

## DEFINITELY UNFINISHED

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
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The business tycoon and media star Oprah Winfrey began life with a hardscrabble and physically-abusive childhood on her grandmother's farm in rural Mississippi. At age 6, Winfrey moved to live with her mother in Milwaukee, where she was sexually abused and molested from age nine to age 14. In her mid-teens, she went to live with her father and stepmother, who stabilized her daily life and focused her on school.

According to Forbes magazine, Oprah Winfrey today ranks sixth among America's richest self-made women, with a net worth of about \$2.9 billion. She's the only African-American woman on Forbes 2018 list of billionaires.

What's the secret of Winfrey's ability to overcome such daunting obstacles? She says, "I learned to read at age 3 and soon discovered there was a whole world to conquer that went beyond our farm in Mississippi." She gives her father and stepmother credit for instilling in her the value of education. "Because of his respect for education and my stepmother's respect for education," she says, "every single week of my life that I lived with them I had to read library books, and that was the beginning of [what eventually became] the Oprah Winfrey Book Club."

In her acceptance speech for the 2004 United Nations Humanitarian Award, Winfrey calls reading "her personal path to freedom." She says, "Books allowed me to see a world beyond the front porch of my grandmother's shotgun house," adding that books gave her "the power to see possibilities beyond what was allowed at the time."

I share Winfrey's debt of gratitude to books and reading. Perhaps because my family of origin didn't have a television, I became a voracious reader early on, as did my younger sister and brother. Beginning in middle school, my family made regular treks — usually weekly — to the public library in El Dorado, Arkansas. I would return home each time laden with a dozen or more books.

After a few years of observing this pattern, the library named our family "Library Family of the Year," a supposed honor that included an article in the local newspaper, complete with a photo of us surrounded by our stacks of library books, reading. Neither the article nor the photo of me — complete with bad acne, bad haircut, and woefully-unstylish clothes — did anything to improve my image at school, where I was viewed as a nerd by most of my classmates and a star pupil by most of my teachers.

But the books began to open my world. I learned about airplanes and imagined myself flying fighter planes in the Air Force. I learned about traveling to outer space (this was the era of the Apollo moon landings) and imagined myself blasting out of earth

orbit as an astronaut. I devoured the entire collection of Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew mysteries, and imagined myself as beset by adventure as the Hardy boys and as plucky and courageous as Nancy Drew. (I adore Ron Koertge's line in his poem "Nancy Drew," when he says, "Locked in the pantry of an abandoned farm house, Nancy makes a radio out of a shoelace and a muffin.")

Books gave me the power to see possibilities beyond what seemed plausible at the time. I should also add that my approach to reading other books was substantially influenced by how I was taught to read the Bible — a thoughtful and reflective process that was designed not only to inform but also to transform.

At least in some respects, the Oprah Winfrey Book Club shares this thoughtful and reflective approach to reading. The initial club, which began in 1996 and lasted for about 15 years, eventually had about 2 million members. The club selected significant books to read and encouraged members to gather for in-depth conversations about how what they had learned could transform their own lives and also help us progress as a nation. The Oprah Winfrey Book Club 2.0, which launched in 2012, extends these conversations to include social media platforms.

These days, however, most reading gets done not by studying a page but rather by skimming a screen, a change that has several worrisome collateral consequences. Maryanne Wolf, Professor of Citizenship and Public Service, and Director of the Center for Reading and Language Research at Tufts University, says that, "when the reading brain skims texts, we don't have time to grasp complexity, to understand another's feelings or to perceive beauty."

Here's the problem: if the goal of reading is merely to get through large volumes of information, the brain adapts its reading circuit correspondingly. It develops neurological shortcuts, ignores subtleties, and leaps ahead. Skimming becomes the new normal. As a result, she says, today's students increasingly aren't developing the patience necessary to read long, dense, or difficult texts. For her part, Wolf is less concerned with what she calls students' cognitive impatience than she is with their inability to read critically and analytically. This has consequences not only in college and graduate school classrooms, but also in the business world, in courtrooms, and in the voting booth.

She says, "The subtle atrophy of critical analysis and empathy affects us all. It affects our ability to navigate a constant bombardment of information. It incentivizes a retreat to the most familiar silos of unchecked information, which require and receive no analysis, leaving us susceptible to false information and demagoguery."

She adds that a great deal hangs on the ability to read analytically and empathetically. "The ability of citizens in a vibrant democracy to try on other perspectives and discern truth; the capacity of our children and grandchildren to appreciate and create beauty; and the ability in ourselves to go *beyond* our present glut of information to reach the knowledge and wisdom necessary to sustain a good society."

Given this analysis, it's clear that not much real reading gets done in our nation. We have a president who dismisses the truth and seems hell-bent on creating as much planetary ugliness as possible, both politically and environmentally. His Supreme Court nominee portends regressive decisions on key women's rights, civil rights, environmental rights, and human rights issues by our nation's highest court for at least the next generation. The president's cultural allies celebrate his efforts to create a callous and divided society, while many of his political allies stand by in acquiescent silence. The rest of us watch this slow-motion disaster in horror, wondering whether and how our nation will come to its senses and return to the difficult work of embodying its founding values.

In the face of these fierce headwinds, how do we develop the discipline to stay the course? Where do we find courage, a spirit of optimism, and even a sense of joy?

Some years ago, while passing through Dublin on the way from Belfast to New York, my wife Holly and I paid a visit to Trinity College. We wanted to see the Book of Kells, an illuminated ninth-century edition of the four gospels in Latin. As those of you who have seen it know, the Book of Kells is an amazing feat of artistry and an impressive expression of devotion. With its lavish illustrations and stunningly precise script, the Book of Kells is lauded by many in Ireland as their most significant artistic national treasure.

My own attention, however, was drawn to another volume in the exhibition, a small book called the Book of Mulling. Dating from the late eighth century, it was named after the monastery in Mulling, a coastal Irish town, as well as the head of the monastery, St. Mulling, who put the original manuscript together. The book itself contains excerpts from the four gospels, along with a service to use when visiting the sick and others in need. It also contains portraits of several apostles and a diagram of the monastery in Mulling.

Designed for use by Irish missionary monks travelling to the European continent, the Book of Mulling was a pocket guide to everything that mattered most to the monks, ready at hand whenever and wherever it was needed. It guided them when they felt uncertain, lifted their spirits when they felt downhearted, and reminded them of their purpose. I found myself drawn to the book not because of what it contains, but because of the unintentional double entendre of its title. To mull something is to ponder it, turn it over and over in your mind, and perhaps even commit it to memory.

On this more fanciful reading, the Book of Mulling is a perfect metaphor for the approach that Maryanne Wolf laments has gone missing. It's an approach that blends analysis, reflection, and empathy as a means of transforming our own lives for the better, as well as helping to transform the people and world around us. What begins as an approach to reading a text ends up being a way to change everything.

Skimming changes nothing. Whether we are skimming over a screen of data or skimming through a life of days, the result is that everything stays more or less the same. We default to well-known words, familiar patterns, and instinctive responses.

Because we don't engage deeply and empathetically, either with difficult ideas or vexing challenges, nothing much changes us, and we in turn change nothing. The screen doesn't know it's been read, nor will history bear much record of our passing.

Perhaps the key to whether we choose a superficial approach to life or a substantive one lies in whether we consider ourselves and our nation definitively unfinished, to use a term coined by Alexander Clark and Bailey Sousa of the International Institute for Qualitative Methodology at the University of Alberta, Canada. They say, "Seeking always to develop, improve and be truly open to learning demands viewing yourself as being definitively unfinished – a massive ongoing work in progress. You never arrive."

This attitude is the hallmark of spiritual practice as we understand it here at All Souls. As I often say to newcomers, if you are completely happy with yourself and your life, and if you think all is well with the world, then you're probably in the wrong place. We're in the transformation business. Each of us is a massive ongoing work in progress. When it comes to embodying the ideals we believe in and exemplifying the virtues to which we aspire, we never fully arrive. The purpose of spiritual practice — both our daily spiritual practice as individuals and our collective spiritual practice in worship each week — is to enable us to look beyond what's present and imagine what's possible. We're definitively unfinished.

The same is true of the United States of America, and of the networks of nations that cover the globe, and of our collective responsibility to care for this fragile planet — it's all definitively unfinished. Yes, the world is in many ways a mess. But it is also a place of exemplary humanity, staggering possibility, and stunning beauty. You might not see that by skimming the headlines. But you can certainly find it if you read deeply the book of nature and of human nature. In the ways that matter most, today and every day, we've mostly just begun.

On this point, one of the poems that has made its way into my personal Book of Mulling is one titled "Beginners" by the contemporary American poet Denise Levertov. She writes:

But we have only begun  
to love the earth.  
We have only begun  
to imagine the fullness of life.  
How could we tire of hope?  
— so much is in bud.  
How can desire fail?  
— we have only begun  
to imagine justice and mercy,  
only begun to envision  
how it might be  
to live as siblings with beast and flower,

not as oppressors...  
We have only begun to know  
the power that is in us if we would join  
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.  
So much is unfolding that must  
complete its gesture,  
so much is in bud.