
Section 12

ME, MYSELF, AND I

Oprah Winfrey

The power of one

BE YOURSELF. BE ALL THAT YOU CAN BE. IF YOU ASKED OPRAH Winfrey for tips on running a business, it's likely you would get something inspiring along those lines.

It's the message she preaches on her daytime talk show and in her magazine. It's a message aimed at housewives caught in a rut, looking for inspiration or empathy. And it's a message that has made her America's richest entertainer, with a personal fortune of \$1 billion, several homes (including 102 oceanfront acres on a Hawaiian island), and friends such as John Travolta, Brad Pitt, and Jennifer Aniston, who in 2004 helped her celebrate her fiftieth birthday.

But it's also a message Oprah has acted on herself ever since she became a television star in 1984. Today she is the owner and head of a company—Harpo—with an annual turnover of hundreds of millions of dollars, a company whose business, essentially, is Oprah. “Oprah reports to nobody but God,” says one of her staff.

Her inspirational rise from poverty to success, her overcoming of such obstacles as teenage pregnancy and drug abuse, have allowed her viewers to feel they know her, and to feel she can relate to their problems. Oprah's drive and success is infectious, too, and while she freely admits she cannot so much as read a financial spreadsheet, she has been invited to sit on the boards of companies including Intel and Ralph Lauren (she declined).

Oprah has, though, taught a business course called “The Dynamics of Leadership” at the prestigious Northwestern University's Kellogg Graduate School of Management, where her

ability to empathize and communicate were seen as valuable business tools (the text for Oprah's class was Stephen Covey's *Principle-Centered Leadership*). Oprah was also the subject of a course at the University of Illinois called "Oprah: the Tycoon"; she invited the class to come to a taping of her show and asked to see their essays about her.

Oprah was born in Kosciusko, Mississippi, on January 29, 1954. For her first six years she was largely raised by her paternal grandmother on a rural pig farm. Her parents couldn't even get her name right: they had meant to christen her Orpah, after the Old Testament figure from the book of Ruth, but spelled it wrong.

When her parents separated, she lived with her mother for a few years, during which time she was sexually abused by male family members and so-called friends. At thirteen, she ran away from home and narrowly avoided being locked up in a youth training center; instead, she was sent to live with her father, Vernon Winfrey. At fourteen she had a baby, who died soon after birth. Oprah says after that she realized she had been given a second chance to make a life for herself and, encouraged by her father, who demanded she read a book a week, became a good student.

Despite her troubled upbringing, Oprah retained an unusual spark; at sixteen, she became the first black Miss Fire Prevention for Nashville, a position that led to her being invited to read the news on a local radio station. She was voted Miss Black Tennessee, then gained a scholarship to Tennessee State University where she studied speech, drama, and English, landing a job age nineteen as co-anchor on the television news program of the CBS affiliate station WVTF-TV. Three years later, at age twenty-two, she became the sole anchorwoman at a Baltimore station's news show, which proved to be both a disaster and the making of her. Inexperienced, she had a passion for ad-libbing that the station did not share. The station dropped Oprah from the news after a few months, deeming her

more suitable for a morning chat show called *People Are Talking*.

Oprah had found her niche. She was confident, revelatory, and, best of all, she was somebody the viewers could relate to—black, down to earth, and not a stick-thin TV Barbie. She honed her skills for six years; then in 1983, at age twenty-nine, she headed to Chicago for an audition with the metropolitan station WLS-Ch.7.

It was obvious to the station managers that she was a major talent, and they gave her a job hosting a show called *AM Chicago*, on a salary of \$230,000. Her success is legendary: within a month her ratings were higher than those of the incumbent number one, the veteran Phil Donahue. Two years later she went national with the show now called *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and has held the number-one spot in her market sector ever since.

If Oprah was on her way to becoming an entertainer at age sixteen, she became a businesswoman in 1984 when she walked into the office of Chicago entertainment lawyer Jeff Jacobs seeking advice on her lucrative new contract. Jacobs evidently saw a big future for the young Oprah, suggesting she set up her own company. Two years later, they launched Harpo (Oprah spelled backwards).

Through her company, Oprah bought the rights to her show, which she now syndicates for around \$140 million a year. Though the show is Harpo's cash cow, the company has diversified into television production, film, and magazines—all of which reflect Oprah and her philosophy of women's empowerment. Total income in 2003 was around \$275 million.

Oprah has never married, but has for many years lived with her partner, Steadman Graham, a former male model and president of a North Carolina-based public relations firm, the Graham Williams group.

NOTES

“**Oprah reports . . .**” Jaggi, Maya. “The Power of One,” *The Guardian Weekend*, 2.13.99, p. 10.