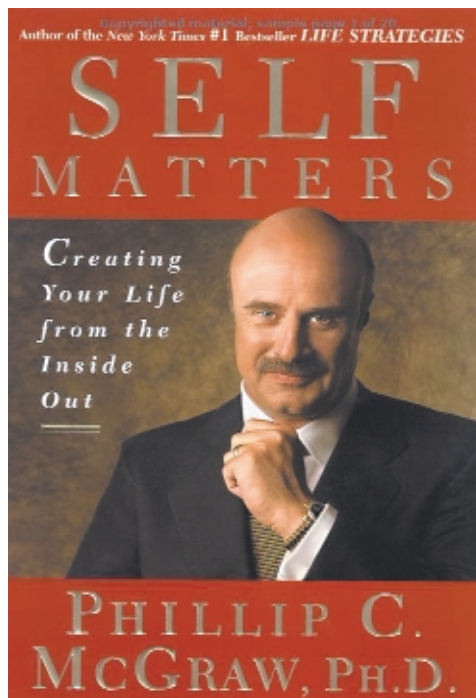


Oprah calls him “America’s Therapist,” and, for the past few years, my friend Maryanne and I took much of Dr. Phil McGraw’s advice to heart. We tuned into *Oprah* every Tuesday in anticipation of witnessing Dr. Phil slice through the façades of guests with surgical precision and dispense pearls of wisdom for uncovering their authentic selves. His bluntness was a bit scary, but his amusing cornpone analogies (“That dog don’t hunt”) gave balance to his take-no-prisoners style. Dr. Phil’s cognitive therapy-based approach made sense to us, and, when one of us called the other with a problem, our immediate response was, “What would Dr. Phil say?”

There was one aspect of Dr. Phil’s worldview, however, that disturbed us—his philosophy about weight. Seemingly, he believed that being plus size was a psychological flaw and that, through choice and a dose of behavior modification, thinness could be achieved. I attributed Dr. Phil’s view of weight to the influence of his mentor, Oprah Winfrey. After all, her decades-long struggle with her own weight has played out on a very public stage. In our hearts, Maryanne and I believed that, if only Dr. Phil had correct information, he would change his philosophy and encourage women to live their lives and celebrate their beauty at any size. And, of course, we were convinced that *we* were the women who could change his mind. We spent more hours than we’d care to admit contemplating (okay, fantasizing) how we’d go about presenting our point of view.

Lo and behold, one day producers from the show called Maryanne at her office (she’s the executive director of NAAFA, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance) and invited her to appear on *Dr. Phil* to discuss discrimination against people of size. Good friend that she is, Maryanne insisted that they also invite me. We recognized that this was our opportunity to change Dr. Phil’s mind about weight (and therefore influence the millions of people who watch his show), yet we were both hesitant. Maryanne has never been particularly comfortable in the media spotlight, and, having done literally thousands of media interviews during the 1990s as NAAFA’s spokesperson, I wasn’t thrilled at the prospect of coming out of



## SHRINK RAP

MY ENCOUNTER WITH DR. PHIL

by SALLY E. SMITH

my self-imposed media retirement. Nonetheless, against our better judgment, Tweedledee and Tweedledum decided to go for it.

Shortly thereafter, the whole thing—as Dr. Phil would say—drove off into the ditch. The producers had the cockamamie idea that they needed footage of people making fun of our size. Though the *Dr. Phil* show tapes in L.A., they sent us to Las Vegas, where there are permissive laws about hidden cameras. Despite our insistence that folks in Vegas have seen everything, and so would be nonplussed about two supersize women traipsing down The Strip, the producers were convinced they could get what they needed. Well, they eventually did, but they had to actually pay one man to make a rude comment and convince the poor, horrified camera contractor to expedite the shoot and say something mean to us.

After the Las Vegas debacle, it was on to Los Angeles, where things went from bad to worse. They tried another hidden camera maneuver, setting us up in a restaurant where two other guests (who hated fat people) were din-

ing, in hopes that those guests would make rude comments about us. It didn’t happen.

Then came taping day, and the rose-colored glasses through which we’d seen Dr. Phil shattered. It quickly became clear that his worldview is internally inconsistent. Removing one’s social mask and leading an authentic life is the pinnacle of Dr. Phil’s psychological construct. Yet, Maryanne and I received no brownie points for having successful careers, raising our children responsibly and overcoming the obstacles thrown at us by society because of our weight. Instead, Dr. Phil labeled us “militants” and challenged us at every turn about why we don’t feel our weight is “change worthy.” He wasn’t interested in having a discussion about social stigma and weight with two experts; indeed, viewers weren’t informed of our last names, much less of our credentials in the field. Instead of being considered advocates and giving a voice to those women who can’t speak for themselves, we were accused of seeing ourselves as victims. Most disappointing of all, it quickly became apparent to us that Dr. Phil claimed expertise in an area where his knowledge is woefully inadequate. Yet, his experience as a litigation consultant allowed him to misdirect the discussion and dance circles around us. Of course, now that we know he is planning to publish a weight loss book later this year, we understand that his vested economic interest in promoting weight loss precluded any chance we had to influence his perspective on weight.

In the weeks that followed, Maryanne and I relived each excruciating moment a thousand times. We were angry, but we also felt deep mourning for the man who’d fallen from the pedestal upon which we’d placed him. And the coda to the story gave us a much-needed laugh—tinged with hysteria. A few weeks after the first show aired (we had taped two shows), the producer called, excitedly reporting that ours was their highest-rated show, and inviting us back for a show called, “Debate Dr. Phil.” We declined, though I suggested that, if Dr. Phil really wanted to have a debate, I’d be happy to do so on a level playing field—where I’d be allowed my credentials—like *Larry King Live* or *Donohue*.

In the meanwhile, I’d suggest that Dr. Phil put away the smoke and mirrors and spend more time trying to uncover his authentic self. ♦