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Black Friday blues? Take a page from Oprah.

The author of 'Living Oprah,' Robyn Okrant, takes the self-help guru's advice for one year and learns that it can drain both your wallet and your psyche.

By [Gloria Goodale](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor
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LOS ANGELES - First it was Black Friday. Now some retailers have come up with White Wednesday, a day of discounts to get shoppers in before the holiday. Indeed, consumption as a path to happiness is the message that merchants would dearly love the public to buy this time of year. But is there really a simple route to satisfaction, asks one author, struggling actress, and wary consumer, Robyn Okrant, who decided to test at least one theory – that following the guru of the self-help talk show circuit, Oprah Winfrey, could be a path to self-fulfillment or something akin to that.

For the 366 days of 2008 (a leap year), Ms. Okrant took every piece of advice, bought every product, and acted on every tip that she found on the daily talk show, in "O" magazine, and on Oprah.com. The new owner of a Kindle (added benefit: it's a guy magnet, she was startled to discover), with a closet now stocked with the 10 basic items every woman should own (including a basic black dress and leopard flats), she chronicled her task in a daily blog and now has a book, "Living Oprah: My One-Year Experiment to Walk the Walk of the Queen of Talk," due out in January.

Okrant's response to the question, was it worth the considerable expense (a Kindle DX, for instance, retails for \$489), and stress on her marriage and career?: "A qualified 'yes' " – and it comes with what she calls important new wisdom about the consumerism that drives so much of our culture.

While Okrant says Oprah did inspire her, "the problem is, a lot of the helpful guidance got lost in the push toward materialism and vanity," she writes in an e-mail. "I think what really got driven home for me during 'Living Oprah' was that turning to the overwhelming amount of media that exists to lead women toward a happier, more fulfilling existence is an incredible mental, physical, and emotional drain. Not to mention expensive!"

She says she also realized she had to make an effort not to be distracted or sidetracked by the cornucopia of information and products constantly targeting women in television and magazines. There were surprises as well as many "aha!" moments along the way.

She relates in detail the experience of baking a "secret" chocolate chip cookie recipe in which the mystery ingredient is the lowly garbanzo bean – a flavor her taste-testing husband gives a four-star (out of 10) rating. And there were times when the show's themes and personalities were soul-draining, she notes in her blog. One such episode detailed a killer who slayed his wife and children.

While slavishly following Oprah's lead may make for an amusing book or even help promote a career, culture critic and Fordham University professor Paul Levinson says this misses what he says is a clear message from Ms. Winfrey herself, namely to take the spirit of what she has to offer and live the best life an individual can.

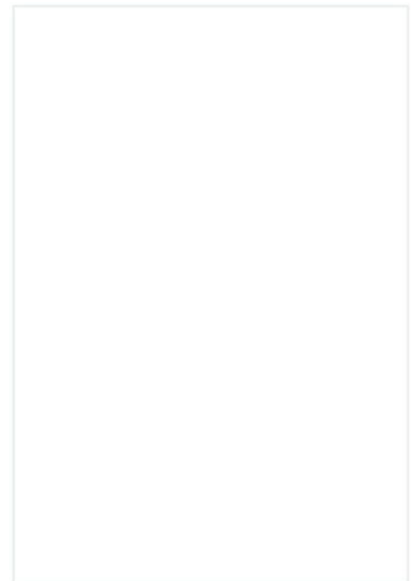
While some may knock Oprah for her open embrace of products and commercial tie-ins, he says this is part of her powerful and what he calls uniquely American appeal. "Oprah has shown you can do good things in a commercial context," he says. "There's nothing wrong with that. After all, money is what makes the world go round."

Adds media coach Susan Harrow (herself author of "The Ultimate Guide to Getting Booked on Oprah"), the "Living Oprah" experiment says as much about our time as do the lessons that Okrant says she personally gleaned.

"It's in the zeitgeist to sell yourself," Okrant points out, "even your most private moments," acknowledging that's what she does in her daily blogs. Beyond that, she adds, critiquing Oprah for her commercialism is somewhat ironic, given that what she herself is doing, after all, "is promoting her own venture, the upcoming book."

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