

Expect Nothing and Delight in Everything “*Blessed is he who expects nothing for he will enjoy everything.*”
—*St. Francis of Assisi*

Oprah Winfrey entered my life when I was 17 and a junior in high school. I loved her right away and would rush home from school to watch her. My mom, my sisters and my friends all chatted about whatever topic she had on her show. We were all hooked! She became a guiding force and her ability to share her painful past publicly taught me what the road to self-empowerment looked like. Her courage stirred me to find my own way in this world, and I loved her the way you love a friend.

15 years later, I would be invited to be a guest on her show. It didn't matter to me that I was going to be a guest on her show as much as it mattered to me that I would be in her presence, because after all these years, there was so much that I wanted to ask her and so much that I had to tell her.

Three months prior to this, I had emailed for the first time in response to a show Oprah had done with Dr. Phil, where he introduced his book *Self Matters*. He spoke of labels given to us in our youth that, in adulthood, keep us stuck and impact our choices, and how we can overcome those labels by reprogramming our self-talk. I shared in my correspondence that I was the “fat girl” growing up and how this label kept me from pursuing my dream of becoming a broadcaster like my hero, Jane Pauley. I went on to say that even though I was no longer fat, I still had to push through the limitations of this label by reminding myself as often as necessary that I was a fit athlete running marathons and wearing a size 6, which revealed to me that the weight had come off in the flesh but not psychologically. Oprah, above anyone could understand this and I thought she must have if I was selected to be on her show.

Going to meet Oprah was off the charts big in the peaks and valleys of my life, and I was making it bigger by the minute with my grand expectations. Oprah would now know that I had loved her since the very beginning and had been her friend through “thick” and “thin.” Oprah would love me too, of course, and we would be fast friends

growing into soul sisters. I would share my struggles that I had overcome with her help, and she would understand me in a way that nobody else could. I would sing my own version of the country classic which I call “too many bodies to count have done me wrong song,” but like Oprah, I had become successful in spite of the adversity. Oprah would recognize my good work and applaud my bravery, and we would ride off on high horses together, patting one another on the back. There was no reeling myself in as the line was cast; I was hooked and zipping along at the speed of light, further and deeper into my fantasies. Oprah would be the answer to my prayers allowing me to finally put the “fat girl” to rest and embrace myself in the aftermath of her approval.

The big event arrived but was nothing like I had expected. The shiny black limousine picked us up in front of the Omni Hotel at 6:30 a.m. sharp. The driver opened the doors as if we were royalty, which made me blush as I heated up in my discomfort with the enormity of the day. He amused my sisters—Angie, Margee, Maureen—and me during our 20-minute ride by responding to all our silly comments and inquiries about “girlfriend” Oprah. We stepped into Harpo Studios, where my sisters were directed to the audience line, and I was escorted into the green room, which turned out to be several green rooms. The producer was graciously chatting it up with me as we walked, but I was preoccupied, staring at the photos that covered the walls of Oprah and every celebrity guest she had ever interviewed. I flashed to a photo of her and me in my mind, hugging side by side with a note written with a black Sharpie, “Dear Kathy, Great to meet you, my sister and my friend. Love, Oprah.”

I entered my assigned green room, where there was a breakfast spread—a fruit tray with strawberries, cantaloupe, bananas, green grapes, watermelon, and kiwi; blueberry, bran, and carrot muffins; cinnamon, plain, and everything bagels with strawberry and plain cream cheese; banana strawberry, vanilla, and plain yogurt; and bottled water, orange juice, apple juice, and 2 percent milk. I had already eaten oatmeal with raisins, brown sugar, and vanilla soy milk at the hotel, so I grabbed bottled water that was buried in an ice bowl and worried that all that fabulous food was going to waste because I wasn’t hungry. My escort invited me to sit down and make

myself comfortable, advising me that the producer I had been speaking with over the phone, Josie, would be in to see me and that I would need to get my hair and makeup done.

There were other guests in the green room, so we began to talk about how we arrived at this rare opportunity. One guest, a confused yet courageous young woman with ivory skin and black curly hair to her shoulders, had just finished medical school and was now a licensed podiatrist. She was there to break it to her parents that she never wanted to be a doctor and was only doing it to please them. Dr. Phil spent the entire time trying to assure her parents and convince her that she could still use her education to pursue something that interested her. As I sat there next to her as the cameras rolled, I wanted to yell out, “No one is even listening to her, thank you!”

Another guest had felt responsible for her baby brother being scalded by hot water when her parents asked her at five years of age to watch him. Dr. Phil let her know right away that her parents were irresponsible for asking her to do something that was not age appropriate. They went back and forth, Dr. Phil asking questions trying to draw out information and help her see the truth of the matter so she could put this behind her. It didn't work.

Sitting there, my mind was wondering, “I thought this show was about labels. How do I fit in?” They had asked my husband to FedEx photos of me running marathons as well as before-and-after shots, showing fat me and fit me. Oprah began to wrap things up, and the live taping was over. I didn't make it on the show, bringing an instant flash of relief. Then suddenly, I began questioning why they didn't choose me, as if I were nine years old again and feeling sad that no one had picked me to be on the kickball team during recess. Josie, the producer, walked me out of the studio as she handed me a purple gift bag filled with an Oprah T-shirt, an Oprah mug, and Dr. Phil's book, *Self Matters*. She said that she was sorry I didn't get on the show, so I told her, trying to hide my underlying sadness, that I had begun to wonder how my story was going to fit. She explained that the show, being live, took a different turn than they'd originally planned, trying to soften the blow by adding that my story was too positive.

I did get to meet Oprah. Let me rephrase that—I did get to shake her hand and managed to squeak out, “It’s a pleasure!” while she stood between two bodyguards (not quite the intimate conversation I expected). I didn’t know what to do or say, so I began second-guessing my brief encounter, wondering if I should have curtsied, bowed, kissed her hand, or begged her to be my friend. Standing in a row with the other guests, I could barely hold back the child inside me wildly waving her arms and beating her legs on the floor, fit to be tied as she was wailing, “This isn’t the way it was supposed to be! Don’t you recognize me?! It’s me, Kathy McHugh, your dear old friend from Indy!” There was no photo of her hugging me with adoration for my wall. There was no connection that would place me second to her best friend, Gayle King. There was merely the aftereffects, picking up the sharp pieces from my expectations being shattered and allowing myself time to recover from the post-traumatic stress.

As we pulled away from Harpo Studios in the same luxurious manner in which we had arrived just six hours earlier, my sisters were energized, clapping their hands as they were playfully singing the title song to the show, “O-O-O-Oprah,” and shouting, “We love you, Oprah, girlfriend! We’ll come and see you soon!” Their experience had been different from mine, which was evident in their thunderous laughter and lighthearted banter.

I tried to fight back the tears, but they came. They came and they came, raining on my sisters’ fun-loving parade. I felt awful for crying, and they felt awful for laughing. One by one, they asked, “What’s wrong?” Choking back the tears and holding my fist over my lips, I shook my head side to side as I looked down because I couldn’t speak. I didn’t want to divulge the truth, because I wasn’t ready to look at it. Before I accepted the real truth of the matter, the child in me resurfaced, worrying that the truth might somehow diminish Oprah in their eyes and tricking me into believing that I was protecting her with my silence. My sisters tried to console me, and I finally asked them to give me a minute to pull myself together. I knew that I was no longer a gullible little girl who thinks silence

keeps the truth at bay. Tearful and disenchanted, I let it out, “It wasn’t what I expected.”

From this experience, I learned to expect nothing and delight in everything. We set ourselves up for disappointment when we live with expectations, because when the expectations aren’t met, we feel let down by others and events in our life. We end up expecting everything and delighting in nothing. There was so much about that experience that I could have delighted in, but I was so focused on my heightened expectations that everything else paled in comparison. It certainly wasn’t Oprah’s fault that she didn’t meet my inflated and unrealistic expectations; it was mine. She wasn’t supposed to rescue me from my lack of self-worth; Even if she had acknowledged my Specialness, she couldn’t have made me see what I couldn’t acknowledge.

Reflecting back, I was able to see the delightful moments that I bypassed. The staff at Harpo Studios was truly remarkable – generous to me from the moment I arrived until I departed. Oprah was even more gorgeous in person than on television with sparkling eyes, radiant energy, flawless skin like a porcelain doll, and a voluptuous figure proportioned just right, which I didn’t expect. My sister, Margee, was unexpectedly picked to warm up the audience with her cheerleading skills. She looked like Lucille Ball as she snuck a touch of Oprah’s burnt yellow leather bucket chair in between jumps and kicks, which we still crack up about.

My dear sisters shared this 24-hour adventure with me, giving us time to laugh, play, tease, eat a fine meal in Chicago, and simply enjoy our sisterhood. They left inspirational cards on the vanity in the hotel bathroom for me to find the morning of the show with beautiful messages acknowledging how far I had come on my journey. Josie, the producer who had spoken at length with my husband, unexpectedly remarked how loved and admired I am as she recalled all of the precious things that he told her. This was real not a delusion of grandeur dreamed up by the overgrown child within me. These were the gifts, but they were overshadowed by my expectations of meeting Oprah and what being on her show would mean to me. I thought meeting Oprah would change my life, but I

learned from this that the daily encounters and experiences that seem insignificant are what really make us grow, expand and change. I no longer look for big moments as I understand all moments hold unknown treasures.

There is nothing comparable to being present to what is and delighting in what unfolds each and every day. It's magical. Life is much more enjoyable when we don't try to figure it out before it happens. The suspense and mystery found in our favorite novels, keeping us turning page after page deep into the night, can be our life if we remove expectations. Allowing life to happen is like the fountain of youth, where we can always view the world through fresh eyes no matter how old we are and no matter what we have seen before this moment.

Meditation: *How do your expectations of events, others, or yourself keep you from fully experiencing the joy in life? How have you been disappointed by your expectations? Are you able to observe life and let things be as they are, not as you think they should be?*

Action: *As you are preparing for each day, let go of expectations by catching your mind as it wanders off into the future painting fantasies about the vacation next month, the wedding this weekend, the girls night out or the blind date. Stop yourself and reward yourself with a laugh that you were able to identify your building up expectations; and remind yourself that the goal is delight in what is not what you expect.*