BOOK REVIEWS

Where has Oprah taken us?

Stephen Mansfield (2011). Nashville, TE: Thomas Nelson.

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***Where has Oprah taken us?* by Stephen Mansfield is a book which is important to Christians living in a New Age world. New York Times best-selling author, Stephen Mansfield, traces the life of Oprah Winfrey from her troubled childhood to her metaphoric rise in talkback television and her subsequent New Age belief systems which she promotes to her audiences of over 700 million viewers. He has drawn on other authors for her biographical sketch but his important contribution is to define why the Baby Boomers fell for the New Age faith, when Christianity failed to meet their spiritual needs. This book will give the reader a greater understanding of Eastern religions and how their teachings have been redefined by Oprah's charismatic gurus to mean something that they were never intended to mean and then—combined with various strategies from the human potential movement—to produce a 'designer religion'.**

Christian fundamentals, too, are reworked and reshaped to give them a New Age flavour. Guru Zukav claims that history has been unkind to Lucifer, a being who has been terribly misunderstood. He is, in fact, the "enlightener", who brings the knowledge necessary to free man to become like God. Marion Williamson, a Jewish atheist, wrote a 1,200 page verbal download, completely reversing everything that Jesus ever taught, and then promoted it on the Oprah Show. Another guru advocated that spiritual partnerships should replace marriage—when the relationship was no longer evolving, it should be discarded. Oprah aspires to lead out, together with the Pope, in a world "day of prayer".

Oprah's grandmother—and later her father—shaped her Christianity in the absence of her wayward mother. With plenty of 'sass' from a young age and gifted with a range of skills and talents, this intelligent young woman picked up a job in radio, then television and 'in next to no time' had her own chat show. The rest is history. A great divide, however, occurred in her life. Listening to a sermon one Sunday, she discarded the Christianity of her father, because of a very petty reason.

For the first ten years of the Oprah Show, she was known as the Queen of Sleaze. She knew that sex and violence appealed to the masses and no subject was sacred. A revolt by thinking Americans and criticism from influential newspapers and universities made her decide to change her ways. Out of the seediness of her programs grew the thought that she could do better and that she should delve into spirituality instead, and seek to lift people up. Her friends told her she was an "anointed one" and an "apostle of truth" and with this encouragement, she and her chosen gurus, started on a mission to re-arrange the 'souls' of every member of her vast audience.

Stephen Mansfield raises questions such as: Is it possible that the Oprah fame factor could entrench ideas in the souls of Americans that would otherwise never be taken seriously? Could a blend of religious faiths gain sway simply because Oprah proclaimed it and not because it gave any evidence of truth? Could she reshape the nature of religion in the entire world by creating a new faith out of the personally meaningful elements of many faiths? Does fame trump truth?

Mansfield makes the point that Oprah, as a wonderfully gifted human being, should have been grateful for the many blessings that a loving God gave her and she should have received these gifts with gratitude and humility. She should have searched for what was eternally true, rather than creating a hybrid faith—a second hand spirituality taken from the lives of others, a faith determined by limited minds and 'screwed up' emotions.

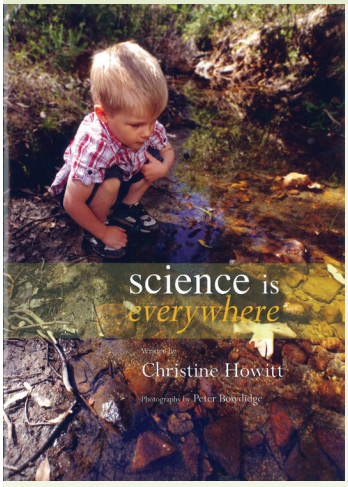
In exposing Oprah's beliefs and frailties, Mansfield does it with grace, respect and gentle reasoning. This is a book that I found hard to put down. The New Age movement is alive and well in my own family and it gave me necessary insight and understanding into a faith system that appeals to many who are educated, financially comfortable and who are desperate to find meaningful spirituality without too many strings attached. If the goal is a one-world religion, then Oprah Winfrey, as a media personality, is certainly advancing its dubious cause; which is why I recommend that every Christian discerningly read this book. TEACH

Science is everywhere

Howitt, C. (2010). Perth, WA: Author.

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This book demystifies and answers Joe's question '*Where do you find science?*' Young Joe and his Mum wander their neighbourhood and manage to discover that science is in fact everywhere!

Written for 3–7yr olds, Howitt's writing style instantly connects the intended audience with Joe's quest, inviting them to go on Joe's journey with him; to posit their own suggestions, wonderings, discoveries and answers, as they identify with Joe's neighbourhood.

Illustrator Bowdidge's colourful real life photography—with its quirky juxtapositions—adds humour and intrigue to Joe's journey. Throughout the book the author and illustrator intentionally invite the reader to go on their own neighbourhood journey, and open their eyes and senses to discover the *science* that is actually around them. By so doing they develop dispositions to learn. Howitt's text, together with Bowdidge's photography, has achieved the stated objective of "*assisting children to ask more questions… to discover and explore more about their amazing world*" (Howitt, 2012).

The author invites teachers and parents to use the book as a provocation for research, in such a way that children will develop a love of learning and an appreciation for God's creation. Hopefully this awareness will also foster an interest in sustaining and maintaining their world. The *practical parent notes* at the end of the book scaffold discoveries and conversations that will strengthen children's development and learning in maths, literacy and visual arts, as well as the sciences.

For the classroom teacher the book's potential as an initial provocation to research cannot be overstated. It has manifold possibilities as a provocation for emergent and negotiated integrated projects, at both the preschool and infant school level. Teachers and children could explore their own environments armed with collection bags, clipboards, and digital and video cameras. The possibilities are endless and are only limited by one's imagination. Revisiting these walks, through the *100 languages* of children will broaden and deepen the child's meaning making. Rarely does one find in one short book such an open ended resource!

When viewed through the lens of the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, (2009), the book fosters in children a/an:

- Strong sense of belonging to their world
- Sense of respect for their environment (Outcome 2)
- Sense of becoming that emerges through a developing sense of self-confidence in their ability to: Think, hypothesis test, explore and experiment (Outcome 4)
- Ability to transfer and adapt learning from one context to another, (Outcome 4)

- Ability to make meaning from text and express their ideas, (Outcome 5)
- Ability to use information technology to represent ideas and thinking (Outcome 5)

In an age when children are spending less time outdoors connecting with the environment, when fewer school leavers are choosing to study science at tertiary level, this book is an intriguing invitation to young children to get out and experience the wonders of science through all of their senses. *Science is everywhere* is a must have for all early childhood teachers' professional libraries. TEACH

Visible learning for teachers: Maximising impact on learning

Hattie, J. (2012). London: Routledge.

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John Hattie's research is powering the current focus on the quality of teaching in Australia. His previous book (*Visible learning*) used a statistical measure (effect size) to compare the learning outcomes of all factors claimed by research to have an impact on student learning.

His new book, *Visible learning for teachers: Maximising impact on learning*, focuses on teaching practices that have maximum impact on learning. Hattie uses the word 'practice' very deliberately, for the term 'teaching practice' embodies the skills of a professional practitioner. In his view, a professional teaching practitioner is much more than a person who simply earns a living as a teacher. A professional teaching practitioner is a person who uses every opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills that characterise teaching expertise.

Hattie argues that five elements are essential in the professional approach to teaching. These include:

- a professional frame of mind;
- the ability to assess learning both formally and informally and provide a constant flow of feedback;
- the ability to plan with both students and curriculum in mind;
- an adaptive expertise in the classroom;
- a team approach to student-learning.

Teachers with a *professional frame of mind* desire and strive to have their students learn. They are confident in their existing knowledge and skills and they believe that they can encourage optimal learning in their students. Teachers with a professional frame of mind see difficult situations as challenges and they get satisfaction from resolving them. They remain buoyant and positive and communicate enjoyment, enthusiasm, optimism and warmth in relation to the teaching-learning process. They also continually seek information about the learning process and employ both formal assessment procedures and informal questioning and observation. Moreover, they are not locked into any given instructional paradigm but remain flexible and seek the most effective means of promoting learning in the given situation. Finally, teachers possessing a professional frame of mind are not just willing, but eager to exchange ideas and resources with other professionals.

Professional teachers need to know the current state of learning at any point in the learning journey of their students. This means that they use *a range of assessment techniques* that include informal continuous (rapid assessment), formal formative and formal summative methods.

Hattie suggests that feedback should target four levels of activity: Task mechanics; task processes; self-regulation; and metacognitive/conceptual/predictive understanding. The informal continuous assessments involve questioning and observation. Brief notes can be jotted down in an annotated roll or similar document. In this way, the professional teacher learns the quirks of individual students—they become real people, are known and liked and can be provided with specific experience and/or assistance. Informal continuous assessments allow the teacher to provide ongoing (rapid) formative feedback that encourages and motivates students.

Formal assessments involve specific tasks that are assigned and considered (assessed) by the teacher. Formative assessments permit adjustments to be made to a planned sequence of lessons so that they can be altered to better suit the immediate needs of students. Summative assessments provide teachers with the means of evaluating the overall effect of the lesson sequence. Feedback from all assessment activities should be timely, appropriate and encouraging. It should also be pointed and focused on student activity. Feedback should indicate what *is* working, what is *not* working and why. It should encourage persistence, with potentially successful activity.

The book's author argues that a professional teacher should see *planning* as a team process and the team should discuss teaching activities in reference to an overall structure. Even so, he argues that individual classes should have a point of reference, a direction and a selection of strategic instructional processes. The point of reference revolves around the students: Their current state of knowledge (their preconceptions) and skills and those personal attributes that impinge upon learning. These attributes include students' interests and motives in relation to learning, their confidence and their ability to persist. Direction is provided by a detailed knowledge of the curriculum structure, blended with an intimate knowledge of the subject matter. Professional teachers' knowledge and experience allows them to select a sequence of appropriate learning activities and tailor these to the students' needs (in Hattie's terms, instruction is 'differentiated').

Tailoring means adjusting the tasks so that they lie in the 'Goldilocks' zone of optimal challenge for each student (Vygotsky's zone of proximal development). In order to achieve this, teachers need to work with 'flexible groupings' of students. Placing learning activities in the 'zone' also increases the likelihood that both surface and deep (conceptual) learning will simultaneously occur. To Hattie, planning is more than an arrangement of a sequence of activities. Each lesson has its own learning outcome, introduction, lesson flow and conclusion. Hattie advocates that each approach to a learning activity be overtly metacognitive and skills-based. The plan for each lesson should be documented in a way that is lean but sufficient.

In Hattie's view, *each lesson* conducted by a professional teacher *is a real-time fluid interaction* between students and teacher and the nature of that interaction may not be fully predicted ahead of time. He uses the term 'flow of the lesson' to indicate the potential mercurial turns that lessons can take. The professional teacher learns to 'read' student-responses and adjusts the pace of the lesson and even the direction of the lesson accordingly. The aim is the promotion of learning, not the completion of some arbitrary task. Questioning and observation permit the teacher to provide formative feedback that encourages students to persist with the learning task. The ability to adapt on the run, while simultaneously managing a range of competing lesson elements, is the indication of teaching expertise. The professional teacher remains fully aware of these adjustments and alterations and can defend them.

Finally, Hattie contends that teaching is an odd blend of individual and team activity. The team needs to agree on details of broad structure, direction and learning outcomes. Communication within the team and between team members needs to be regular, free, confident and open. This is sometimes difficult for some teachers; for they tend to treat their own classroom as a castle and events that occur within, belong within. However, if student learning is to be the predominant aim, then open communication needs to be established and each teacher must be encouraged to develop expertise. On the other hand, professional teaching also requires individual effort, individual preparation and individual documentation. Yes, documentation! The sub-theme of the book presents teaching as a profession. Professionals keep records of their activities and can account for their decisions and actions.

The book is directed toward the professional or aspiring professional teacher and suggests rather than preaches. It does however include practical applications that can expand a teacher's repertoire. TEACH