

# Los Angeles Times Magazine

## Cover Story

Don't Do Therapy

*Dr. Laura Schlessinger, the Country's Top Female Radio Personality, Calls Herself a Prophet. What She Frequently Calls Others is an Entirely Different Matter.*

**By Janet Wiscombe**

It keeps happening. Callers share intimate details of their lives with Dr. Laura Schlessinger, and she is moved to tears. She tells ABC's "20/20" about growing up in a house with angry parents, and she cries. She is interviewed for a U.S. News & World Report cover story, and she sobs. She appears on "Oprah" and is overwhelmed with emotion after a young dad fesses up that he's been more concerned about bringing home the bacon than being with his kids.

On this day, the country's premier female radio star is seated on a wrought iron chair on the patio of the three-story dream home that she bought a year and a half ago in an exclusive, horsy San Fernando Valley enclave. And it's happening again.

Dr. Laura is recalling a summer teaching job three decades ago at a school for the handicapped in New York, and the tears are so persistent that her attendant media consultant discreetly disappears into the house for Kleenex. In those days, she had no values and no God. She was a basket case trying to cope with children who "would be dead by the end of summer."

Then one day, she met a paraplegic black man in his 40s who was intently bending wires on resistors--extremely exacting, repetitive work. "How can you do a job that's so boring?" she remembers blurting out unthinkingly.

"He was looking at a young little white girl with a whole life ahead of her," she relates, tears now flooding her face. "He said, 'There are lots of ways to think about what you do with your life. On the surface, my job may look very boring. But I take great pleasure in beating the other guys' times and figures.'"

\* A tissue is offered. "I was so ashamed and enlightened," she murmurs. "I've never been bored since that day. He changed my life."

She propels the conversation forward, then suddenly reins it back: "I am the guy in the wheelchair. I get things done faster and better."

For those who perceive the controversial national scold as one gnarly cookie, Dr. Laura would like you to know she's really a mushy-hearted kitty cat. As she reminds her legion of listeners every weekday, she is a deeply religious woman who uses her mega-pulpit to

drum sense into a morally wayward culture, a recently converted Jew who was reared a heathen, a fervent apostle of motherhood who drapes herself in the Ten Commandments and reigns as values queen.

"I am a prophet," she proclaims with unapologetic grandiosity. "This is a very serious show."

It can also be a very unforgiving show. An undercurrent of breathtaking anger surges not far beneath the jokes and laughter. For all the chumminess and girlish teasing, there is a drum beat of invective as Schlessinger rips into people, snarling insults at often pathetically needy callers, their friends, members of their families.

You are lying! she will hiss.

Don't give me that crap; it won't fly here! She will demand of callers: Repeat after me, I am a dummy! I am a dummy!

And they do.

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There is something of almost biblical proportions about the ascension of Laura Schlessinger. Her voice has been heard on various Southern California radio stations for more than two decades, most notably for the past seven years on "The Dr. Laura Schlessinger Program" (KFI, 640 AM, weekdays, noon to 3). During the KFI stint, she has also written a syndicated column and several best-sellers, including "Ten Stupid Things Women Do to Mess Up Their Lives" and "How Could You Do That?!"

Internationally syndicated in 1994, her celebrity soared. And last September, Jacor Communications Inc. paid Synergy Broadcasting Inc. (equity partners on the show with Schlessinger and husband Lew Bishop) a staggering \$71.5 million for the show, radio's biggest deal ever, 40% more than it gave Rush Limbaugh. She has the fastest-growing show in radio history, a program now aired on 450 stations in the United States, 30 in Canada--where she is the No. 1 talk radio personality--and in South Africa. And it has made Schlessinger and Bishop very, very rich.

Every weekday, devoted listeners from Juneau to Johannesburg tune in to Dr. Laura's no-nonsense confessional to hear how to live moral lives. She doesn't care how people feel; she cares about how they act. "I don't do therapy," she says, "I do the Ten Commandments." Verily, she's not interested in mental health; she's interested in moral health. And she is unequivocal about her beliefs: Don't leave your kids in child care--"stranger care." Don't shack up with anyone until you're married. Don't get an abortion or a divorce. Control your animal urges. Pull yourself up by the bootstraps. Don't be weak, selfish or stupid. Stop whining. Get a life. Grow up!

Have little kids and a rotten marriage? You made your bed, Honeybaby: Deal! Want someone to go along with your manipulative, irresponsible little games and give you warm fuzzies? Call somebody else! Considering therapy? What for? Terrible childhood? Get over it!

"I have a background," she says, "that would curl your hair."

With a mixture of down-home street talk and titillating frankness about penises and panties, Dr. Laura zooms in on callers' most intimate problems--from whose house to go to for the holidays to what to do when your husband is sleeping with your sister. In three minutes, she strips a problem to its naked essence and badgers callers to admit what's really going on in their messed-up lives.

Based on data from AT&T, her publicists estimate that 60,000 people a day clamor to be one of the 20 or so callers who actually get past the busy signal and screeners for a few minutes of anonymous "therapy." Dr. Laura hates that word, and insists she doesn't dispense therapy or advice. She offers moral opinions--without the warm chicken soup. It's her job "to teach, preach and nag."

Callers, of course, don't make the distinction. They assume Dr. Laura, who refers to herself as a shrink, is, well, a shrink. She is licensed as a marriage, family and child counselor, but she's not a psychologist and hasn't personally undergone therapy. Her doctorate is in physiology, a branch of biology.

She and her husband also stoke the entrepreneurial fires with other Dr. Laura enterprises. Fans can subscribe to her monthly magazine, "Dr. Laura Perspective," for \$29 (Schlessinger is the editor, Bishop a contributing photographer and their son, Deryk, 12, creative consultant); leave a message at the Dr. Laura Web site (<http://www.drlaura.com>), read her newly published best-seller, "Ten Stupid Things Men Do to Mess Up Their Lives," or order from the Dr. Laura Collection, a catalog featuring a full line of merchandise--from books and videos to Dr. Laura workout wear and Dr. Laura staff shirts (100% cotton denim, \$39.95).

Schlessinger says she'd rather not mention which television networks have wooed her, because she doesn't want her rejections to embarrass them. She's not interested in TV anyway, unless PBS comes calling. "PBS is a very classy venue," she says, "and it would be a higher level of discourse, the level we're headed."

She has been bestowed with honors, including the 1997 Marconi Radio Award as the top syndicated personality of the year from the National Assn. of Broadcasters--the first woman to win it. She can command up to \$30,000 a speech and still has energy enough to raise money for charity and to work on her biceps with a personal trainer and her larynx with a singing coach, keep kosher and observe the Sabbath, read several newspapers and stacks of books, write commentaries and collaborate with her rabbi on a book due out next spring with the working title "The Ten Commandments: What's In It for Me?"

Most important, she is home to greet Deryk every day when he returns from school.

And if she can do it, you can, too.

Dr. Laura is such a vociferous defender of stay-at-home moms she has become a four-star general in the Family Values crusade, a not-so-covert conservative who quotes the Weekly Standard and the Heritage Foundation. She rails against feminism and abortion, vehemently argues against sex education in public schools and instinctively knows how to mine the overflowing trenches of guilt-ridden Americans who are struggling to juggle kids and jobs in a global village that's still under construction.

At a time when half the mothers of babies work and half stay home, Dr. Laura draws lines in the dirt between Bad Mothers and Good Mothers. She is a Good Mother, a "recovered feminist," and she and her fans wear shirts with imprints to prove it ("I Am My Kid's Mom"). When Deryk was born, she sacrificed her income and her work to stay home for four years. What she doesn't mention is that when Deryk was young, she was an adjunct professor in the graduate school of education and psychology at Pepperdine University, maintained a private counseling practice and operated a knitting business from her home. What's important, she now says, is that she was rarely away from home, and when she was, Bishop was with their son. She's not against women working, Dr. Laura says, she's against leaving children in child care.

Certainly she's an enigma, a sought-after professional, the heroine of homemakers, a divorced career woman who was so sure she didn't want children at one point that she had a tubal ligation, a staunch defender of the commandment to Honor Thy Mother and Father who has been estranged from her own sister and mother for 15 years. Her mother, who has never met Deryk, lives in Southern California.

She dismisses her family of origin with a flat statement: "I'm an orphan."

Above all, she is Joan Rivers with a Bible, a consummate master of the one-liner whose flair for language and common-sense approach to domestic problems inspires affection and loyalty. "Thank you, Dr. Laura," callers frequently gush. "You changed my life." She's tapped a sensitive chord among the growing numbers of Americans who want more accountability in schoolhouses and bedrooms and more direction in their lives. She not only talks plainly about taking personal responsibility and taking care of kids, she's also out to reclaim words such as sin and guilt, to raise the flag for religion. "I've probably sent more people back to Catholic church than the pope," she jokes.

The Rev. Robert Schuller, who has turned his televised pulpit over to her twice, sings her praises: "She is a power voice for positive values without equal in our time. She is a national, spiritual, moral treasure."

Fans mob her for autographs and blanket her in lavish praise. To differ with her in any way is considered an act of treason. During the question-and-answer period following a speech last summer at the Skirball Cultural Center, a middle-aged woman in the audience

stood to say she didn't like Schlessinger's attacks on women and said she thought Dr. Laura's manner with callers was arrogant and mean. A young woman shot from her seat to punish the dissenter. In a tone hot with vitriol, she exclaimed: "If you're coming to criticize, you shouldn't be here." The vast majority of the predominantly female audience, however, showed appreciation with generous applause and offerings of gratitude, even flowers. "She has the strength of her convictions," says Shirley Ambers, a travel agent from Encino. "She is a moral compass."

Margie Ehlers, a Torrance homemaker who tunes in to Dr. Laura every day, says most callers are so screwed up and thickheaded, they need to be hit over the head: "She just won't sit there and be namby-pamby with people who won't listen to the truth. My friends think she's a bitch. I think she just tells it like it is."

Telling it like it is can be manifested in far more than a light verbal spanking. One minute, Dr. Laura is nice mommy, cooing endearments, calling people sweetie pie. The next she is vengeful mommy, berating callers as moral slime, bimbos, bums, jerks, manipulators, idiots, scum, sluts, whores and bitches.

"She has contempt for people," says Salvatore Maddi, a professor of psychology and social behavior at UC Irvine. "She is a very angry woman. She has an authoritarian frame of reference. She gives orders. She dictates to people. That's not the way you develop personal responsibility. That's the way you develop followers."

Says Rabbi Susan Laemmle, dean of religious life at USC: "Healthy people don't want to be ordered around."

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On this Sunday afternoon, Schlessinger is in fine form.

In a cotton Tweety Bird blouse and short denim skirt with matching applique--both gifts from Deryk--she says she's never been so happy, or so fit. She looks younger than her 51 years and likes young things--shopping malls and escapist movies such as "Alien" and "Terminator." She's a petite 5-foot-3, 110-pound Trekkie with a black belt in karate who power-walks and pumps iron and doesn't go anywhere without a plastic bottle of water in her hand and a diamond Star of David hanging from her neck.

She likes to foster an image as fun-loving and slightly wacky and is proud of her Harley bicycle with the hot red fenders and her rose-colored Mercedes-Benz. She has a passion for oldies and jokes that she's coming back in her next life as a rabbi--or a Supreme.

Last February, she celebrated her 50th birthday at the Disneyland Hotel. She invited the whole country to Dr. Laura's Blast to the Past, a '50s dance and fund-raiser for ChildHelp USA, which honored her in 1996 with its Children's Friend Award. A throng of about 1,400 faithful flew in from all over the country and Canada in Elvis ensembles and poodle skirts. Schlessinger stepped out of a vintage red T-bird convertible sporting a

megawatt smile and a beehive hairdo, all gussied up in a bubble-gum pink and white polka-dotted dress with matching gloves and flats. She bopped 'til she dropped.

"She's a bundle of energy, shall we say," says Bishop, 64, a low-key former scientist who looks like he'd be more comfortable in a tweed suit at a colloquium than in the denims and white T-shirt with rolled up sleeves that he wore to his wife's Big 5-0. "She wakes me up in the night in the middle of a thought and gets mad if I can't finish it.

"Someday she'll learn to relax."

Bishop not only serves as Dr. Laura's manager and financial partner, he does the grocery shopping and all the cooking. When Schlessinger and Deryk--Deryk Schlessinger ("You go through labor for 12 hours, you get to name the kid!")--converted to Judaism a year and a half ago, Bishop learned to keep a kosher kitchen. Though reared an Episcopalian in Boston, he plans to convert. (Dr. Laura does not approve of two-religion families.)

She met Bishop in the mid-'70s when she was a 28-year-old full-time physiology instructor at USC and he a professor in the department of biological sciences with a wife and three children. L.A. radio legend Bill Ballance, who "discovered" Schlessinger in 1975, says they dated awhile, but he quickly lost her to Bishop, who left academia in 1981 to work in biomedical research and manage Dr. Laura's career.

"She's the smartest woman I ever met," Ballance says. When he first knew her, Schlessinger was a soon-to-be divorcee who had moved to California from New York and was living with her parents in the San Fernando Valley. Ballance has many nice things to say about her, an affection that apparently isn't mutual. At the mention of his name, Schlessinger says her comments about him are strictly off the record.

Here, in the heart of privilege and piety, many subjects are verboten.

Bishop won't discuss his divorce. Schlessinger used to talk publicly about her estrangement from her mother but no longer will. To do so, she says, would be gossip, and gossip is against her religion. Five years ago, she told a reporter she was an only child. Now she says she has a sister 11 years younger but that they don't have a relationship. Period.

She often talks on the radio about the difficulty she had getting pregnant and told reporters about undergoing fertility treatments after her tubes were untied. Since she conceived Deryk only a few months after her marriage to Bishop, it's confusing. Asked for clarification, however, Dr. Laura bristles, charging "the liberal press" with trying to undermine her by making her look like a hypocrite.

She frequently talks about what a difficult financial time her family of three had after Bishop lost his job when Deryk was a baby. But asked about being out of work, Bishop can't immediately remember, then says if he was, it wasn't for long. Both accuse people who ask her personal questions of having venal motives. Schlessinger eventually softens:

"I regret talking about my mother before. I didn't have the religious framework then. I am what I am now."

The stories that emerge about her childhood don't exactly connect with the halcyon days of yore she talks about on the radio, when moms stayed home, parents stayed together, schools were good and people "had values." Schlessinger says her parents were not "Ozzie and Harriet"; rather they were combative and angry. The family was never close, and there was neither extended family nor religion. Her father was reared a Jew, her mother a Catholic. But religion became such a rancorous issue between them, they didn't bring their two daughters up with any religion or values at all, Schlessinger says.

During most of her childhood, her father worked as an engineer; her mother was a housewife. Schlessinger, though extremely outgoing and precocious, was an underachiever until college, first at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, later at Columbia University, where she earned her Ph.D. Then, as now, she was an outspoken conversationalist whom some found intimidating. She always knew she was smart but never considered herself pretty. Ready to leave for college, she asked her father, "Daddy, am I pretty?"

"No. You aren't pretty," she remembers him answering. "You don't have the looks to make a guy turn his head twice."

"I was devastated," Schlessinger recalls.

She artfully steers the conversation onward, then adds in a rare moment of introspection: "I was always on a treadmill, always trying to prove something. I'm like a panther. There's always something I have to jump."

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Among the biggest obstacles is the media--her passion and her curse. She enjoys the ratings that come from her in-your-face, take-no-prisoners style but is openly hostile to those who question or disagree. Women are especially vulnerable to attack. Those who differ are ridiculed as "people who have problems with their value systems or are jealous and competitive."

Those are recurring themes. She recently dismissed an author who wrote a less-than-glowing review of her new book. "His books must not sell, because I've never heard of him," she sniffed on the air. "He must be jealous."

So certain is she of Dr. Laura's pipeline to the truth, Schlessinger concludes that when she calls people liars and they don't like it, it's because they don't like the truth.

Last March, Dallas Morning News columnist Marilyn Schwartz chided Schlessinger for acting like a prima donna while in town to deliver a couple of high-ticket speeches, one to the Jewish Federation of Greater Dallas. Schwartz wrote that Schlessinger was cold

and ungracious to fans and hosts and refused several hotel rooms and taxis because, she said, they aggravated her allergies.

Dr. Laura went on the air the next day and wept, saying the remarks had triggered a personal and spiritual crisis. Schwartz then wrote another column quoting several people who had attended the event who described Schlessinger as arrogant, rude and insulting.

"I don't think there was anyone in the room she didn't offend," says Joyce Schiff, a manufacturing representative in Dallas who attended the lecture. Schlessinger was critical of Jews she deemed insufficiently orthodox, Schiff says, and was highly critical of working women.

Schwartz says she's never experienced anything like the avalanche of mail and telephone calls from fans and critics of Schlessinger. "Schlessinger tells people to stop sniveling and take responsibility," Schwartz says. "Then her husband calls me and she gets on the phone and screams at me like a crazy person and slams down the phone. I was shocked."

Schlessinger says she can't believe that the episode hasn't died but can't let the subject drop. She mocks Schwartz as "that terrible woman" and, in an oblique reference to Schwartz's column, snaps: "She spouts morality and isn't moral." Still, Schlessinger maintains she can't defend herself against vicious attacks because of her religion. "I have to eat a lot of shit," she grumbles. "It makes you want to get vengeance, but I control it."

Soon after the Dallas episode, Dr. Laura hired a public relations team. GCI media consultant Keven Bellows believes the media has been hard on her client but concedes that it's fair to say Schlessinger is thin-skinned: "She is panicked about what people will say about her."

On the air, Dr. Laura frequently talks about her religious convictions and offers herself up as an example of moral superiority. "My friends have better character than that," she recently told a caller who shared an ethical dilemma involving her boss, whom she considered a friend, but who was taking money ("You mean embezzling!") from the company. "Would my son like them?" she righteously demanded of an 11-year-old caller who wanted to talk about how her mother didn't like her friends. (Dr. Laura concluded the conversation with this dictate: "She's your mother. She gave you life. Do what you're told. Remember to honor thy mother and father.")

Schlessinger has also been involved in at least two personal legal embroilments. In 1994, she and her husband filed a lawsuit against Sylmar Medical Center and four physicians who treated Bishop for a cardiac condition--he for medical negligence, she for emotional distress after watching him collapse at home. Schlessinger claimed she was "sickened and traumatized" and suffered "great emotional disturbance, shock and injury to her nervous system" and had to hire myriad professionals--including physicians, psychologists and counselors--to get through the ordeal. She and Bishop dismissed the suit in 1995.

In 1996, Alan Fuller, a radio producer who helped with the national syndication of the "Dr. Laura Schlessinger Show," sued Schlessinger and her producers, claiming he was owed 20% of the net profits of the show in accordance with a written contract. Schlessinger and her producers then sought a temporary restraining order in May 1997 against Fuller and his associates. Fuller's suit was "resolved" last year, according to his attorney, Bruce Van Dalsem, who says he cannot discuss details of the resolution because of a confidentiality agreement. In August, attorneys for Schlessinger and her producers dismissed their request for a restraining order with prejudice, which means they cannot bring the matter to court again.

(Among those named in the Schlessinger complaint was radio talk-show psychologist Toni Grant. In the filing, Schlessinger said, "Dr. Grant is fiercely competitive and apparently was threatened" by Dr. Laura's success. Grant has declined comment.)

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It's happening again. But this time, the streams seemingly come from a well deep within. Dr. Laura wants people to know she isn't an angry person. Her voice softening, she concedes she really hasn't been a happy person for much of her life. No matter how well she did professionally, she was always confused and troubled about her life's direction and purpose. Religion has given her new meaning.

"I came from nothing," she says, tearfully referring to a childhood bereft of spirituality. "What I've learned is about everyday blessings. I almost didn't have children. Now I look at Deryk and know he is God's blessing."

For all the people who reach out for Dr. Laura's advice, she is a hard woman to know. Certainly she is a savvy entertainer, an astute student of human nature with a genius for tapping the misery of Middle America. She is also an insecure little girl, a broadcaster with a rapacious appetite for attention who inspires both love and loathing.

At a time when the public faces confusing choices, her absolute opinions are compelling antidotes, clear bells against a noisy landscape of TV and boomboxes, traffic jams and malls that are always open.

"We live in a society that destroys our humanity and mutilates us," says Judith Grant, chairwoman of the Gender Studies Program at USC and a professor of political science. Dr. Laura is popular because "she speaks to a nostalgia that never existed."

Schlessinger has enormous appeal to people who don't really want to wrestle with major moral or ethical dilemmas, adds Lilli Friedland, an L.A. clinical psychologist and past president of the American Psychological Assn.'s division of media psychology. "She's more than willing to tell people they are right or wrong. She tells people what to do, and a lot of her judgments are sound. People are lonely, depressed and angry. They don't know their neighbors. She's like the Great White Mother."

She's also capable of being Wrathful Mommy, a shock jock who stirs hatred against "feminist physicians" and others she perceives as undermining parental authority by talking to kids about sex and AIDS, subjects that, she believes, belong in the home. Dr. Laura is angry at parents--particularly mothers--who don't do things her way. "Mothers kill more children than anyone else," is her frequent refrain, a harsh, loaded conclusion that selectively and simplistically gives but part of the story of the very real and complex problem of child abuse and neglect.

Hey, somebody's got to tell it like it is, she will say. And nobody's going to confuse her with the "pure shrink shows, which tend to be exceptionally liberal and men-bashing.

"I bash everyone," Dr. Laura boasts, the fire and brimstone in her voice thundering. "I want to make an impression. I have to get people's lives on track. I am a prophet. A prophet takes a big metal spoon and hits the pan: Hello! I'm here!"

Credit: Janet Wiscombe's last article for the magazine contemplated what life would be like if tobacco were declared illegal

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