

Guiding Light

Self-help entrepreneur Kathy Freston brings transcendence to the media-mogul set.

Photograph by CHRISTINA PAIGE

Kathy Freston
in New York



Feel your spirit aligning with a greater energy," says the woman on the CD. "Picture a magnificent golden light surrounding your body... Perhaps," she continues, "you would like thinner thighs and a flat stomach... Your feelings will create the reality."

Forget world peace. This is meditation, Madison Avenue style, and the woman behind it is Kathy Freston. The second wife of former Viacom chief Tom Freston, she's released four meditation CDs and two self-help books, including the 2006 best-seller *The One: Discovering the Secrets of Soul Mate Love*. In June Weinstein Books will release her third title, *Quantum Wellness: A Practical and Spiritual Guide to Health and Happiness*.

Freston's booming business is based on her own philosophy—a mix, she says, of Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and "plain old self-help practical sense." But unlike others peddling enlightenment, she has an audience beyond the housewives who caught her on *Oprah* last spring. It also includes her peers—a fast-paced, media-savvy group unaccustomed to browsing the self-help aisle.

The wife of a media titan, Freston is not an obvious guru on the mountaintop. But as the scent of incense wafts through her Upper East Side living room, the 43-year-old insists she's able to reconcile her spirituality with her lifestyle. Three years ago she became a vegan and stopped wearing leather. "Giving up steak was easy," she says. "Giving up Manolo Blahniks, that was hard." But she's hardly shopping the Whole Earth Catalog. She had a nylon and faux

leather handbag custom made at Tod's and buys vegan shoes at Stella McCartney. Still, she's not above popping into Payless for pleather. Once, she dragged her friend Wendi Murdoch, whom she met at Herb Allen's Sun Valley conference, hoping to persuade her of the chain's merits. No dice. "I find shopping at Payless not very appealing," says Murdoch.

"Life gives us opportunities to push past our attachments," Freston says. "I'm grateful for these challenges with shopping."

To suit her dietary restrictions, Freston calls ahead to restaurants like Le Bernardin to request meat- and dairy-free entrées. On occasion, she's been able to convert her dining companions. Murdoch has given up poultry, and Tom eschews most animal protein, though he admits he's not religious about it. "I'm what she calls a select-atarian," he quips.

Elizabeth Wiatt, a board member of the Natural Resources Defense Council who met Freston through her husband, William Morris Agency CEO Jim Wiatt, recalls Freston begging her to meet with PETA to discuss the connection between global warming and vegetarianism. "We were having a hard enough time moving global warming forward in the mainstream without linking it to PETA," Wiatt remembers. In the end, though, she relented. "I'll do anything for Kathy," she says. "And I've been a vegetarian now for two years."

Freston was not born enlightened. Raised in Atlanta, she started doing catalog modeling at age 16. After high school she moved to Paris, where she read self-help tomes by Ken Wilber and Marianne Williamson between shoots. When it became clear she wasn't supermodel material, she moved to Los Angeles and began leading friends in visualizations. In 1996 she met Tom, then CEO of MTV Networks, at a Grammy after-party. Turning Tom New Age wasn't easy. "He's not someone who would pick up a self-help book," she says. (He protests that he does, in fact, read her recommendations, though "maybe not as fast as she'd like.")

When Tom was ousted from Viacom in 2006, his wife reacted with her characteristic sunny attitude. "What looks like a disaster can turn out to be a blessing," she says. "Since then he has done so many incredible things," she adds, referencing his travels to Mali and work for Bono's ONE campaign.

Freston sees her own path in the same karmic terms. "Had I been successful in modeling," she says, "I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now. They always say, do what you love and the money will follow."

—EMILY HOLT

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