to these programs to help them make meaning of their lives.

But the overindulgent, materialistic nature of these giveaways only undermines whatever good these celebrities have done. And their power and charisma can quickly manipulate ordinary people's perceptions of what is truly valuable.

When it comes to genuine generosity, they have much to learn from the nuns who visited Oprah's family decades ago. While we do not know who they were, we can probably assume that sisters who served the poorest areas of Chicago in the 1960s were not endowed with an abundance of resources. They likely gave out of their own need, appearing anonymously and without fanfare, possessing an almost mysterious knowledge of her family's neediest hour.

Oprah's childhood Christmas experience clearly had a profound impact on her, though I wonder whether she has missed the true power of her story. The offering that the nuns brought Oprah's family convinced her that she mattered. But it wasn't the material nature of the presents that did this. Rather, it was the way in which the nuns honored their dignity through presence and allowed this family to deepen their communion through a meal and simple gifts.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

Editor's Note: Jamie Manson has been writing a Web column for *NCR* since November 2008 when she premiered as one of our "Young Voices" columnists. Last month, *NCR* invited and Manson agreed to become a weekly columnist under her own title. "Grace on the Margins" is the result. It will appear here every Monday.

Why is this column titled Grace on the Margins? Read Manson's inaugural column: **The grace of living on the margins.**

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