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Oprah and the triumph of the therapeutic

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

Later today, Oprah Winfrey will present the final episode of the epic 25-year run of her talk show. Whether you belong to the Oprah or the "Just Say Noprah" camp, it is difficult to deny that, for millions, Winfrey's program has been much more than a talk show. The devotion that she has inspired goes beyond her massive car and gift giveaways and her ability to attract the most powerful celebrities to her stage.

In the late 1990s, Oprah made a concerted effort to change the nature of her show from an entertainment similar to rival programs hosted by Phil Donohue and Sally Jesse Raphael, to what she branded "change your life television."

Though Oprah now admits it was presumptuous to insist that her show could transform any life, hearing some of the testimonials of loyal viewers certainly lends credence to her initial claim:

A woman who, five years ago, suddenly lost her 13 month-old baby, reflects on a show about a mother who has suddenly lost her twin boys. "Nothing could console me," she says, "This show was the only anchor I could hold onto in my sea of pain."

Another young woman describes her being in a car accident with a drunk driver. She survived, but her mother and her best friend were killed. "I was so lonely. When I got home, I would turn on the TV and just listen to Oprah. She taught me the power of forgiveness. It freed me."

A teenage girl who grew up watching Oprah thanks her for "lifting the shame of being abused. You taught me it wasn't my fault."

Women young and old agree that because of Oprah, "We've learned that we are enough, that we

matter, that our lives have value. We learned we can be anything we want to be."

At the same time, Oprah's extraordinary success as a "life changer" may have as much to do with timing as it does with her charismatic knack for drawing viewers into a trusting relationship.

More than 40 years ago, in his book *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud*, sociologist Philip Rieff warned that the psychological person was replacing the religious person. Seeing the decline of the importance of religious tradition and community, especially in U.S. and European culture, Rieff believed that the therapeutic process, the quest for self-realization, would eclipse the role of religion in human life.

In therapeutic culture, "the self" becomes an individual's vocation, and authority becomes self-imposed, rather than handed down through religious or communal tradition.

As the prophet of the "aha moment" and the evangelist of the gratitude journal, Oprah called her audience to "live your best life" through greater self-care and self-understanding. And her timing was impeccable. In the 1990s, the first generation of Americans living in a post-communal -- and, in many ways, post-ecclesial -- culture were entering adulthood and facing the responsibilities of raising families. As Catholicism returned to its conservative, pre-1960s roots and mainline Protestant churches continued to decline, many did not have a tradition to turn to when it came to articulating their beliefs, their values and their perceptions of the meaning of life.

For millions of people around the world, Oprah filled the hunger for meaning and purpose that for millennia before her, was filled by religion. But, unlike traditional religions sustained by communal rituals, stories and practices, Oprah offered a way of believing, feeling and acting that was based on the development of the self. Audiences were invited to travel along her own therapeutic process, and, in turn, to find their own path to self-discovery. It was this journey that became not only Oprah's goal, but also her gospel.

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This gospel easily touched those seeking to make meaning of their lives in a way that was both centered on the self and consistent with individualistic, American values. Oprah's connection to celebrities fed the American conviction that fame confers social, if not moral, authority. Her lavish gifts and zeal for her "favorite things" allowed us to reconcile seamlessly our consumerist wants with our spiritual needs.

And, yet, as her viewers' testimonies above reveal, Oprah accomplished what could be considered authentic, even pioneering, quasi-religious work. She offered a new form of spiritual leadership for those who no longer felt nourished or ministered to by the churches of their upbringing. Her show became a community of seekers, led by a once-marginalized woman who was committed unequivocally to the empowerment of women, and was on the cutting edge of topics like race relations, the AIDS epidemic, and the experience of gay, lesbian and transgendered persons.

Through her public struggles with food addiction, negative body image and sexual abuse, she made herself vulnerable to her audience. And, in doing so, she opened herself up to minister to the longings, sorrows and traumas of the millions who flocked to her for strength, guidance and hope. She introduced her audiences to Eckhart Tolle and the concept of Christ consciousness. Earlier this season, she investigated the remarkable work of a South American Catholic priest and healer, moderating one of the

deepest conversations about God, miracles, healing and the soul that I've heard in years.

For a woman who has thrived on self-disclosure, the content of Oprah's final episode has remained a mystery. Yesterday's penultimate episode concluded with a fusion of celebrity powerhouses and timeless spirituals. Aretha Franklin offered a stunning rendition of "Amazing Grace," followed by pop star Usher's elated performance of "O Happy Day."

It was a fitting conclusion for a woman who, for many ministers and religious people, will remain a contradiction. Oprah is at once a cautionary tale about the human capacity to blur the line between religious belief and the therapeutic process, and at the same time, a harbinger of a new realization of church in the evolving American religious landscape.

[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.]

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