

# Exponent II

Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?



Volume 29, Issue 1

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Cover art:  
“Wave [Womb]”  
by Galen Bell Smith (G)

## Special Edition: The Best of the Blog

The idea of an *Exponent II* blog began with the most innocuous and quintessential of Mormon activities: visiting teaching. Caroline Kline had been assigned to visit teach Jana Remy. After discovering Caroline's feminist inclinations, Jana loaned her pile of *Exponent II*'s. She was enraptured. And committed to contribute.

After collaborating to put together a 2004 Southern California guest issue, Jana and Caroline became convinced that they could help support the *Exponent II* organization by creating an interactive online presence to reach a new generation of women who were yearning to share their diverse experiences as LDS women. Not only could a blog reach out to this new generation, it could also transcend geography. Women all over the country, even all over the world, could come to this virtual forum and converse with a community of women willing to share their insights, their sorrows, their struggles, and their triumphs.

On the other side of the country, Deborah Kris was engaged in vigorous discussions with then-Exponent Board President Aimee Hickman. An avid LDS blog reader, Deborah felt it was time for *Exponent II* to add its distinctive voice to the (then largely male dominated) "bloggernacle." What does the "next generation of LDS women do when they have a question or concern? They Google!

Linda Hoffman Kimball, Brooke Williams, Amelia Parkin, and Dora soon rounded out our initial merry band of writers—each bringing an array of life experience to the forum. Over time we have been joined by other women—Amy Bobo, Maria, Jessica, Zenaida, MRaynes, and numerous guest posters. Of course, it is the "commenters" as much as the "contributors" who create a vibrant community.

Now, three years later, with nearly 700 posts, over 8000 comments, and nearly 100,000 visits, we are pleased to feature some of our favorite posts and comments in this issue of *Exponent II*. Please feel free to join our virtual community at [www.the-exponent.com](http://www.the-exponent.com).

Visit the Exponent II Blog

[www.the-exponent.com](http://www.the-exponent.com)

# Exponent II

Volume 29

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Issue 1

## Love Bug

by Deborah F. Kris

This is a love story.

February 2002. I was a new assistant head of school, married to my job. However, after several months of perseverant courtship, I had finally, warily agreed to date a co-worker: Michael. Interoffice romance? Doomed. I was much too practical to give it a real chance.

Two weeks later, during the height of rush hour traffic, my trusty Saturn hit a patch of ice in the left-hand lane of a major freeway. My car spun twice, crossed three lanes—somehow dancing between cars—and became wedged under the shoulder guard. I walked away, but the car was loaded in chunks onto a flatbed as the snow picked up speed. Mike met up with me at the towing office, bearing blankets and hot chocolate. I accepted both in a stupor.

The next day, as I wearily contemplated buying a used economy sedan, Michael asked, “Is that what you really want? What do you want?” What did I want? The question provoked my first tears since the accident.

“Well, there is one car, but it’s only a two-door and it’s . . . cute. You aren’t supposed to buy cars because they are cute.”

That evening, I somehow found myself at a Volkswagen dealership, test driving a Bug. Two days later, as I drove into the school’s



parking lot, a whole line of Kindergartners began to point and punch. Driving my beetle released something silly and young in my hyper-responsible personality. I felt cute. Mike gave me a yellow daisy for the bud vase. Two years later he gave me a ring.

For over four years, I commuted 63 miles a day in that car. I don’t like my commute. I dread it, actually, and the gasoline used to fuel it. One accident on the pike and my drive can stretch to 90 minutes. Each year is my “last year” and each year I can’t bear to say goodbye to these students quite yet. And so over time, my car has been privy to all my secrets, my musings, my singing, my tears. I believe buildings take on the energy of their occupants. This car—enduring 80,000 miles of Deborah energy—became my hobbit home: round, comfortable, familiar as skin.

This past Friday, I reverently cleaned every

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## Selected Comments

corner. She really didn't need much more than a vacuum. Moe at "Quick Cash for Cars" wouldn't be paying attention to neglected crumbs in the trunk. We Pay Top Dollar! No Haggling! Sell Your Car—Fast and Fair! Yeah, right. But at a hundred thousand miles, no reputable dealership would take her, and Moe's flashing neon sign became our only expeditious option. It's time for something more practical—four doors. My father-in-law was going to trade in his old Honda, but he was generous enough to offer it to us instead. It's in good shape, with fewer miles. All very practical.

I sold her to Moe—she sparkled on that last drive. After handing over the keys, I ran back into his office, "Wait! I forgot to get out my daisy!" That evening, my husband couldn't do anything right. Even his breathing brought forth darts until finally he said, "You miss your car, don't you?" And then he was good enough to hold me as I sobbed recklessly—without laughing or eye-rolling at such a silly silly sadness in this serious world. I didn't mind giving up my maiden name—just wasn't an issue. But my bug.

My husband assures me that I don't need her anymore—that I can still be sassy and suave in a black Accord. He's right, I guess, partly because I still have him around to ask me, "What do you really want?" And he listens almost as patiently as she did.

*I love your story. What a powerful question. It takes such a caring person to ask it, then wait for and accept the answer given. I know many talkers, and I do appreciate them. However, those who are listeners as well tend to be the best friends.*

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*Deborah, this is such a great story. My husband and I have been in the throes of car discussion for months now. He is absolutely, irrevocably In Love with a certain kind of car I blush to mention and would blush to be seen in (especially since we live in a ward consisting of mostly poor students. I'm going to be hideously embarrassed to drive this thing to church if we end up getting it.). But your wonderful story has given me a glimpse of his car-loving heart. Thanks.*

\*\*\*

*Thanks for sharing! I had to get rid of two bugs that I dearly loved in my life, and I can totally relate. My first car was a 71 Super Beetle named Apple, and she got me up and down the coast of California more times than I can say—even once making it with my purse strap as her generator belt! Nothing like a bug. Several cars were in between, but when the new bugs came out, I knew there was no other option for me. I LOVED that car, and her name was Lillybelle. We had to trade her in when we started our family, as much as I didn't want to. Someday, when the kids are grown and gone, we plan on getting another. I wonder what her name will be?*

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## In the Shadow of His Wings

by Deborah F. Kris

She came in late. School started at 8:35 but it was nearly 9:30 when she shuffled into the classroom. She ignored the teacher's welcome, hung up her grease-stained backpack, walked to her desk, and put her head in her hands. Within ten minutes, her body slumped in slumber.

At lunch my cooperating teacher, Sandy, filled in the details. This was her 37th year teaching in the district—the poorest and poorest-performing district in the state. I was a 21-year-old student teacher, and we had 32 four graders between us. Tina, she said, had an older brother whose dark defiance had earned him a place in a special school after his fifth grade year. It was an open secret that her father was a major player in the local drug trade, she said. No one doubts he beats the wife; probably the kids. Yes, the social worker has filed with the state. If this kid were in Lexington she would have been removed years ago, but here . . . well, welcome to the neighborhood.

That afternoon, I followed the students to music. "I'm the old vet in this school," Sandy said, "so I get the tough ones in my class. These specialist teachers can't handle them on their own, yet. Go help them out." We hadn't finished the welcome song before Tina walked to the upright piano and curled herself beneath it, wrapping her arms around the leg. When I went to retrieve her, tears were streaming down her face, but I couldn't hear

a sound—even her breathing was silent.

The silence lasted two days. "Don't you f\*\*\*\* touch my stuff!" I spun around to see

Tina—a full head smaller than the smallest student—digging her nails into Jeffrey's arm. Her eyes were wild. Silence, fists, and an occasional simple addition problem. That was the best we could do for a few weeks.

One October day, Sandy pulled me aside. "Expect Tina to be a little off her game today. It's her birthday. Her brother was always a terror on his birthday—not much for a celebration at home." I rifled through my bag in search of something, some little present. I found two Halloween pencils and a sheet of pumpkin stickers. I made a card and placed them in her desk. She didn't acknowledge the gesture, didn't even look at me as she left that day.

When I arrived the next morning, a package was sitting in the center of my desk. Someone had ripped the book cover off a math book and used it for wrapping paper. A Dole banana sticker ripped in two served as tape.



Photo by Julie Davis

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And scrawled in black marker:

To Miss F. From your friend Tina

I unwrapped the package to find a rag doll — her face was smudged, her dress stained. When Tina walked in, she simply stared at me. I nodded and smiled. She practiced her spelling without complaint.

I am fairly certain I have never prayed more fervently than I did during those six months for those 32 students. My other teaching practicums had been almost effortless. But here I was, running a reading group with nine students who didn't have basic decoding skills, checking homework that was completed in homeless shelters, and feeling more than I had thought possible. And then there was Tina. She was beginning to trust me, and she was beginning to read; she even learned her times tables. But I knew the statistics were stacked against her. Her smudged face and fits of tears made me question all I knew about justice and mercy.

On my last day of student teaching, I once again followed the students to music. The students were well trained by now, and I could sit on the back bench and watch. After a few minutes, Tina came to sit next to me. She curled up on the bench and laid her head in my lap. I stroked her hair and listened to her breathing. I'm not sure how to explain what happened next. On a single inhale — for just a fraction of a second — I thought I saw her far from here, standing someplace warm and someplace gentle. Her face was clean. On her exhale, I felt a force from Elsewhere,

felt more love than my body could hold, as if God wanted to touch her for a just moment in this lonely world and my lap was the nearest conduit. Tina fell fast asleep.

I don't know the ending to her story. I lost track of her after a year or two. Every fall, I pull out the doll and tell my students about Tina. They pass it around gingerly; they look at her picture peering from the old class photo, frozen in time.

I know I learned something of mercy that semester, something of God's love. But justice? It still doesn't seem fair . . .

## Selected Comment

*I was a "Tina" as a child. One of myriads of course. Still, I thank all the Deborah's in this world for being just enough of what I needed to survive my youth. And God for putting them in my path; you are the reason I am the person I am today. Oddly, (and I can only really attribute this to the atonement, which I barely understand still but it's the only possible explanation) the wretchedness and darkness and loathing of my childhood have actually been replaced by a sweet sense of gratitude for the things I learned from that time. They made me who I am and formed my compassionate heart. But I'm only able to be grateful because I made it. And I only made it because of people like you. You have no idea how even the smallest kind gesture can imprint upon someone like Tina (or me). One small gesture carried me for years on end. It's easy to forget, when one's life is full, that sometimes it's just a small, simple thing that brings great things to pass.*

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## Missing Wives in the Presidents of the Church Manuals

by Emily Clyde Curtis

Every two years when I get my new *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church* manual, I go to the index to find the pages that talk about the prophet's wife. I always hope to see a few pages devoted to her. But, there's never as much information as I'd like to read.

If the prophet was a polygamist, the wives are usually not mentioned anywhere in the manual.\* A more recent prophet's manual will list the marriage and death dates of his wife. If we're lucky, she might be mentioned in one of the chapters,\*\* but often, this is in the context of her death...which makes me pause and think, "Wait, the only thing worth mentioning about some of these women is their death?!"

This makes me sad. These women sacrificed just as much (and maybe more) as their husbands did. I want to know about their struggles, too. When I read about how the deaths of Joseph F. Smith's nine children shaped him and how he taught the doctrine of the salvation of children, I can't help but wonder how these children's mothers also dealt with such loss.

I was really excited to see two stories about Phoebe Woodruff in this year's manual (and she's a polygamist wife, too!). As I read these two stories, I get a glimpse of a woman of amazing strength, both physical and spiritual. I think I am particularly amazed because one of the stories has her at about my age

losing her baby, who is about my baby's age, while being pregnant with another baby and having a husband on a mission in the UK. That story makes me a little sheepish when I complain a. about my son and b. that my husband goes out of town too much!

However, even as I write that we should be able to know more about the prophets' wives, I don't think these are the only role models we should celebrate.

As my Young Women struggle to find their identities as Mormon women, I want them to be able to see the variety of life choices that they have. I don't want them to grow up thinking that a woman is defined by her husband.

I would love to have manuals that brought up great Mormon women every week instead of just a few times a year. So, I wonder...where can we find other female role models? How do you bring them into your Church lessons?

*\*See Brigham Young, John Taylor, and Joseph F. Smith manuals. \*\*Emma Ray Riggs McKay is the only wife of a prophet who has a story about her that doesn't involve the death of herself or her child.*

These women sacrificed just as much (and maybe more) as their husbands did. I want to know about their struggles, too.

## Selected Comments

*Yes, we need more stories of prophets' wives. Less whitewashing and more discussion. It is silly not to mention the many important women in these chronologies. As far as bringing in the teachings of R.S. presidents on a general curricular level, though, I'm dubious. In one sense, the teachings of women are used to educate men. The theology of Eliza Snow is regularly sung and cited. Beyond that – well, I can sympathize. It would be nice to have statements from women's teachings. But I don't know that this is possible, until/unless women receive a greater ecclesiastical role. I just don't see how we could have a "Teachings of Elaine Jack" or "Teachings of Cheiko Okazaki" given current ecclesiastical structure. Current-era R.S. presidents just don't occupy the same sort of position of authority. Absent a change in ecclesiastical structure, I don't think a change in curriculum would make much sense. The R.S. president just does not have the same position as the prophet – it's not even close. The curricular imbalance is a natural result – or, depending on one's viewpoint, a symptom – of much more fundamental structural issues.*

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*While I admit that I'm always interested in reading about the women in Church History in our manuals, I've never felt strongly that we or even I am "missing something" from my Gospel study because the RS/Priesthood manuals are "about the men." In the context of studying the Gospel, I just don't think gender should be that important. Clearly, the reason the manuals are centered on*

*"men" is that they, not the women, are the prophets whose words we are studying. Am I the only Mormon woman who sometimes feels that LDS women's complaining so much about their "lack of voice" in the Church have been too influenced by the world's definition of our success and value – i.e. fame, power, worldly success? For the record, I am a 33-year-old, college-educated, former research scientist turned high-school math teacher turned full-time mother. But then again, what do all these labels matter anyway?*

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*For me this issue is about a bigger picture. I do feel that women lack a voice and are utterly devoid of any authority in the Church, and I think that leads to a significant imbalance. My personal opinion is that men and women should be making decisions together. The Church seems to say that should be the model in the home, but I would like to see it mirrored in the leadership.*

*Also, like all of the Christian churches with which I am familiar, there is a great lack of the divine feminine. We are taught that one day we can become gods and goddesses, but what does that mean? Will the men get to go around creating worlds, answering people's prayers, and being praised and worshipped while we are in some dark corner doing nothing? That seems to be the model. I am not okay with that.*

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Issue 1

## Dinner with the Polygamists

by Emily Clyde Curtis

A couple weeks ago, my husband, Nate, asked if I would have dinner with some of the people he works with. One of Nate's clients is the Colorado City Unified School District, a polygamist community that straddles the Arizona/Utah border near St. George. (Yes, that's where the infamous Warren Jeffs is from.)

Of course, I jumped at the chance. I have read lots about pioneer polygamists, but I'd never actually met any modern-day ones.

We went to dinner with C and F, who are in leadership positions in the school district. They are strong women who talked about their children, husbands, and career ambitions. I was particularly struck during our conversation about the advantage of having sister wives who can help raise each other's children. I think that gives these women a little more freedom than us monogamists about when/how/if they will pursue a career. In fact, many of the women Nate works with have Masters and PhDs from schools like Northern Arizona University and Southern Utah University.

As I listened to them, I was ashamed to admit that I had not wanted to see modern-day polygamists as "real people." I was tired of the Mormon polygamy jokes, and I wanted to do everything I could to distance myself from the modern-day polygamists. I wanted to believe in the stereotypes of men forcing

child brides into marriage, of women too oppressed or uneducated to realize how horrible their lives were, of polygamist families living in decrepit trailers. I wanted to see polygamy as evil and oppressive and the people who chose it as a way of life, unenlightened.

In fact, part of me still wants to see it as something to be abolished because if polygamy is a valid model, what does that say about my role as a monogamist wife? What would this say about the roles of women versus the men? And, then, of course there are the theological implications if polygamy truly is an eternal principle, but I'll save that tirade for another blog.

Now that I've met these women and Nate works with them on a daily basis, I'm finding my polygamist wife stereotype falling apart. As Nate and I have gotten to know these people, I see, for the most part, women choosing this lifestyle. The women I've met married around the same age or even older than I was when I married (I was 22). They have as much (often more) education than I have and are pursuing successful careers while raising healthy, intelligent children and maintaining well-functioning families.

I've heard the stories of abuse and of octogenarians marrying teenage virgin brides on Oprah and seen the book displays at Barnes and Noble.

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*Sisters, by Galen Bell Smith (G)*

But I wonder if that's more because the sensational stories are more interesting than the majority of polygamists' daily lives. Nate isn't seeing the pictures the media depicts. Granted, he's seen some scandal up there but no more than most places have to deal with.

In fact, as he talks with these women, he sees that the idea of an older man marrying a 14- or 15-year-old girl is just as offensive to polygamists as it is to monogamists. This is one reason why many polygamists in Colorado City no longer believe Warren Jeffs is a prophet.

Warren Jeffs and others have done bad things, and, unfortunately, this tiny group represents polygamy to the outside world. And yet many polygamists do not follow Warren Jeffs or support what he has done. When Nate talks about the people he works with and when I meet some of them, all I see are individuals trying to live their lives the best they know how. And, right now, those would be hard lives to live...

Imagine the current state of events in Colorado City. Major networks have crews permanently working in the town, and these reporters have to come up with stories that will attract viewers. This means they constantly sensationalize the lifestyle and the hunt for Warren Jeffs. But these polygamists are regular people, who have news crews filming them at church, at school, at the grocery store, and even at home without their permission.

Add to this that their communal land trust has been taken over by force by the Utah Attorney General. The school district has been taken over by the Arizona Attorney General, and every police officer in town has either been arrested or de-certified by the Arizona Attorney General. There are two FBI agents permanently assigned to the community of 10,000 people, and approximately once a month dozens of state police officers from Utah and/or Arizona descend on the city to serve outstanding subpoenas or execute search warrants.

Amid all this strife, the polygamists are dividing amongst themselves with one group

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## Dinner with the Polygamists

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pursuing an isolationist strategy by moving the religion to Texas, where they are building temples and preparing for the Second Coming. The other group is staying in Colorado City, trying to preserve their lifestyle and open up to the outside world. I can't help but think how really hard this whole situation would be if it were happening to me.

It is still difficult for me to know how to react to modern-day polygamists. Like Linda mentioned in her polygamist blog, on one hand polygamy seems freeing—to be able to pursue your dreams as you share child-care responsibilities—but on the other hand, I'd be sharing my husband and my children would be sharing their father with a lot of other children. If I accept polygamists' way of life, am I helping pave the way to having polygamy come back? Or would I be supporting an aspect of the Church that I frankly think was a big mistake?

And yet, if I want people to be accepting of my way of life and not stereotype me, don't I have the obligation to defend others when I see them being persecuted?

So, what is my obligation to these women? I know that the vast majority of them are free to leave whenever they choose. Can I condemn them for exercising their free agency? On the other hand, by supporting their lifestyle choices, am I condoning the instances of abuse? Worse yet, am I assisting the perpetuation of abuse?

## Selected Comments

*I believe the criminalization of polygamy between consenting adults is ridiculous. Abuse and statutory rape should be dealt with as a separate issue and not automatically bundled into the polygamy discussion. That said, I can think of plenty other ways to manage a happy family life and meaningful work than inviting other women to share my husband's bed. That strikes me as a rather weak "benefit."*

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*I too have been impressed by certain plural wives I have met at Sunstone. They are smart, articulate and are great advocates for a lifestyle that they feel is legitimate and empowering. However, I also try to remember that the ones I meet (and I imagine the ones you met) are among the best, the brightest, and the most empowered of polygamist women—the modern day equivalents of Eliza R. Snow or Emmeline B. Wells—while the majority are not in such privileged circumstances. I wonder if the empowering aspects of polygamy are really only available to a few people of a certain social/economic strata. My husband had dinner with some polygamists who lived in the middle of nowhere when he was a missionary in Montana. He was struck by how desperately poor and downtrodden and isolated those people were. I wonder if that is more reflective of the majority of polygamists than these few who I see at Sunstone. That said, while I find the practice personally revolting and ultimately degrading to women (despite efficiency arguments), I too can't see why it should be illegal between consenting adults.*

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*Continued on p. 13*

## Selected Comments Continued

*My problem with polygamy as practiced by fundamentalist Mormons has nothing to do with two or more consenting adults choosing to cohabit. From a purely legal standpoint, I agree with big-brotherhouse that the criminalization of such an arrangement is ridiculous and possibly unconstitutional under the First and Fourteenth Amendments. That said, what troubles me is the theology upon which the practice is based. It is solidly patriarchal and, hence, sexist at its core. Although there are cases of polyandry (a woman with more than one husband) in early Mormonism, they were solely temporal arrangements and were never seen as eternally binding. LDS and fundamentalist LDS doctrine was and still is based on a patriarchal, polygynous (a man with more than one wife) model in which the man is head of his kingdom, if you will, and his wives and children are facilitators of his kingdom-building; indeed, jewels in his eternal crown. As a feminist and great-granddaughter of Mormon polygamists, I reject this model as well as all others that subordinate women. I don't know much about other aspects of theology among Mormon fundamentalist groups; however, I understand that many take a sort of retro position on several points of doctrine, including the exclusion of black males from priesthood ordination. Needless to say, this is a belief I also reject.*

## Dress

by Brooke Williams

It had been wrinkled and awkward for more than eight years in the bottom of a chest.

Once in a while she would peek down underneath the others just to see if she remembered the exact shade of blue.

Last week she pulled it out to see if it would fit, tried ironing out its shape, but clumsily put fresh creases here and there and then used too much water.

She kept looking for the round French collar, dainty buttons, and gorgeous pin tucks. Thinking things, like the waist didn't used to look like this. Then she saw the whole cloth—that it had never been sewn together, never even been cut out in the first place.

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## Reclaiming My Garments

by Caroline Kline

Two weeks ago I wore my garments for the first time in a year. And I haven't taken them off since.

Last year, it was a simple decision to stop wearing them—one that caused me very little guilt. I took them off last year at about this time when it became clear that maternity and/or oversized garments were just not going to work with my pregnant body. Add to that living in Southern California during the summer with no AC in my home and I didn't even hesitate. As it was, even without my garments, I was forced to drive around in my car for hours, blasting my AC at myself since being inside my home was so intolerable. I can't even imagine how much sicker I would have felt with garments on. And then, finally, after baby came I began breast feeding, and it was easy to justify not wearing them. My orthodox and stalwart LDS sister-in-law had even whispered to me once when I was pregnant to not even try to wear a garment top while breast feeding. I took her at her word and never looked back.

Taking off the garments was surprisingly easy for me, but deciding to put the garments back on has been more complicated. I had given myself permission to take this break from them because of my physical condition and because I wanted some time and space to figure out my relationship with the Church. I had been wearing my garments out of habit for years, and I wanted to make sure that the next time I put them on, it would mean something to me. It would symbolize something. A renewed dedication perhaps. A newfound loyalty maybe. After spending the last few months evaluating my future in this Church, I have decided that I can, with peace of mind, reclaim my garments as a symbol of my faith and dedication and loyalty.

Not loyalty towards Church policies about women that I find troubling, but instead loyalty towards a religion that helped form the best, most ethical, kindest man I have ever known. To a religion that has gifted me with this man for eternity. Not loyalty towards an overwhelmingly patriarchal Church structure that I desperately plead with God to change. But towards a Savior who exemplified radical egalitarianism as he worked to lift up and empower all human beings, regardless of race, class, age, or gender. To a Savior whose ideals of kindness and service I often see reflected in the faces of my fellow ward members. Not loyalty towards the angst-inducing portrayal of women in the temple, but instead towards Heavenly Parents who I now believe cry when I cry, suffer over the same things that I suffer over, and hope for change as I hope for change.

Wearing my garments again wasn't a difficult adjustment physically. I had never struggled too much with them before—I kind of liked the fact that women were wearing 'garments of the priesthood' just as men were. And I had always allowed myself to tug and pull and adjust as I saw fit. So putting them back on again was kind of like returning to a comfortable old sweater—not all that attractive or exciting, but warm, reassuring, and familiar.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I should tell you that I doubt I'll ever be the type to cling fastidiously to my garments. If I have some clean ones, great. If not, I'll shrug my shoulders and find other underwear. But from now on, I'm glad to know that I can happily put them on as a symbol of the ideals I most treasure.

## Why I Stick with the Church

by Caroline Kline

Let me be perfectly upfront: church is a real struggle for me sometimes. A lot of the rhetoric I hear over the pulpit about gender roles and identity, “us” vs. “the world,” exclusivity, and black and white statements in general—not to mention a lack of focus on Jesus—drive me up a wall.

But despite all of that, I am somewhat committed to remaining at least a partially active member. I can locate a few reasons for this.

1. Mike. He’s the best human male I’ve ever met. Hands down. Kind, ethical, compassionate, thoughtful. And really smart. Sure, there are some things I would change (e.g. his politics and lesser interest in helping animals), but overall he is an incredibly good person. And the LDS Church helped produce him. I can’t forget that. Every time I wonder why I stay, I look at him and know that the Church can indeed do very good things for some people and teach some very good principles. It helped fashion a marvelous human being in Mike.

2. While I find a lot of Joseph Smith’s actions, particularly during the Nauvoo period deeply problematic, I like his radical vision of a new religion. I find compelling his vision for the divine potential of humans, male and female. I like his radical approach to battling poverty through the United Order. I think his ideas about the spiritual and divine potential of women were particularly revolutionary, as when he “turned the key” to the Relief So-

ciety and organized them “in the order of the priesthood.” I think our present-day Church institution has unfortunately retreated from the liberated vision Joseph Smith had for women and their auxiliaries.

3. I stay because I now realize I can choose what to believe in. I stay because I now realize that I have the privilege, the right, and the responsibility to embrace those wonderful LDS ideas that empower me and to reject the ones that don’t. And this realization—that I can choose what to believe in, that Mormonism is not an all or nothing proposition—has liberated me. By rejecting the ideas that tear me down and hurt me (men presiding in the family, women being subordinate to their husbands, a circumscribed definition of womanhood, polygamy as my eternal future), I am now at liberty to embrace the ideas which I love that are also a part of my faith. It inspires me to no end to know that the Jesus we Mormons believe in is the same Jesus who went out of his way to include and teach the outcasts of society, to break taboos, and to uplift all humans despite race, sex, or class. That is the Jesus I accept and love, and any ideas that have crept into Mormonism that go against that, I roundly reject.

4. I stay because I know that leaders need to be allowed to make mistakes and grow. At this point in my spiritual life, I am on a religious journey that privileges my own conception of God’s wishes and my own conscience (i.e. personal revelation/the Spirit) over the

# Exponent II

## Why I Stick with the Church (cont)

statements of Church Authorities. I now realize that all human beings, including Church leaders, are subject to their own cultural contexts, and that even the wisest, most wonderful leaders can allow unfortunate cultural ideas to creep into their conceptions of the gospel. I am trying to be more compassionate towards these leaders. After all, they are human, and I am human. And I know that I make mistakes too.

5. I stay because of my own fallibility. This realization of my own fallibility has also profoundly affected my relationship with the Church. Just as I need Jesus to forgive me for all the mistakes I make, I know that I need to forgive the institutional Church for the mistakes it makes. It's not easy to do. I am extremely hurt by the ways women are routinely shut out from the general Church hierarchy, by the ways women's voices and ideas are lost or ignored in nearly all Church talks and lessons. But I need to give the Church time to progress. This is the gospel of progression; it is also the Church of progression. And I have reason to hope that it will indeed progress with time. (After all, blacks did eventually get the priesthood.)

6. I also stay because, in order for the Church to progress, it needs people like me to stay. The Church benefits from having all types of people of various ethnic backgrounds, ideologies, and political persuasions. The more types of people it has, the more types of people it can help. Besides, this is my church too. If progressive, liberal people keep leaving the Church, it will be left with a population that grows steadily more conservative and



*From L to R: Deborah, Dora, Caroline, Brooke, and Jana*

homogeneous in ideology. This would negatively impact its ability to be the inclusive and compassionate church I know it has the potential to be.

7. I stay because I care. Despite all my issues with the current hierarchical structure of the Church and certain doctrines I find disturbing, I really do care about it. I have shed countless tears over the problems and unfairness I have perceived in the institutional Church. After all, this is my religion, my heritage, and my identity. My ancestors sacrificed and died for this religion, and I want this to be an institution they would be proud of. I want to be proud of it. I desperately want it to be better than it is, just as I want me to be better than who I am. And if I don't stay, I will no longer have the same types of opportunities to help it progress.

I would love to hear why others have personally chosen to stay in the Church, despite possible difficulties.

Continued from p. 16

## Selected Comments

*I stay because I have had profound spiritual experiences through my involvement in this church that I would find it very difficult to walk away from.*

*I stay because I know it's what God wants me to do. My relationship with Him is one of the most sacred things in my life, and I know that leaving would injure this relationship. And I know that God accepts my unique/heterodox positions on the Church and wants me to be involved in spite (or maybe because) of them.*

*I stay because it is true. It is not the only truth, it is not complete truth, but it is true.*

*I stay because the Church pushes me to be a better person, and I push back.*

*I stay because I believe I have a responsibility to care for my brothers and sisters, and the Church helps me to foster and attend to that responsibility.*

*I stay because the Church is incredibly progressive even to this day. Sometimes it does not feel like it, ok most of the time, but you would be hard pressed to find another religion that changes as much as the Mormon faith without splintering into a thousand different factions.*

*I stay because it is my heritage.*

*I stay because it takes so much more courage to stay than it does to walk away.*

*I stay because diversity is what drives the progression, and I am part of the diversity.*

*Thank you for the good post.*

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*That is a pretty powerful post and I am glad you made it. Everyone who stays in the Church has their reasons for doing so. But the one thing we can be sure of is that no one stays in the Church because it is the fun place to be.*

*The Mormon religion is not easy, and while we all struggle for different reasons, we all do struggle with the religion to various degrees. We also all react differently to these personal battles. Some people constantly face an internal debate as to whether or not they should stay or go. Others turn on themselves and pursue self-guilt complexes. And many of us just try and ignore the Church as much as possible while still aspiring to its tenets.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*I have a good friend who is expecting twins. She will likely be on bedrest soon. "But," she said, "if it comes to that, I know I can pick up the phone, call the Relief Society president, and my family will be fed." I'd bring her meals, even if she wasn't a good friend. And undoubtedly I'll need this temporal, physical charity someday myself. I*

I stay because it takes so much more courage to stay than it does to walk away.

# Exponent II

## Why I Stick with the Church (cont.)

*stay for more reasons than this, but the willingness of women to step up and step in for their sisters is a piece of the puzzle.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*Thanks, Caroline, for a beautiful and heartfelt post. Many of your reasons are mine as well. I was particularly touched by your point about the need to forgive the institution of the Church, something I've been thinking about a lot lately.*

*I stay because hard as it often is, I know God would have me here and that I am a better person for my relationship with the Church and my participation in its ordinances. When everything seems to conspire to keep me away and I feel so forever alone at church, I remember a few piercing, transformative spiritual experiences and many quiet moments of peace. I know I'm responsible to those experiences and to God through the covenants I've made.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*I've enjoyed reading everyone's thoughts on this. In pondering this, I've realized that I'm not completely sure why I stay. The fact that I've had spiritual experiences in an LDS context is certainly a large part of it. And for all the ways in which I wonder whether I belong, there's still that sense that it's "my" Church – perhaps most evidenced by the fact that despite all my complaints about things, I get defensive and irritated when outsiders make fun of or criticize Mormons.*

*When it all comes down, I think that hope has a lot to do with why I stay. Hope that the Church really does have something of value. And hope that the problems aren't permanent, that things can change.*

When everything seems to conspire to keep me away and I feel so forever alone at church, I remember a few piercing, transformative spiritual experiences and many quiet moments of peace.

I know I'm responsible to those experiences and to God through the covenants I've made.

## Rapunzel's Room

by Brooke Williams

If I got to live in a high, high tower  
in a black forest and away from  
backyard fantasy  
I would have round pink walls and round  
red pillows silk everywhere  
and would cut my hair shorter and shorter  
of course I would have gold-framed mirrors  
on the walls  
and I would weave my hair into doormats  
eat star fruit and bananas  
maybe a pigeon if the witch thought to bring  
me one  
and no one could climb my hair and no one  
would dare to dare.  
Because it wouldn't be there.

1998



## at Portage Glacier

by Brooke Williams

Alaska was always an eternal  
word to me. empty, cold as an opal  
ocean's surface. and dad held the world in  
his fingertips there. he could point and dim  
horizons lit up with hot-air balloons  
and floating glaciers turned into ice-blue  
steamboats sculpted on a still lake. we walked  
a lightly lapping shore and seeing all  
the sites I thought we'd come to see, I bent  
to scoop a piece of slush from the water  
and in my small six-year-old fist I pressed  
its freezing mass into a ball. after  
my fingers numbed, dad said, "what you're holding  
in your hands is more than a million years old."

1998

# Exponent II

Volume 29

20

Issue 1

## Forgiving My Parents

by Amy Bobo

The topic of this post is a very personal story. It's taken me a long time to come to know this story and to voice it. It feels dangerous and scary to bare myself in this way, but here I am, naked in front of the crowd:

I remember when I told two of my best friends. We were cutting through a neighbor's backyard and I stopped them. "I have to tell you something . . . my parents are getting divorced." There, I said it. Out in the open. For some reason, I had a huge smile on my face that I couldn't wipe off. I was not happy, but my facial expression had taken on a life of its own and I had no control over it. That was that and we didn't really talk much more about it. I was fifteen.

Life went on. I became even more obsessive with my schoolwork than I already had been. I involved myself in several extra-curricular activities and picked up extra hours at my job at the local public library. I was the star student. I made long lists of things to do to make myself feel busy. I grew depressed. I moped around, cried a lot and occasionally completely broke down. I would suddenly burst into tears while hanging out with friends. I felt ashamed of my dark emotions and my inability to be happy like my friends seemed to be. Somehow I did not connect those feelings with my parents' divorce, and I thought I had no right to have them.

Time marched on. I moved away to college. I chose a major that initiated me into a journey of self-exploration. At the end of my junior year I



*photo by Brooke Williams*

got engaged, and all hell broke loose. The shelf on which my family issues had been neatly tucked away came crashing down. A sequence of events led to my father's writing me a long letter basically blaming me for the distance in our relationship and telling me he would put no further effort into it. He threatened that if I did not do certain things he would not attend my wedding. In addition to my family pain, priesthood leaders said and did some things that in my perception were abusive, adding to my misery.

The wedding day came and went, and life moved on. Now that I was married, I was in a safe place where I could face my past. I spent nights crying in my husband's arms as I grieved for the ideal father I wished I'd had. So many times I wanted to scream at him, "You left me; I didn't leave you!" I was tired of being the "grown-up" in the relationship and was angry that he didn't step up.

As I continued my education in clinical psychology, I began to see how depressed I had been in high school. I was angry at my mother for not seeing the problem and for not helping me. I was angry at my father—for leaving me and telling me it was my fault we were distant. I felt angry and hurt about a lot of things.

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Forgiveness is sweet. I have come to realize that my parents did the very best they knew how. My father wanted to be a good father. He has his own emotional pain to deal with and did the best he could given what he was dealt in life. My mother had never dealt with her own issues and had six other children at home. How could she have seen my pain when she couldn't admit to her own and was much too preoccupied with her daily caregiving tasks anyway? They did their best. They love me. I really know that. Things aren't perfect, but I have now grieved the loss of what could have been and have forgiven them for not being perfect parents. Somehow grace has worked its miracle, and I've been able to let go. It's freed me of many of the burdens of my past, and I look forward to my future with a more open heart. Now I only hope that my parents can forgive me for not being the well-behaved Mormon girl that they had hoped to raise.

## Selected Comments

*Amy, this is an amazing story. It resonates deeply with me. I struggled to forgive my own parents for years. I had long recognized that my parents had done the best they could and that much of my anger was focused on actions and patterns of action over which they had no control. But that awareness did not lead me to the sweet peace of forgiveness no matter how fervently I sought and prayed for it. I know that eventually it was grace that, in an unexpected moment, washed over me and filled my heart with that forgiveness. I now find the love of my parents to be such a cherished gift of the spirit because I know that I couldn't have found it on my own. Having found it, I can*

*only hope that my children will forgive me the pain and anguish I have caused them as you have forgiven yours.*

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*So many things expressed through Amy's post gave me pause: Our responsibility to our children is huge. As I contemplate divorce myself, after nearly 30 years of trying to be the good Mormon wife and mostly falling short because I have never had the burning in the bosom that it's all true and right, I look at my several children and ask, "Is it fair to try to take care of myself?" Forgiving neglectful and abusive parents is another whole area that some people have to deal with. And then there are some priesthood holders who turn either to their manuals or to their own dysfunction to then dictate outcomes for us that are life changing! Goodness! So many layers, so much hurt and guilt. I think ultimately we have to work on self-knowledge in a way that is just glossed over in "I am a Child of God." We, with the help of our Savior, need to be our own best friends.*

\*\*\*

*AmyB, thanks for such an honest, realistic, heartfelt account of forgiveness as something that comes with time and with the hard labor of grief. Too often in church we tell people whose lives have been devastated "just forgive," which glosses over the enormous amount of work and time it takes to come to that grace. I really appreciate and admire people like you who are able to be honest about such painful experiences and who are able to extend such grace and generosity to those who have hurt you.*

# Exponent II

Volume 29

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Issue 1

## A Visit to Seneca Falls

by Amy Bobo

Standing in an open air chapel, with only two brick walls and remnants of a wood roof left as evidence of its existence, I had a profound feeling that I was on sacred ground. I was overcome with gratitude for the powerful women, who here, at the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls, New York, started the women's rights movement in the United States.

Incidentally, Seneca Falls is not far from Palmyra. The beautiful green countryside is rich with a sense of history. Spectacular church buildings can be seen almost around almost every bend, each with a unique personality. I can picture more fully the boy Joseph Smith being caught up in the religious fervor of the time with so many churches everywhere. I'm sure at least some of the churches I see existed during his time. What would it have been like to be here in those seminal times?

The LDS church was founded in 1830. Just under two decades later, in 1848, the Seneca Falls convention was held. Since that grand meeting of female minds, women have fought for and won the rights to vote, to own property, to hold government offices, to gain admittance to institutions of higher education, and more. In short, we have the same basic rights as men, at least in the secular world. In the religious world, however, some sentiments of these first-wave feminists are still poignant and, for me, painful. Their list of grievances (from the Declaration of Senti-

ments) includes this: "He [man] allows her in Church as well as State, but a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the church." The declaration also states, "He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and her God."

I was struck several times during my visit to the Women's Rights Museum by the fact that the rhetoric used then to keep women subordinate in all areas of life is the same used in church today. Women were told then that they had superior moral authority and "natural piety," which was why they needed to stay at home and rear the children. In other words their moral authority was greatly needed in the "women's sphere" of home and family.

Early suffragists took this argument and turned it around, saying that if women had superior moral authority, it should be used in the public sphere. The moral authority argument for keeping women from participating in the public sphere is the same argument I have heard in church for keeping power and authority from women. "Women are more spiritual, so they don't need the priesthood" is a justification I've heard countless times. Over a hundred and fifty years later, the same arguments are still in play.

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Elizabeth Cady Stanton delivered a speech to the House Judiciary Committee in 1892 titled

“The Solitude of Self.” In it, she made the argument that woman is ultimately alone in the world and must have the tools, such as a right to education and to own property, to fend for herself. This statement of hers was particularly moving to me:

“The strongest reason for giving woman all the opportunities for

higher education, for the full development of her faculties, forces of mind and body; for giving her the most enlarged freedom of thought and action; a complete emancipation from all forms of bondage, of custom, dependence, superstition; from all crippling influence of fear—is the solitude and personal responsibility of her own individual life. The strongest reason why we ask for woman a voice in the government under which she lives; in the religion she is asked to believe; equality in social life, where she is the chief factor; a place in the trades and the professions, where she may earn her bread, is because of her birth-right to self-sovereignty; because, as an individual, she must rely on herself.”

Cady Stanton fought for women’s right to vote, but toward the end of her life became disillusioned with this fight. “For Stanton, women’s liberty depended on their freedom from social and political constraints in every realm of life: the family, the church, and the state. Losing her faith in the power of women’s vote as a vehicle for social change, she began to see women’s lack of political rights as symptomatic of a larger, more disturbing problem: the belief in women’s subordination rooted in the Bible and taught by the Christian church and clergy.” [from Mrs. Stanton’s Bible by Kathi Kern].

Mustn’t we as women—just as much as men—follow the counsel of Paul (and later Mormon) to “work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling?” (Philip. 2:12, Mormon 9:27) While we are all part of a grand interconnected web, we are ultimately responsible for our own lives. If we are to give a portion of those lives to a religious institution, should not our voices be heard in that institution?

I feel strongly that women’s subordination is not right. I have grown weary of the mental gymnastics and justifications that keep women subordinate and tell us we should think it’s okay. How much better could the church be if the full potential of the talents and gifts of its membership were tapped, rather than only half? How can we as women participate in an empowered way and have our voices be heard? Is it possible? I know these are oft-repeated and worn-out questions, but I still have no satisfactory answers.

Since that grand meeting of female minds, women have fought for and won the rights to vote, to own property, to hold government offices, to gain admittance to institutions of higher education, and more. . . In the religious world, however, some sentiments of these first-wave feminists are still poignant and, for me, painful.

## Periods and Priesthoods

by Jana Remy

We were talking about the priesthood and how boys get it when they're 12 and girls don't have any similar ritual. We spoke of the way that boys emerge into a very visible role at that age and how significant it is for them to pass the sacrament each Sunday. We were bantering back and forth when my friend Holly replied:

"You know where girls are at age 12? Unlike the boys who are getting public recognition for advancing to the priesthood, 12 year-old girls are locked in the bathroom with their Tampax."

As I thought more about it, I realized that she was right. Girls, at about age 12, have an important change in their lives, but it's a private, secret matter. For all of the Church's rhetoric about motherhood being equal to the priesthood, you would think that there would be some sort of ritual/celebration to mark a girl's first period—the really big change in her life that allows the possibility of motherhood.

My daughter is approaching her pre-teen years, and I've been thinking lately of how our family should mark her first period. I've heard of rituals like roses or parties. Though I want to do something special for her, I also don't want to invade her privacy.

My first period came at a moment of *huge* change in my life. I was using the toilet in

an airport bathroom when I discovered that I was bleeding. I was about to board a plane with my Mom and sisters. We were in the process of moving from Colorado to California—the females were flying while my Dad and brothers were driving the cars over. It turned out that both my Mom and older sister were in the middle of their periods at that time, too. So we flew to California and then had three days in a hotel together while we waited for the guys. Mom and Big Sis gave me lots of advice and support. I felt supported and loved. It was a very positive and memorable experience.

I want to do something similarly memorable for my daughter when she begins her period—have some "girl time" with her, or have a special dinner/party/celebration. But I'm not at all sure what to do, and I feel like I need to have a plan soon so I'm prepared when it happens.

So I'm asking a few questions of you:

- 1) Do you have any suggestions for how the Church could better mark this change in girls' lives?
- 2) How did your mother or family react when you started your first period?
- 3) What ways have you marked this event in your daughters' lives?
- 4) Can you pass along any advice on how I can celebrate my daughter's first menses?

You would think that there would be some sort of ritual to mark a girl's first period . . .

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## Selected Comments

*I started at my brother's wedding reception in another state. My mom told everyone in the wedding party (not the guests though), and I was furious. Perhaps what bothers me the most is that this is something no one has any control over. Boys are largely able to control their worthiness and, in turn, how and when they receive the priesthood. Girls just get their period whenever it comes. Receiving public recognition for something that just happens to us seems like it would make women feel like spectators, valued only for the things their bodies do with no regard for them.*

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*This is an interesting topic. Unfortunately, I've never bought into the idea that motherhood is comparable to priesthood (and therefore can't go along with onset-of-menses being comparable to being ordained a deacon). Theoretically, a boy needs to be \*worthy\* to be ordained to the priesthood; any old girl can slough off superfluous uterine tissue once a month. Philosophically, it does bother me that we as women have such a negative view of menstruation, but I don't think it's all (or even mostly) due to society. I think it's mostly due to the fact that for many (if not most) women, menstruation is a distinctly unpleasant experience. And I'm all about the miracle of growing life inside you and the inherent power of women, blah blah, but I still hate my period. I hate the cramps, I hate the moodiness, I hate the headaches, I hate the (forgive me) mess – and I think I would feel that way regardless of what the Church or society told me I ought to feel. Some things just are. That aside, I think menstruation is a private thing of ne-*

*cessity – because, really, 6th grade girls are pretty much embarrassed about everything. I can't imagine them wanting to share info related in any way to their reproductive system with the rest of the world. Puberty just isn't that cool. Anyway, the Church already makes the ridiculous gesture of recognizing girls who have "advanced" to a different YW class, as if getting older were comparable to "being found worthy" to be ordained to an office in the priesthood. I've always found this kind of dumb. But I might be overly cynical.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*Jana, the secrecy surrounding female menstruation and fertility is a huge evolutionary boon for human women. In many primates, it's perfectly obvious when the female is in estrus – and this works to her disadvantage in many ways: when males have knowledge of a female's reproductive state, they have vastly more control over her reproductive functions. You'll find that all cultures in which a woman's periods are publicly marked are highly patriarchal: by forcing women to reveal their reproductive state, men can more effectively control women's sexuality and reproduction (and ensuring certain knowledge of paternity is, of course, the *raison d'être* of most patriarchies). So no, I definitely don't support the idea of any public acknowledgement of a girl's menarche. This doesn't mean, of course, that mothers oughtn't to teach and communicate with their daughters sensitively and openly (and privately) or that we ought to associate impurity or shame with menstruation.*

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Issue 1

## Periods and Priesthoods

### Comments (cont)

*A few years ago, I saw a group of 8th grade girls shrieking in excitement and hugging their friend in a school hallway. I later learned that this girl had “finally” gotten her period, and her friends were celebrating with her. Wow. That stirred up a lot of emotions. At that same age, I hid the fact from everybody for a while, and I believe this had both a cause and effect role in some harmful emotions I harbored about my body and sexuality for years. As a middle school teacher, I frequently am in the position to talk to girls about menstruation, and it has taken real effort – effort well worth it – to speak about it both matter-of-factly and positively. Recently, two middle school girls talked to me about the book *The Red Tent*. One said, “It kinda made me wish we still had something like that – a place for women to bond together each month.” Many moms I know engage in some kind of mother-daughter celebration to mark this physical transition. However, I imagine these are most effective when there has been open communication about maturation and sexuality BEFORE menstruation. Otherwise, this attention will likely feel awkward. It’s not so much marking the day as the attitude we project for the first thirteen/fourteen years leading up to this day.*

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*When I started my first period, I had what I remember as a positive experience. My mother was right there when I wanted to ask her if the small brownish stain was what I thought it was. She*

*was sweet, quiet and understanding about it. She was excited for me and, underneath my nervousness, I was excited, too. She thoughtfully asked my permission if she could tell my close female relatives that were with us that afternoon (sister, aunt, cousins), to which I consented. We all wore red to some event that night, but the reason was our secret. That was about all the people I wanted to know. She did ask if she could tell my dad, and I didn’t feel like I should say no, but I did feel very awkward about it. Looking back, I’m sure he did too. But I remember the awkwardness as a sort of endearing thing (I wasn’t in the same room, but I did hear her telling him, and his response was something in a wry humorous tone, like a “oh great – all we need is more female hormones around here” kind of comment).*

*The things I liked about my mother’s approach, which you may want to think about, are: 1) she was sensitive to my needs and my personality and my privacy, asking permission in every case – even though she might have told my dad anyway; 2) she was positive and informative about it (the information coming before the event was important; and 3) we secretly celebrated it among the females I was closest to (but it could have been just me and her if that’s what I had wanted). Furthermore, I agree with many comments that the Church should have nothing to say about what rituals or recognition we have for a girl’s menarche. I think it should be privately celebrated in whatever way the girl feels comfortable with.*

## My Shoulders

by Jana Remy

My shoulders. They have been blessed to bear the burdens of my life. But those burdens have left my shoulders scarred and stiff. Inflexible. Too tender for touch.

My shoulders tell many stories, particularly the left shoulder where I have a thick scar. Thinner on the ends, pale pink in the center and red along the edge.

This scar is now more than 20 years old, from when I was in the midst of cancer treatment (bone cancer, a large tumor above my knee). I had an “infusaport,” a catheter, inserted into my shoulder so the chemotherapy could be administered more easily and directly into my bloodstream. Previously, the doctors had tried IVs in my arms and hands, but these were inadequate for the task of administering the volume of drugs that I would receive. I would need a semi-permanent catheter embedded between the skin and muscle of my shoulder. They had to make an incision about 3” long to insert the port. This scar never healed well because the chemo was killing all of the “growing” cells in my body—including those that would close the incision. My weekly chemo was pumped through three-inch long needles inserted into my shoulder and into the port. The needles left gaping holes that would not heal. Open sores.

By the time I was finished with my treatments, things started to heal. At least on the outside. But I couldn’t stand to touch my shoulder—not even with soap and washcloth—and I flinched whenever someone brushed against the shoulder accidentally. I approached hugs with the right side of my body, hoping to avoid contact with the left.

I was self-conscious about the scar, which even years later was a raw red color. When I went to prom and chose a dress with thin straps, my Mom sewed a ruffle to cover my left shoulder. A Young Women’s leader taught me to sew my own swimsuits, and I learned to put bright ruffles and straps across my left side.

I married about 8 years after the end of my chemotherapy treatments. I explained to John about my shoulder, asked him not to avoid it. Warned him of the teeth-gritting pain that accompanied even a light touch. I trusted him to be gentle. And he has been.

In meditation over the past few months, I’ve come to realize that my shoulders are carrying great pain. They are stiff and tight. I stoop. By the evening they are sore and burning; they have knots of stress. I began to realize the need for healing. To make them my own again. I started gentle stretches. Worked to make them more loose. Looked at myself in the mirror and pulled my shoulders back—standing straight and tall.

I told my yoga teacher of my desire to work on my shoulders. She pulled me and a classmate aside. She had me bend at the waist, then balance on one foot with the other foot stretched out straight behind me. The other woman took my wrists and pulled them firmly towards her. So my shoulders were being stretched forward. And my teacher put her hands on my shoulders. Lightly and firmly. “You are strong, so strong” she said. And I believe her.

# Exponent II

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Issue 1

## Minimalist Theology

by Linda Hoffman Kimball

A few months back I described myself in a post as being a “Mormon of minimalist theology.” This caught the ears (eye?) of some readers. Here are some more thoughts on what I mean by that phrase.

Let’s go back in time. I was raised a Protestant Christian and believed in Christ as early as I believed anything. At around 14 I made a specific determination to live my life for Him. This is what traditional Christians (and folks who don’t get creeped out by the terms) would call “being born again” or “accepting Christ as your personal Savior.” Alma might call it “having been spiritually born of God.”

One of the things I enjoyed most about my Protestant upbringing was that the basic principles were so, well, basic: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, might, mind, and strength (because they were three in one and one in three, you didn’t have to parse Everyone out); live a moral, compassionate life—which would come pretty much naturally if you were really doing number 1. Committing to Christ as the unique Way, Truth & Life was essential, but I never really felt compelled to buy into the “or else you’ll be damned to hell” postscript.

During the last years of high school and my freshman year at Wellesley College, I wrestled with the question of whether I should be a Mormon. I’d taken the missionary lessons at the home of my high school



*Photo by Jana Remy*

best friend whose family was inactive at the time. I was so taken by Brigham Young’s claim that “all that is true is contained in the Gospel, no matter who has it.” What’s not to love about that? Who doesn’t want that?

Still, I didn’t want to be scammed. One evening in my first college year, I had an experience that made it clear to me that God’s hand is in this Mormon place, that there’s something to the authority here that isn’t anywhere else, and that I should in fact become a Mormon. None of my intellectual concerns were answered and none of the quirky or disturbing things about LDS teachings and history I’d already heard vanished. But the message was still clear.

Fast forward to the early 1980s. I heard about a talk that Bruce R. McConkie gave

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at a BYU devotional blasting poor George Pace for a book he'd written called *Having a Personal Relationship with Christ*. In this devotional McConkie very specifically detailed the three distinct aspects of members of the Godhead and told everyone what the appropriate feeling was to have toward each of them. Apparently he viewed Pace's teachings as getting too chummy.

This sent me into a deep downward spiral. What exactly were these Mormons teaching? Since when was it inappropriate to have a

I still view the Gospel as all truth . . . I'm just very wary about what I let into that core.

personal relationship with Christ? This was a truth I'd known since long before the Mormons, and

I wasn't about to toss it because some guy with "authority as he supposed" said it was "foolish and unwise." I determined to re-read the Book of Mormon with an eye to all the references to Christ and see if I was going to have to bail out of this place after all.

What struck me most in reading the Book of Mormon was the familiar call to Christ that I'd known before I could walk. And when Christ finally shows up—the pivotal point in the Book of Mormon that marks time and focuses everything—what does he want to hammer home to his followers? He says it several times within a few short verses in 3

Nephi 11. First he describes (with no great persnickety-ness) the unity of the Godhead. Then, getting down to the nitty gritty: "...ye must repent, and become as a little child, and be baptized in my name, or ye can in no wise receive these things...I say unto you, that this is my doctrine, and whoso buildeth upon this buildeth upon my rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against them. And whoso shall declare more or less than this, and establish it for my doctrine, the same cometh of evil, and is not built upon my rock..."

I cling to these basics. All the truth I had before is still true. Whew. Granted, there are a lot of loose ends. This doesn't mention the temple, for example. But I've had my own confirmations about that, and while I find it troubling, confusing, and head-scratching much of the time, I honestly believe there's a living pulse under there. I put that into the "building upon the rock" category.

Maybe Elder McConkie thought his "doctrine" was also building upon the rock. Since I'm also cautioned in this same chapter not to have "the spirit of contention" or "contend with anger one with another," I've had to do some major heart/mind/soul work to allow folks who think in that rigid way to have a place in what I consider the real true church. (Good thing, since I can't really escape them.)

I still view the Gospel as all truth and our job as a church and as Mormons is to be open to and respectful of "the further light and knowledge" we receive. I'm just very wary about what I let into that core. I believe

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something dramatic and divine happened to Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove and with the Book of Mormon. (I am not so willing to believe that God actually told Joseph that all the other churches were “wrong.” Semantics will be the death of us all.) The rest I have to put into the “wobble room category.” In my own personal wobble room category, there are many mansions. I don’t want to be building on shifting sands after all.

So what’s false doctrine? There was no dramatic falling of scales off my eyes when I officially “received the Holy Ghost.” I think God is very generous with the way the Spirit moves on people. Does being sealed to dead church leaders so you can have a glorious kingdom in the hereafter sound like something we’re promoting now? It was a big deal back in the 19th century. And when early converts were searching for a church that followed the format of the church of Christ’s time, would they really find it here now? (Did they find it here then?) What about the sister who teaches that modesty involves dressing even her baby girls in onesies with sleeves and assumes we all agree on that? If I had to be a “sound doctrine cop,” I’d be blowing my whistle all the time.

I want to be clear that while I am pleased to consider myself a Mormon of minimalist theology, I am NOT a minimalist Mormon. I consider myself to be a fully committed Mormon, a Christian walking my walk of faith here and continuing to develop a muscular, robust relationship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

## Us and Them

by Linda Hoffman Kimball

In Relief Society on Sunday, our lesson was the Wilford Woodruff Lesson “Proclaiming the Gospel.” I make a lot of comments—not just because I’m the Prez but because I actually care about the topics and content. The teacher started leaning toward “setting a good example so others will be drawn to the Church” and asked if the converts in the room had been positively influenced by the example of Church members as they made their decision to join. I couldn’t sit on my hands.

Trying for the delicate balance of tact and enlightenment (and squelching infuriated screams), my comments were something like this: As a convert to the church from another faith tradition, I was brought up among wonderful examples of deep faith and Christ-centeredness... I had spiritual mentors all my life. Getting acquainted with Mormons was not a whole new world opening for me. God is generous with His Truth. Every faith has access to Divine Truth and some of them are far better at what they focus on than we are.

That is one of the things that drew me to the Gospel in the first place. I remember reading quotes by Brigham Young: “[We] believe in all good. If you can find a truth in heaven, earth or hell, it belongs to our doctrine. We believe it; it is ours; we claim it.... ‘Where is your code, your particular creed?’ says one. It fills eternity; it is all truth in heaven, on earth, or in hell. This is

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*Photo by Jana Remy*

‘Mormonism.’” Who doesn’t want a Gospel that is all truth? The more we celebrate and learn from others the truths that they know and live, the more we all grow in the Gospel.

Or something to that effect. And it wasn’t just the opportunity to say “hell” twice in Relief Society. One of the things most entrenched in Mormonism today – and therefore the most discouraging when it comes to seeing change any time soon – is the attitude that “we” are the possessors of the fullness of the Gospel and “you ‘gentiles’” can’t really teach us anything we should give theological weight to. Back in the day when President Benson was preaching against pride, couldn’t that have been at least part of what he was getting at?

Of course, it’s a tricky semantic issue, this truth-seeking business. I always am curious to know what people mean when they say “I know the Church is true.” Each of those

words, with the exception of “the,” is a meaty gem that could mean many things to many people, and what some people may mean, I may not agree with at all. My friend, scholar and tres cool chick Jana Riess, told me she likes hearing the phrase in part because it DOES mean different things to different people. And no one is required to explain themselves.

I am not one to fall for the wishy-washy relativism that claims every path is as “true” as another. I honestly believe that Christ really is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and that the priesthood authority in the Mormon Church has unique Divine power. But let’s go to the source, people, and see that it is God and the Gospel which gives the Church whatever good oomph it has, not the other way around.

Of course this is a difficult reality to hold on to when we have scriptures that say “whether by my voice, or the voice of my servants, it is the same” and when Joseph Smith was told by God not to join any of the other churches of his time “because they are all wrong.” Semantic issues – and the theological stumbling blocks they create – will and have alienated many of “us” and “them” – whichever side you’re on.

If we could let go of trying to interpret every jot and tittle of theology and rejoice and dance around in the incredible breadth of the Gospel, we would all be better off. Maybe this sounds wishy washy, too. But I like to think of it instead as sort of zen-like. There’s truth there, too, after all!

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## Staking My Claim, Claiming My Stake: Mid-Singles

by Dora

A few months ago, I was reading an essay by Mary Lythgoe Bradford and was struck by her comments on being single again. As I read further and further, I found myself thinking, “Right on sister!” more times than I’d care to recount. One point that particularly spoke to me is that singlehood is not a punishment, a condemnation or a cruel joke. It’s just a fact of some lives, and mine in particular at this point in time. And when I review my life, I can honestly say that I’ve chosen singlehood over the marriage opportunities I’ve been presented with. I don’t view this as being selfish, or too career-minded, or noncommittal—just realistic about my capacity to love and be loved by and to be happy with and foster happiness in certain people.

So, I’m single. And invested in living the best life I can. And I like to think that I’ve been doing a pretty good job of it so far. But there is always room for improvement, and the area that seems to have the most potential so far is my Church experience. Not that I hate Church. Far from it. But I have noticed that there are certain organizational quirks that could stand to be looked at again.

In my stake, the records of all singles over 31 years of age are moved out of the YSA ward into their geographic family ward. Frankly, I agree that YSA wards are no place for mid-singles. I think that being in multigenerational wards is a good thing for people who have attended their fair share of Lin-

ger-longers and Flick ‘n’ Floats. However, reactions to the transition seem to be one of three varieties. Some people transition easily enough, faithfully attending the new wards that they’re planted in, even though they may feel lonely as one of only a few mid-singles in their ward. Others seem to retreat into denial and continue going to the YSA ward despite time’s relentless forward march. I can understand the rationales; that’s where most of their friends are, who wants to be stuck in a family ward to molder away your thirties, and the fact that sometimes mid-singles can be a scary bunch. Still others just seem to “slip through the cracks,” giving new incentive to overeager visiting teachers, home teachers and ward clerks.

A couple of months ago, the second counselor in my bishopric (who happens to be single and in his mid-forties) took a few of us mid-singles out to dinner to discuss how the ward/stake could better serve our needs. There was a lot said about having more activities, especially of the non-dance type, or segregating activities by age decades (ie: 30s, 40s, 50s), but I think my idea was the best. However, before I can amaze you with my brilliance, let me provide a little background info.

My stake is very diverse. It encapsulates two very affluent wards, three rather impoverished (both financially and leadership-wise) wards, two university wards, a YSA ward, and one non-English-speaking ward. The

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stake leaders have had to farm out YSA's and older couples to help with leadership and missionary work in the smaller wards that have many non-English speaking members or a lack of active adult members of both genders. As a stake missionary, I was assigned to one of these "growing" wards and attended Sunday services there for six months to help out.

So, back to my brilliant idea. I told the counsellor that I would love for the stake to designate one of the growing wards as the place

After having attended a vibrant YSA ward, sometimes it's just depressing to go to a family ward and be one of only a few mid-singles. We all have a need to be with our peers.

where the mid-singles should attend, which would fulfill the two major needs of members of the Church: fellowship and service.

Fellowshipping is such a huge part of the gospel. What is visiting teaching and home teaching if not a formal take

on fellowshipping? I believe that, important as VT/HT can be, the best type of fellowshipping is the informal and spontaneous kind, especially when entering a new ward. After having attended a vibrant YSA ward, sometimes it's just depressing to go to a family ward and be one of only a few mid-singles. We all have a need to be with our peers. Young mothers commiserate with each other about babies, and older ladies share menopause stories. Not that I won't benefit

from their experience, but I do feel a need to share my own stories with those who will understand me best. On the other side of the gender divide, one of my guy buddies said that attending high priest group meeting in the family ward the first week was like feeling the prison bars slam shut on his dating years. Not that he didn't like the other HPs, but he suddenly felt as if he had aged thirty years, since the next oldest HP was in his 60s.

Members need callings to help feel invested in the ward and to reap the blessings of service. Without a calling, it's just too easy to slip into inactivity. When my bishop asked me what calling I would like, I asked to be the RS pianist—not only because I wanted more incentive to practice piano, and because the old pianist was moving away, but because it would give me a reason to go to Relief Society that I couldn't shrug away because I didn't feel benefited by it. I admit that my current bishop does a better job than most, but it is bothersome that most of us mid-singles have been conveniently called to the activities committee, which also seems to be the catch-all place for in/less-actives. This one-size-fits-all calling can be particularly frustrating since the families in the ward are so busy with FHE, youth activities, boy scouts, sports and enrichment that they don't support other ward activities.

My last request of the stake leaders, assuming that they recognize the genius of my idea, would be to call as bishop someone who has experience with mid-singles—either as having been one, having children

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or friends who have been in the situation, or just someone who is very empathetic. Sometimes, bishops just doesn't know what to do with mid-singles. When my roommate (who transitioned into the family ward a year ahead of me) had an interview with the bishop, he asked her what her plan was.

P: Plan?

B: Yes, what is your plan?

P: For my career?

B: Hmm, no. What is your plan for getting married?

P: (Thinks to herself: Well yes, I planned on it about six years ago, thank you very much! Says: ) I'm not sure what you mean.

B: I think you need a plan. How are you going to get married without a plan? Maybe you should go on-line. It worked wonderfully for Jane. I think it would work for you.

And really, the bishop was very well-meaning and earnest, but blanket solutions don't work for everyone. BTW, P was subsequently wooed by a prior home teacher, and they've been happily married for almost two years, sans internet hook-up.

So, if you are still reading this interminable post, I'd love to hear your thoughts on the subject. Have you had similar experiences, or better, or worse? What is happening in your stake, and how does it serve the needs of the members? Do you too have a brilliant idea you'd like to have implemented?

## Selected Comments

*I don't personally have any brilliant ideas. But I do know that my friend Amy stood up in stake conference when they were having a question-answer period and asked the stake presidency what they were doing to make singles feel like they have a place in this Church/stake.*

*I think the leaders fumbled a bit, but some have since talked to her more about it. She suggests that they alter their rhetoric. Start treating females as humans and not future wives and mothers. I hope I'm not putting words in her mouth, but if I understand correctly, she feels like motherhood and wifehood were so pounded into her and her sense of identity her whole Church life that now she is a single 30 year old, she feels like she has no place in this gospel/Church.*

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*I can relate to your friend. Even in a midsingles magnet ward up here (we have one in the North Seattle stake but not one in the stake I just moved into – but then, they don't have a YSA ward, either) – even within that ward, I didn't feel really welcomed or put to work. Nor did I feel taken care of, and I was in that ward for four months and sick for four months. I did have one friend in the singles group who brought me food, and that was so welcomed.*

*Part of it wasn't that people weren't reaching out to me – it was more that I felt out of place and groundless (and being sick for six months didn't help my morale). Like Amy, I feel like I've placed my idea of my own worth so much into the basket of wifehood and motherhood that, as I find myself 31 and still single with absolutely no dating*

## Mid-Singles Comments (cont)

*prospects—and since getting kicked out of the singles' ward, hardly any friends, either—I've had to reevaluate how I feel about myself and find a way to recognize that what I do has worth, even if it isn't in a family.*

*We're told so many, many times that the greatest thing a woman will ever do will be to raise a family. It's even in my patriarchal blessing. Which makes everything else I do pale in comparison. It frustrates me that I have no control over whether anyone likes me or wants to marry me, and even pushes me in the direction of settling if someone would be willing to settle for me.*

*I don't like that. At all. What it does to me, or what it implies about me. And I'm constantly fighting against letting myself feel that way—an almost impossible battle for my personality type.*

*I'm trying to get to the point that Dora's at, though—being able to recognize what a great life I have even without those things. Despite the great loneliness—and I mean, I live alone with 2 cats, and I have no really close friends who live within a few states away—I'm at a great job that I love and living in a place that, though it's trying to kill me with allergies, I need to learn to be able to enjoy somehow. And that means still trying to reach out.*

*My current ward has only one other single my age, which is kind of frustrating because she's very very busy and doesn't have time for hanging out. But the bishop knows what it feels like to be in my situation—at 31 he was also kicked out of his singles ward, and the first thing he told me in my intro interview was that I was prayed to be in that ward (it's one of those struggling wards) and that I'm welcome, with all their hearts. He also made sure to emphasize that being 31 is not the end of the world and never mentioned a thing about marriage except to say that he did get married in his mid-thirties, and he probably had zero prospects when he was 31. Not terribly comforting to someone who sees no prospects for years to come, but the spirit of it was meant to comfort, and I took the comfort for what it was.*

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*Not too long after they forced a large group of 32 year olds out of my singles ward, our bishop gave a talk to the RS on "Dealing With Disappointment." He reminded all of us that we would be able to have families in the next life. I know his intentions were good, but I know it made the group feel hopeless and worthless.*

*So it's WONDERFUL to read that "singlehood is not a punishment, a condemnation or a cruel joke."*

## Be Ye Therefore Perfect: Saints and Cosmetic Surgery

By Dora

“So, what would you have done?” Conversing with some of the least vain people I know, the question surprised me. However, with the growing incidence of teenagers going under the knife, Sister Tanner and Elder Holland’s talks at the last General Conference, and the \$12.4 billion Americans spent on cosmetic surgery in 2005, can it really be that surprising? How far are we willing to go to achieve perfection?

We are all commanded to be perfect. And we all fail. It’s part of the human experience. Most LDS people that I know tend to break the enormous responsibility into bite-sized, manageable pieces, like being perfect in paying tithing, weekly church attendance, keeping the Word of Wisdom, etc etc. However, these are rather discreet ways of being perfect ... talking about them exudes a distasteful and ostentatious air reminiscent of the Rich Man in the parable of the Widow’s Mite.

So, when did the search for perfection become public? Even with the Book of Job in the Old Testament, why is the law of the harvest so insidiously entrenched? Why do we associate wealth, abundance and beauty with righteousness, and poverty and the absence of physical beauty with unrighteousness? In the Lord’s name, Samuel passed over seven of Jesse’s sons—“for the Lord seeth not as man seeth, for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart (1Sam 16:7)” —and chose David. Coinciden-

tally, David was “withal of a beautiful countenance and goodly to look at,” but maybe that was just spiritually. Or maybe not. Somehow, humanity cannot get past the idea that what looks good must be good.

Cosmetic surgery is becoming more acceptable to the American public, and with better technology and financing, it’s becoming more common than I ever believed it would.

More and more, Americans are coming to accept and embrace the tremendous benefits of cosmetic surgery. According to a study, appearing in the March 2005 issue of *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery*, nearly fifty percent of all young women would consider plastic surgery by middle age and forty percent would consider it in the near future. According to an AARP survey, 60 percent of women and 35 percent of men say they would undergo plastic surgery if it could be done safely and effectively. It seems the majority of Americans see plastic surgery in a favorable light (<http://www.plastic-surgery-resource.com/>).

When I was a little girl, I longed for fair skin, red hair and green eyes. Back then it was impossible, but with skin lighteners, hair color and colored contacts, my childhood fantasy is within reach. Yes, I would probably look like a freak, but so does Joan Rivers, and she makes a fortune and gets to mock celebrities to their faces.

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In the LDS singles scene, women are haunted by the specter of Barbie—tall, buxom, blonde, blue-eyed, with very low FP (or Fat Potential, as a guy friend once disgustingly put it). In a community with limited resources (righteous, active, single men), how can consumers (women) hope to get a competitive edge? Apparently, cosmetic surgery has been one tool that's blossomed in the Desert. Utah boasts one of the highest per capita incidence of cosmetic surgery in the nation. We could try to pin it on the non-member granola types who tend to gravitate to Utah, but that theory just doesn't hold water. We are the ones searching for perfection and happiness in all the wrong places.

In the Last General Conference, Elder Holland stated, "In terms of preoccupation with self and a fixation on the physical, this is more than social insanity; it is spiritually destructive, and it accounts for much of the unhappiness women, including young women, face in the modern world."

In the same General Conference, Sister Susan W. Tanner eloquently stated the right places to look search for joy: "Happiness comes from accepting the bodies we have been given as divine gifts and enhancing our natural attributes, not from remaking our bodies after the image of the world. The Lord wants us to be made over—but in His image, not in the image of the world, by receiving His image in our countenances."

To this end, I'd like to restate the complete scripture, with one little addition. "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father (and Mother) which is in heaven is perfect." (Matt 5:48)

As an Asian-American, I can never hope to (un-cosmetically) fit the Barbie mentality that represents the Northern American, and particularly Mormon, standard of beauty. That isn't to say that I don't still struggle in the beauty wars because I occasionally do (as evidenced by how fantastic my hair is going to look after I get it cut this afternoon). However, the larger (and more complete and beautiful) picture is that I am vying for spiritual perfection. Yes, I have to break them down into manageable, bite-sized pieces, but I intend to savor each of the courses offered at the celestial feast. Care to join me?

And if you were curious about how my friends answered the initial question—"So, what would you have done?"—they responded as follows: hair plugs, lipo and nothing at all.

Utah boasts one of the highest per capita incidence of cosmetic surgery in the nation. We could try to pin it on the non-member granola types who tend to gravitate to Utah, but that theory just doesn't hold water. We are the ones searching for perfection and happiness in all the wrong places.

## Women of Righteousness: A Mother's Day Talk

By Amelia Parkin

For Mother's Day, I was asked to speak, as a surprise for my mother, in my parents' home ward. The bishopric asked me to address Elder M. Russell Ballard's talk entitled "Women of Righteousness." I took the opportunity to expand on his talk's treatment of what it means to be righteous women. In my talk, I try to illustrate that righteousness has very little to do with what work we are asked to do (whether the work of mother- or fatherhood, community service, career, or church service) and everything to do with the manner in which we accomplish the work we are given. In my opinion, that truth means that gender, marriage, and mother- or fatherhood are unnecessary categories for understanding what it means to be a "righteous woman" or a "righteous man." Caroline asked me to share my talk here.

In his talk, "Women of Righteousness," Elder M. Russell Ballard addresses a concern voiced by a faithful sister in the church. In a letter sent to church headquarters, this sister wrote the following:

"I have a wonderful husband and children, whom I love deeply. I love the Lord and His Church more than I can say. I know the Church is true! I realize I shouldn't feel discouraged about who I am. Yet I have been going through an identity crisis most of my life. I have never dared utter these feelings out loud but have hidden them behind the huge, confident smile I wear to church every week. For years I have doubted if I had any value beyond my roles as a wife and mother. I have feared that men are that they might have joy, but that women are that they might be overlooked. I long to feel that I, as a woman, matter to the Lord."

In his talk, Elder Ballard replies to this sister's concern

with a "resounding yes"—women do matter to the Lord.

This sister's concern may seem misguided and even ungrateful. It may seem absolutely obvious to us that of course women matter to the Lord. Of course they are of equal value to and deserve joy as much as men. Of course God loves his daughters and would never have them be overlooked.

But no matter how obvious this may seem to us, my experience and friendships with LDS women tells me that this concern is very real—that many women in the Church wonder whether they have worth in the eyes of the Lord.

In response to the problem of what value this sister has outside marriage and motherhood, Elder Ballard says that while the doctrine of marriage and family "sometimes causes women to ask: 'Is a woman's value dependent exclusively upon her role as a wife and mother?' The answer is simple: No."

When we hear women voice this concern, we far too often glibly dismiss it by asserting that being a wife and a mother is the most important thing a woman can do. This is certainly true: marriage and parenting—creating families—is the most important thing either a woman or a man can do. But that does not change the fact that many women find themselves wondering what other contributions they can make—how they can make contributions as themselves, not only through others, even when those others are as dear to them as their husbands and their children are. It is a heartbreaking and very real problem for many of our sisters.

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And then there are women in my position. Women who are not wives or mothers. Again as faithful Latter-day Saints, we often too easily dismiss this situation by assuring single women or women who are not mothers that all women are by nature mothers. That they will be given this blessing sometime. That they can nurture and love children around them, whether nieces and nephews or children in the Primary. It is true that all of us, whether women or men, can and should reach out in love to the children in our lives whether they are our own children or not. But believe me, when faced by loneliness and depression, these assurances are very cold comfort. Even when I am happy and trust that, in his goodness, God will bless me with the opportunities of marriage and motherhood whether in this life or the next, the fact remains that I am here on earth with a life to live now—a life I thought would be full every single day with teaching and loving children together with my eternal companion, but which is not.

Even when I am happy and trust that, in his goodness, God will bless me with the opportunities of marriage and motherhood whether in this life or the next, the fact remains that I am here on earth with a life to live now . . .

So, if motherhood is not always enough and if it is not even an option, what does it mean to be a righteous woman? In a church that places so very much emphasis on family in general and, for women specifically, on being a wife and mother, the answer to this question is not always apparent. Too often we use “wife and mother” as a kind of shorthand for righteousness in women. But I don’t think it’s that simple. After all, there are many wives and many mothers who are anything but righteous. I would like to present the examples of three righteous women whose righteousness is not entirely rooted in their roles as wife and mother: Eliza R. Snow, Deborah, and Esther. Each of these women were wives, but Eliza R. Snow never had

children and the Bible leaves it unclear whether either Deborah or Esther bore children. Each of them teaches us a great deal about what it means to be righteous regardless of gender.

When the Relief Society was first organized in 1842 in Nauvoo, Eliza R. Snow served as its first secretary. Twenty-five years later, Brigham Young called Sister Snow to help establish Relief Societies in the wards of

Zion. Serving as president of the Relief Society for twenty years, she pioneered a variety of programs meant to educate the women of the Church and promote the Church’s self-sufficiency. For instance, she asserted that “We want sister physicians that can officiate in any capacity that gentlemen are called upon to officiate . . . Women can occupy precisely the same footing that men occupy as physicians and surgeons.” She proceeded to establish, with President Young’s support, programs to send LDS women

to medical school to become doctors and to train LDS women as nurses. Under her leadership, the Relief Society established a hospital where a woman served as head surgeon.

In many ways, President Snow’s efforts epitomized the spirit of President Hinckley’s recent advice to the young women of the church. At the spring 2007 General Young Women Meeting, he said: “You may plan on marriage, and hope for it, but you are not certain that it will come. And even though you marry, education will be of great benefit to you. Don’t just drift along, letting the days

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## Mother's Day Talk (cont)

come and go without improvement in your lives. The Lord will bless you as you make the effort. Your lives will be enriched and your outlook broadened as your minds are opened to new vistas and knowledge." Eliza R. Snow's efforts as the president of the Relief Society encouraged women to gain knowledge and valuable skills, allowing them to establish successful silk manufactures, mercantile commission exchanges, grain storage systems (which outstripped the system run by the Church's bishops), publications, and educational institutions.

As a result of her dedication and diligent work to establish the kingdom of God on earth, Eliza R. Snow was frequently referred to as both a prophetess and a "mother in Israel." The last seems a rather strange title to be given to a woman who, though married to first Joseph Smith and then Brigham Young, never bore children. But that title's meaning is illuminated through the story of another prophetess, the Old Testament judge in Israel Deborah, who is the first woman to have been called a "mother in Israel."

Deborah had many roles. Poet. Prophetess. Judge. Leader of military action. As a prophetess and judge, she received instruction from God that Barak should raise an Israelite army and move against the Canaanites who held them captive. Even after Deborah assured Barak that God would deliver the leader of the opposing army into their hands, Barak insisted that he would not go to war unless Deborah accompanied him. Barak lead the army; Deborah, in her role as prophetess and judge, lead Barak, making possible through revelation his military victory.

While Barak's army, with God's divine assistance, defeated the much more powerful Canaanite army, Deborah advised him that "the Lord shall sell Sisera [the

leader of the Canaanite army] into the hand of a woman." True to this prophecy, Sisera fled sure destruction on the battlefield and took refuge in the tent of Jael, the wife of an Arab chief allied with the Israelites. Having made Sisera comfortable and promised to hide him, Jael waited for him to sleep and then killed him.

Both Deborah and Jael righteously performed the work of God, but they did so by performing actions that fall outside what we would think of as women's typical roles. In doing so, these women demonstrated that what matters is not necessarily fitting ourselves to preconceived notions of what it means to be a woman (can you imagine what would have happened had Deborah refused to go into battle with the Israelite army because it would be dirty and difficult and dangerous? or had Jael hesitated to kill Sisera because such a deed did not conform to notions of femininity?); Deborah and Jael help us understand that it's more important to do the work God gives us to do, and to do it well, than it is to try to force ourselves into being what we think it means to be a woman, or for that matter a man, and therefore failing to do what needs to be done.

After the Israelites' victory over the Canaanites, Deborah sings in praise of God that "the inhabitants of the villages ceased, they ceased in Israel, until that I Deborah arose, that I arose a mother in Israel." How is it that she arose "a mother in Israel" as she first revealed God's plan and then accompanied the army into battle as it fulfilled God's plan? At the end of her song of praise, Deborah sings: "So let all thine enemies perish, O Lord; but let them that love him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might. And the land had rest forty years." Deborah's efforts, Jael's actions, and the Israelites' obedience to God's commands resulted in forty years of peace.

The number forty represents the gestation period—forty

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weeks to bring forth new human life. This symbol is repeated throughout the Old and New Testaments: forty years of peace, forty years wandering in the desert, forty days fasting in the wilderness. In each instance, this period of time functions as an incubator to foster new spiritual life. While we do not know if Deborah actually had children, her righteousness fostered the spiritual life of her community just as Eliza R. Snow's dedication and hard work fostered the physical and spiritual strength of the early church as it settled in the west.

Esther, like both Eliza R. Snow and Deborah, dedicated herself to preserving her community and did so at great risk to herself. We all know that in entering the presence of the king in order to seek protection for her people, Esther risked her own life. The extent of that danger becomes more clear when we understand what went before. When Esther took this risk, she had not been queen for very long. The previous queen, Vashti, had been put aside by the king, Ahasuerus, because she disobeyed his command. As a result, all of the king's provinces were instructed that women must obey their husbands and all of the young women of his kingdom were brought to the court so Ahasuerus could choose a new queen.

When Esther chose to disobey the king's command that no one enter his presence without his having summoned them, she did so knowing that her predecessor had lost her position because of disobedience. She further knew that her people were threatened because her uncle, Mordecai, had disobeyed another of the king's commands when he refused to bow to the king's first in command, Hamar.

In spite of these two powerful examples of how disobedience to the king could result in a loss of status, home, and position at best and life at worst, Esther risked entering the king's presence in order to save her people from death. Her uncle Mordecai first suggested this course of

action; Esther in turn suggested that she and her attendants, her uncle, and all of the Jews in the king's provinces fast and pray for three days prior to her entering the king's presence and making her request. Esther's selfless sacrifice and her recognition of the power of fasting and prayer saved her people from destruction.

Each of these women, with their obedience and dedication, helps us understand that righteousness is not a factor of the role we fill in this life. Instead, righteousness is about how we do the work we have been given to do, whether it is the work of mother- or fatherhood, of our careers, of public service, or of Church service.

In his ministries in both Jerusalem and the Americas, the Savior said: "Therefore what manner of men (and women!) ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am." He is our ultimate example of what it means to be righteous. If we will worry less about making ourselves the perfect woman, or man, and instead embrace the example of the Savior, we will live lives of righteousness and meaning. As we become loving, compassionate, strong women and men of Christ, we will change our selves, our families, our communities, and ultimately our world and help build Zion.

I have been richly blessed with parents who set an example of such righteousness. Today I would like to honor my mother. I know no more perfect example of Christlike love and service. Her love and compassion have taught me to reach out to others. It is her example of righteous living and her belief in me that makes it possible for me to find happiness in my life.

I know that as we strive to live as Christ did, we will lead lives of righteousness that will allow us to bless our families and communities. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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## Sleeping with the Bishop

by Maria

I was teaching sharing time one Sunday when the branch president's 7-year-old son excitedly announced to the Primary, "It's a secret, but our family is moving!" Almost the moment the words left his mouth, I had a strong spiritual impression that my husband would be called to be the new branch president. The impression puzzled me—we were both only 25, we'd only lived in the branch a few months, we'd only been married a few months, and there were plenty of other men (read: men who were more capable) to choose from. But a few weeks later my impression was confirmed. The district president called us in and extended the calling to my husband. A short time later our district became a stake, and then the branch became a ward, and I've been sleeping with the bishop ever since.

It's a good thing for me to reminisce about that initial impression because it's been a wild, and sometimes surreal, ride these past few years. As we live in a highly transient area, we've seen a lot of people come and go: five bishopric counselors, three RS presidents, and five EQ presidents. Oh, and there was that arsonist that tried to burn down the chapel, the graffiti artist who "decorated" our car in the church parking lot, the gypsy children from Romania with lice (I combed the nits out of their hair in the women's restroom), the mentally ill eternal investigator who sneaked into the local temple for a few endowment sessions (the temple president asked my

husband to make WANTED posters of her face to hang behind the recommend desk), the processional of Moonies that marched into the chapel and demanded an audience with our "great leader," and the unhappy foreign circus performer passing through town who sought welfare assistance to help him out of indentured servitude in the circus. And those are just a few of the more...ahem...unusual situations we've found ourselves in.

Normal "all-bishops-go-through-this" stuff happens all the time, too—like sobbing women calling at all hours of the night (or showing up on the doorstep) because of their marital problems, porn-addicted men calling during dinner because they're having a rough temptation night (or so I'm guessing), screaming mothers and teenage daughters demanding that the bishop come and act as referee during their weekly power struggles, etc.

But by far the biggest challenge for me has been dealing with feelings of isolation and loneliness. I think there are many factors that contribute to this. One factor is the difficulty I have had in making close friends within the ward. Many ward members view me as a not-so-secret agent on a constant reconnaissance mission for my husband ("I can't let her know I'm anything but perfect, because if she figures it out then she'll tell her husband..."). This leads presumably normal people to act incredibly weird around me—and said weirdness is often a challenging foundation

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to form a friendship upon.

To be fair, I have to say that as the bishop's wife I often have a hard time being myself around ward members, too. I find that I am constantly self-censoring so that I don't say anything *Ensign*-unfriendly that will then be attributed to my husband, or offend any testimony-teetering members into inactivity, or seem too outspoken for a wife who certainly has no authority over anything going on in the ward.

I feel like all bishops' wives should be read Miranda-like warnings when their husbands are called: "Anything you say can and will be used against you in the court of ward opinion." I figured out early on (in, oh, the first week my husband was branch president, through a nasty three-page email) that any opinion I expressed, no matter how benign (that particular email was about...gasp... a testimony I had given about the Savior), would be subject to the strictest of scrutiny by ward members.

I thus began to plead the 5th on almost all occasions—better to be reticent than to have to deal with any blowback later on. But then I started getting blowback for being non-participatory, and I learned the next bishop's wife's rule of thumb: "No matter what you do or don't do, someone in the ward will be unhappy about it and won't hesitate to let you know it."

Not only is it difficult to make close friends within the ward, but the bishop's wife's best friend, her husband, is gone an extra 20 to

40 hours per week performing his bishoply duties. I can't tell you how many dark nights I've spent alone as my husband attended meetings, interviews, and disciplinary councils, or rushed to members' homes to minister in the way that only the bishop can. And, on the rare occasion he is at home, he is often fatigued, saddened, or stressed-out by the problems of the ward—emotionally unavailable to an already lonely wife. Add to that the fact that he really can't discuss anything that's bothering him in the ward (confidentiality issues), and some nights we just stare at each other and cry. On one particularly sad night I realized that he probably feels just as isolated, overwhelmed, and lonely as I do.

When we first began to feel the weight of my husband's calling press down on our young shoulders, we sought out comfort, information, and advice. We prayed. We fasted. We did countless searches on [lds.org](http://lds.org) for articles that would offer helpful suggestions. While a few of the articles were pleasant enough, I felt most of them sugar-coated the challenges inherent in being a bishop or bishop's wife. Rather than addressing concerns directly, the mantra seemed to be that if we would just focus on the "many great blessings" we have because of the calling, "everything will just start to feel better soon."

Hitting that dead end, I began to cautiously approach other bishops' wives in the area and in our extended families. Each of these women was uncomfortable expressing anything negative about her husband's calling—even though I could often see the pain and

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## Sleeping with the Bishop (cont)

frustration brimming in their eyes. With that dead end, my husband and I just kind of gave up trying to find answers for this issue. While we're committed to talking about our feelings with each other if we're having a particularly Bad Bishop Day, we mostly just try to ignore the challenges his calling brings into our lives. If we don't think too much about the hard stuff, it'll just go away, right? Not a very mature or effective coping mechanism—but it's surprisingly sort of worked over the past few years.

Recently I read an article in *Time* magazine that piqued my interest: "What God Joined Together: Pastors' wives have changed with the times. Now they're finding fellowship—online."

One of the large-font headlines reads: "What do you think is the No. 1 problem that preachers' wives have? Loneliness." I excitedly called my husband after reading only a few lines—I felt that the pastors' wives in the article were channeling me. I don't know why I didn't think of it before, but the article describes the idea that many pastors' wives face the same complex feelings about their husbands' callings that I do—sadness, pride, isolation, joy, under-appreciation, guilt, pressure to be perfect, gratitude, uncertainty about their roles, and occasional anger and resentment. But, most importantly, these women are finding comfort, community, and answers to their problems online by conversing with other women in similarly-challenging situations.

I've visited many of the blogs and websites that these women have created and have found them to be incredibly warm and inviting. Most make an up-front invitation to women of all faiths to participate in their conversations. A wealth of absolutely-applicable information is available at my fingertips. Practical tips on dealing with cranky congregation members, making the most of limited family time, learning how to say no to relentless inappropriate requests for your assistance (today a ward member informed me I am planning her wedding...uh...no...), and, the mother lode: improving communication with your husband about delicate topics such as gender roles within the church community. Unbelievable! SO helpful! I think these blogs are an answer to my prayers.

Maybe someday when I get my act together I'll start my own blog specifically for bishops' wives...if I do, I think I'll call it "Sleeping with the Bishop."

## Selected Comments

*Oh what a wonderful beautiful post. A friend pointed me here as I just started sleeping with the Bishop 2 months ago when my husband was called. I think I have two great advantages in my situation. I've been in my ward for 7 years already and have an extraordinary circle of friends who happily treat me no differently than before. This circle also includes the two other Bishops' wives from the other 2 wards that share our building, so I have an extremely fortunate support network.*

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*And my ...ahem...strong personality and range of opinions are well known in the ward already. I don't feel I have to be hyper-cautious every time I open my mouth. And I haven't yet felt the judgment or disapproval of others. Then again, we have an unusually wonderful ward, and I've only been in this limbo-ish undefined position for two months. Maybe I'll get some spectacular 3-page e-mails in the future calling me to repentance...*

*The other advantage I have (with a depth of gratitude that knows no bounds) is the instructions given by our Stake President when we were called. I was treated very much as an equal in the conversation, and the SP took pains to draw out my concerns and address them. My two greatest fears were (1) Although my husband would try his best to keep a balance, ultimately the kids and I would take second place to the calling if only because he is so incredibly responsible, and (2) I dreaded – DREADED – the wedge I thought would be driven into our marriage when my husband would be required to carry great burdens that he could not share with me. I hated that we wouldn't be able to talk about the details of this overwhelming second life of his that would dominate so many of his hours and take him away from us.*

*To the first concern, the SP admonished my husband that family came first no matter what, but then went a step further and gave concrete examples of bishops he had known who had been superb delegators and who had successfully upheld clear boundaries around family time. To the second concern, he told us that as the wife, I was*

*to act as an additional counselor to my husband as the bishop. He said that there would probably be things that would need to be kept confidential, but that often the issues could be discussed without naming names. He said that there would even be times when my husband would confide things in me that he wouldn't confide to his counselors.*

*I felt such a flood of relief at this that I almost cried. It came as a surprise to my husband, who had never heard anything like it before. I get the feeling it's not the typical approach in the Church. But a few weeks ago, my husband ran into Claudia Bushman at a conference and his new calling came up, as well as how the SP was able to allay my worst fears. Claudia's response was that they seem to be saying those things to bishops more and more in the Church. Here's hoping.*

*Anyway – Maria, thank you for a wonderful post. I hardly ever have time to troll the blogging world but would read your "Sleeping with the Bishop" blog religiously, should you start one!*

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*My best friend is not afraid to admit to anyone that the five years her husband spent as bishop were the worst five years of their marriage. Of course, part of that was due to the fact that her husband was focused on being a "perfect" bishop, but still, a lot of the stress just comes with the job description. It's great that you've found support online.*

## My Choice: Placing My Baby for Adoption

by Louise, Guest Blogger

I graduated from law school this month near the top of my class. As I was walking across the stage at (hopefully) my last graduation, I couldn't help but consider the fact that only 8 short years ago I was walking across a substantially smaller stage, 8½ months pregnant, at my own high school graduation. Most people who know me today would never believe that I was a Mormon teenage mother.

I found out I was one month pregnant in September of my senior year in high school. I have never been so afraid in my life—I could not believe that I had been so stupid. My consideration of the choice of abortion was very brief. The night I took my pregnancy test, I considered and rejected this choice because I didn't think I could live with that decision long term. I knew that the best way to ensure that I honored my choice not to have an abortion would be to tell my parents, who would be opposed to such a choice. My boyfriend was older, and he could get me to a clinic easily and pay for it. My parents wouldn't have to know; no one would have to know. I was embarrassed and part of me felt like this was the best choice—but a feeling inside me and probably my good girl Mormon upbringing told me that I would not be happy with that decision in the end. Looking back, it is surprising that I rejected that choice so quickly, but if I am honest with myself, I also made my final decision that night in the bathroom.

I knew I wasn't ready to be a mother, I knew I didn't want an abortion, I knew there was only one other option—but it was several months before I told anyone else what I had decided.

As soon as I had rejected the choice of abortion, I told my parents that I was pregnant. I know that they were disappointed in me, but their reaction was truly amazing—no anger, no yelling, just a frank discussion of what I was facing now (having two therapists as parents can be useful in some situations). They told me from the start that they would support whatever decision I made. However, I was **STRONGLY** encouraged to attend an unwed mothers support group at LDS Social Services where my mother was at that time volunteering to get her licensure hours (although she was not involved with the unwed mothers group). The leaders of this group were definitely focused on the adoption choice, but most of the unwed mothers in the group (in fact, all of the mothers at the time I attended the group) decided to keep their children. I was the anomaly in this group in many ways—I was one of the only girls to finish high school, I was absolutely the only girl to graduate with an A average and take mostly AP classes, I was the only girl that didn't talk about the option of marrying my child's father, and I was the only girl who made the decision to place a baby

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for adoption and actually stick with that decision after the baby was born.

Although I found the group leaders to be thoughtful and caring, attending the group was a frustration to me. We had classes about taking care of babies and how much it costs to feed and cloth them. This all made sense to me, but my main frustration was that I could not relate to the other pregnant women. Sure—we were all unwed teenage mothers, we all belonged to Mormon families, but I was not the typical teenage mother, and I found that I had even more trouble relating to pregnant teenagers than I did to the teenagers I attended school with and generally didn't want to be around. Some weeks women who had decided to keep their children spoke to the group about their decision and the trials of raising a child when you are still a child. For me, the worst group meetings were when women who had previously placed their babies for adoption would talk to the group about their decisions. Fortunately, none of these women who had made the same decision I was planning on making had much of an impression on me either. Most were still very tormented by their decision, and I did not want to be tormented for the rest of my life.

Essentially, the message I got from the unwed mother group sessions is that all women who get pregnant in high school are miserable regardless of the ultimate decision they make. I know that this wasn't the intention of the group, and I don't think this was the impression that everyone else got—but for someone like me, the group terrified me, made me feel

like getting pregnant would be the end of my life. Either I'd have a baby and be poor and stressed or give up the baby and be tormented because my baby was not with me.

After several months attending the group, I informed my parents that I wanted to place my baby for adoption. I had been discussing this with my parents along the way, and they were not surprised at this decision. A part of me knows that my mother was disappointed—not because it wasn't the best decision for me at the time—but because she wanted the baby, her first grandchild. Sometimes I think it was harder for my mom to give the baby up because she didn't get to make the decision. She was there for all the crap, puking, getting fat, whining, and tying my shoes for me when I couldn't reach my feet—but she didn't get to make the choice of whether or not to keep the beautiful baby at the end. I know today my mom knows without a doubt that I made the right decision, but I think a part of her still hurts every time one of my cousins or friends from high school is pregnant with a new grandbaby and she still has none. I was an oppositional-defiant teen, so knowing that my mom would have been happy if I kept the baby probably actually helped me to make the decision to place for adoption. It is hard now to really say why I knew adoption was best, even in those first few seconds after I found out I was pregnant. I honestly don't know how a kid who was dumb enough to get pregnant in high school could have been smart enough to make a decision that was really hard but resulted in a great life for the baby and a great life for her after the initial heartaches.

## Adoption (cont)

I am happy with the family who adopted my daughter; I know that they are the right family for her. I was not happy with the “choosing the family” process at LDS Social Services. I told them my number one priority for the parents was that they both have graduate degrees. I was shocked when they came back to me with only two families where both parents had graduate degrees and then several more where the father had a graduate degree and the mother had either a bachelor’s or an associate’s degree. Sometimes I think this factor was an arbitrary one made by a hormonal 17 year old who grew up in a happy family with two parents with graduate degrees. Looking back, though, I think that if you are going to make some sort of decision about parents this is probably one of the only objective factors you can use to pick people who are probably smart and probably hard workers. I know that there are smart hard workers who don’t have graduate degrees, but there are not as many stupid lazy people with them. It was of the utmost importance to me that the mother of the family was as educated as the father. My feminist self was only beginning at that point, but I knew enough to know that a baby would be happiest if she had a strong and smart mother.

I had a cesarean section and so I was in the hospital with my new baby girl for 5 days. I decided I didn’t want to take her home before the placement because it would be too hard to see all those places at home where she had been. The time at the hospital felt like an instant—I couldn’t believe 5 days had passed. The day when I left the hospital and

went to LDS Social Services to sign papers and give them my baby is a total blur to me. I can’t really remember reading and signing the papers, and I can’t really remember what anyone said. The only thing I remember is handing my social worker my baby and walking down the hall away from her. I couldn’t look back because I couldn’t stand to see her again. I remember the drive back home with my parents. It was completely silent except for my sobs. Even then, I didn’t second guess or regret my decision, but I hurt in a way I have never hurt again. I hope I never have to feel that way again.

My choice, to place my baby for adoption, only worked for me because it was truly my choice. I am strongly pro-choice, and I would never judge a mother who decided her best option was to have an abortion. I would also never judge a mother who decided her best choice was to raise her child herself even though she wasn’t quite prepared to do it. My strong belief in a woman’s right to choose (abortion, adoption, or keeping) is grounded in my experience. I’m not sure how to say what I’m trying to say here, but basically what I want to say is that being pregnant before you are ready is a complicated and difficult situation and that I think as women we should support other women’s decisions to deal with that situation in a way that works for them. I want to encourage other women not to try to make decisions for their sisters, daughters, or friends—but to let them make the choice themselves because that is the only way the women will actually be at peace with their decision.