

“The Touch of Human Kindness: Women and the Moral Center of Gravity”

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Today's culture is losing the plot about marriage, motherhood, and family life. As our Primary children sing "Follow the Prophet," they sing this verse: "Now we have a world where people are confused. If you don't believe it, go and watch the news."¹

Church members aren't immune from this confusion. A Latter-day Saint mother who was called to work with young single adults was expecting a new baby. One by one, several of her young women privately asked her how she really felt about having another child. In a spirit of deep womanly trust, they asked questions that reflected honest anxiety about being bound to husbands and assuming the burdens of motherhood. She told us she was surprised to hear concerns like this from young women who were believing, active Church members.

In response, she invited each young woman to do what she had allowed only her husband and children to do. She tenderly placed one of their hands on her abdomen and invited them to feel the baby's movements. Then, with her hand on theirs, she lovingly taught each one that, despite the relentless demands, she had discovered an exquisite happiness through being married and having children. These young women drank with deep reassurance from her wellsprings of testimony. But today, people without mentors like that can be very confused.

What is happening to us? We are now living through the biggest change in attitudes about family life in five centuries. An *Atlantic Monthly* writer believes today's massive family disintegration is part of what he calls "the Great Disruption," a wave of history as big as the shift from the age of agriculture to the Industrial Revolution some 200 years ago.² And so today, many people are skeptical about the very idea of "belonging" to a family. After long seeing family bonds as valuable ties that bind, some now see those ties as sheer bondage.

It feels like vast forces are eroding our foundations of personal peace, love, and human attachments. Whatever held family relationships together suddenly feels weaker now. At times it feels like a kind of ecological disaster, as if a vital organism somewhere in the environment is disappearing.

Patricia Holland once said, "If I were Satan and wanted to destroy a society, I think I would stage a full-blown blitz on women."³ What do you suppose she meant? Men and women share the traits of human nature and often perform the same tasks. But some strengths are gender-specific. And we are losing, in this society, what women have traditionally contributed to cultural cohesion. Like the mortar that keeps a brick wall from toppling over, women have held together our most precious relationships—our marriages and child-parent ties. But now we're seeing cracks in that mortar, which reveal some things we have too long taken for granted.

A salesman walked down a street past a group of boys playing baseball. No one answered at the door of the house where he was to call. Through a side door, he saw a boy about the age of those playing in the street dutifully practicing the piano. Baseball gear leaned against the wall. He called, "Excuse me, sonny, is your mother home?" The boy glanced at his baseball gear, and then he said glumly from the keyboard to the salesman, "What do you think?"

More broadly, studies of third-world development show that of all the factors that affect a culture's social and economic growth, perhaps the most significant factor is the literacy of women. How interesting. Women have always lifted entire cultures. Their influence begins in every society's very core—the home. Here, women have taught and modeled what Tocqueville called "the habits of the heart," the civilizing "mores" or attitudes that create a sense of personal virtue and duty to the community—without which free societies can't exist.⁴

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* teaches powerfully about the moral influence of women. He uses his phrase "the milk of human kindness" when Lady Macbeth is persuading her husband to murder the king and take his throne. As Macbeth hesitates, his wife sneers, "Thy nature [is] too full o' th' milk of human kindness."⁵ Then, in a haunting passage, from her balcony, Lady Macbeth taunts the evil forces of the universe to "unsex me here" and "fill me . . . [with] direst cruelty. . . . Take my [woman's] milk for gall. . . . Come, thick night."⁶ Haunting lies.

Lady Macbeth's womanly heart makes her incapable of taking a life unless she renounces her female instinct to give and nurture life. Later, after they have killed the king, she goes insane, and then she dies—not just from guilt, but perhaps from symbolically renouncing her nature.

"The milk of human kindness" is a symbol of female nurturing at many levels, but it especially means the moral influence of women. Let's consider now four ways in which modern society has devalued that nurturing. Perhaps seeing more closely what we're losing will help us regain it. Let's look first at the devaluation of motherhood.

For most of our history, the very word *motherhood* meant honor, endearment, and sacrifice. Victor Hugo wrote, "She broke the bread into two fragments and gave them to her children, who ate with eagerness. 'She hath kept none for herself,' grumbled the sergeant.

"'Because she is not hungry,' said a soldier.

"'No,' said the sergeant, 'because she is a mother.'"⁷

Yet this spirit of self-sacrifice has, these days, become a contentious issue, making contentious the very idea of motherhood. For instance, a feminist essay called "The Problem of Mothering" tells us that "explorations of women's oppression [challenge] the social assignment of mothering to women [because] women's oppression is in some way connected to mothering."⁸ In other words, because mothering has been assigned to women, the feminist criticism is that women have been assigned to be oppressed. Others have attacked the sacrificing mother whose selflessness has allowed and encouraged male domination. They argue that stereotyping the motherly role forces women to accept a sexist division of labor everywhere, most especially in family relationships.⁹

Now, these critics do have a point. Some people have exploited mothers' willingness to accept relentless demands. And some women have felt undue pressure to conform to rigid roles that deny a woman's sense of self. But the critics have swung the pendulum too far. As Newsweek put it, they "sometimes crossed the line into outright contempt for motherhood."¹⁰

If being selfless means a woman must give up her own inner identity and personal growth, that understanding of selflessness is wrong. That was a weakness in some versions of the Victorian model of motherhood, which viewed women as excessively dependent on their husbands. But today's liberationist model goes too far the other way, stereotyping women as excessively independent of their families.

A more sensible view is that husbands and wives are interdependent with each other. The Church's inspired Proclamation on the Family states that spouses are "equal partners" who "help one another" in fulfilling their individual roles.¹¹ Marriage offers each partner the opportunity for spiritual development. I once said in frustration to Marie, "The Lord put Adam and Eve on the earth as full-grown people. Why couldn't He have

done that with this boy of ours?" Marie replied, "God gave us that child to make Christians out of us." That is an equal-opportunity blessing for each parent.

The critics who moved mothers from dependence to independence skipped the fertile middle ground of interdependence. Those who moved mothers from selflessness to selfishness skipped the fertile middle ground of self-chosen sacrifice that contributes to a woman's personal growth. Because of these excesses, debates about the value of motherhood have, ironically, caused the general society to discount not only mothers but women in general.

One woman's essay, "Despising Our Mothers, Despising Ourselves," reported that, despite many victories for women since the 1960s, the self-respect of American women is at an all-time low. Why? She says because we've experienced not just a revolt against men's oppression but also a revolt against women: "Heroic women who [dedicated] their lives to . . . children-as mothers, teachers, nurses, social workers—. . . [have been] made to feel stupid and second rate because they [took] seriously the Judeo-Christian precept that it was better to do for others than for oneself." Devaluing motherhood devalues "the primary work of most women throughout history," which tells women they "aren't worth serious consideration."[12](#)

Then what happens? Society's bricks begin to collapse. Consider the unprecedented appearance of child brutality. American schools have now witnessed several cases of children shooting other children, something the world had never seen before. The forerunner to these events was the world-shocking 1993 case of James Bulger, in which two ten-year-old boys murdered a two-year-old child. This crime prompted some British researchers to probe how children learn the difference between right and wrong. What they found is that a child's understanding of the difference between good and evil emerges emotionally long before it emerges rationally, so that the orientation of a child's conscience begins with its earliest relationship with its mother.[13](#)

A child is an echo chamber. If he hears the sounds of love from his mother, he will later echo those sounds to others. But if the mother's signals are confusing and hateful, that child is more likely later to sound confused and hateful. Whether or not a mother feels support from her husband, her family, and her society profoundly influences whether she feels like a mother of hope—a mother who values herself enough to nurture a child of hope with the milk of human kindness. And children of hope create a society of hope.

An LDS woman recently said that some mothers in the Church feel guilty when the needs of their children make it impossible for them to do all the things they feel they ought to be doing in their ward and stake. Some mothers, she said, believe that Church service is the Lord's work, and mothering is, well, "home-work."[14](#) Not so. This mis-impression is just one more example of how a confused society has sent women the false message that motherhood is a second-class activity. All of us need to do our part in the Church, but there is no higher example of the Lord's work than doing what good mothers and fathers do. Our two most sacred buildings are the temple and the home. A family dinner table, surrounded by parents and children who share their laughter and their lives, is a sacred setting—not just a place setting. Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven, and that kingdom is, first of all, in your home. "Home-work" is the Lord's work.

A second area where society is devaluing the gender-specific gifts of women is sexual behavior. Historically, the keystone of the archway of sexual fidelity was the intuitive sexual self-control of women. The sexuality of most women reflects an inner moral compass that can point true north, like a natural magnet. Of course, just as a natural magnet can lose its power through damage or trauma, women can also lose their natural moral magnetism. And many men have demonstrated the capacity for moral self-direction. But throughout history, women have tended to be society's primary teachers of sexual mores.

As scientist Leon Kass put it, "A fine woman understood that giving her body, even her kiss, meant giving her heart, which was too precious to be bestowed on anyone who would not prove worthy by pledging himself in marriage to be her defender and her lover forever." And so, "it is largely through the purity of her morals, self-regulated," he said, "that woman wields her influence. Men will always do what is pleasing to women, but only if women suitably control and channel their own considerable sexual power."[15](#)

This view of female sexuality deplores abuse of women. It also celebrates the spiritual and emotional fulfillment of marriage for both women and men. Yet women have too long endured the unfairness of a cultural double standard that tolerated promiscuity in men while condemning it in women. A sociologist named David Popenoe writes, "Men the world over are more sexually driven and 'promiscuous,' while women are more concerned with lasting relationships." So, he says, women have been "expected to set limits on the extent of intimacy."[16](#)

A double standard that winks at this male laxness enough to excuse it is unequal and unfair. Society might have responded to this inequality by demanding fidelity of men. It is as if our culture had two hands, a female hand that was morally healthy, and a male hand that was morally withered. In the name of equality, we held up both hands and said, "Please make both my hands the same," and what happened? Both hands became withered. And so our generation has romped into history's most staggering sexual revolution, seeking male/female equality by encouraging women to imitate the habitual promiscuity of men.

This strange combination of sexual liberation and women's liberation has, with incredible irony, now liberated men—not only from a sexual conscience but also from the sense of family responsibility that women's higher sexual standards once demanded of men. And the biggest losers in this process are, sadly, children and women—the very women who've lost their former power to demand lasting commitments from their children's fathers.

Despite the unfairness of the double standard, our culture's concept of marriage made serious demands of men. Popenoe says men are simply not as "biologically attuned to being committed fathers as women are to being committed mothers."[17](#) And so, he says, marriage was our culture's way of teaching men to provide for and protect their families. But our current culture of divorce shows us that because male domination is so terrible, male commitment must be a learned behavior, and it "is fragile and can disappear" when the culture no longer expects or teaches it.[18](#) Most men won't stay married in any society unless their culture requires it of them.[19](#)

By expecting men to marry, our culture traditionally sent men a message that controlled the damage of the double standard. But now, in the rush toward women's sexual liberation, we seem no longer to expect men to marry. So we've given up not only the double sexual standard but also the power of marriage to tame the male wanderlust. And the losers in this hasty bargaining were not men but women—and, even more so, children.

As a third area of devaluation, our society has stopped prizing women's innate yearning for permanent marriage bonds. Our antimarriage culture now literally throws out our babies with the bath water of resentment toward the very idea of marital commitment. As you know, rates of divorce and illegitimacy have raged out of control for years. We live in "fatherless America," with a third of all children in this country now born out of wedlock, and over fifty percent of new marriages expected to end in divorce.

Two experts describe all this as a "remarkable collapse of marriage," with a decreasing parental investment in children. After looking at the gale-force damage to children in this messy scene, our sociologist friend Popenoe concludes that our only hope today is what he calls "the female predisposition toward permanent pair bonding."[20](#) What does he mean? He means that women prefer permanent marriage. For instance, most young women once would have answered the early propositioning of a young man with forceful authority: "Not until you marry me."

And why is this a *female* predisposition? New evidence suggests that women have innate qualities that differ from men's, including a stronger desire for long-term marriage. "Women, who can bear only a limited number of children" and who must nurture them through years of dependency, "have a great [inner] incentive to invest their energy in rearing [their] children, while men, who can father [many] offspring, do not."[21](#) Because child-rearing is so demanding, then, women have found ways to keep their children's fathers close at hand.

Women's desire for long-term mates has also made them more selective about whom they marry. This female instinct, with all the social benefits that flow from it—raising secure, healthy children in the home—has led women and civilized cultures to entice fathers to share the yoke of family responsibility through marriage

bonds.

The chain of being that moves from a mother of hope, to a child of hope, to a society of hope, gives our culture an enormous interest in permanent marriage. And so the woman's greater desire for permanence really is the mortar holding together the bricks of social stability.

As the writer Wendell Berry said, "Marriage [is] not just a bond between two people, but a bond between those two people and their children, and their neighbors." When this bond weakens, we face "an epidemic of divorce, neglect, community ruin, and loneliness." That is why, he said, "lovers must turn from their gaze at one another back toward the community. The marriage of two lovers joins them to one another, to forebears, to descendants, to the community, to Heaven and earth. It is the fundamental connection without which nothing holds."[22](#)

Essential to the connection Berry describes is the female longing for permanent ties. When the marriage bond is secure, a wife stands at the center of moral gravity for her family's universe, holding her husband close with her gravitational pull. When he moves to the perimeter of the home and community to guard and to sustain his family, he is like a falcon and she is his falconer. If he strays too far, he will no longer hear her voice, ever calling him home.

Poet William Butler Yeats tells us what happens then:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.[23](#)

Sadly, society's devaluation of the female center of moral gravity is creating just such disintegration.

The image of the falcon and the falconer suggests an important distinction between the roles of fathers and mothers. A psychiatrist named David Gutmann found that in all successful societies, fathers have been what he called "creatures of the perimeter" who provide for and protect their families, while mothers nurture young children.[24](#) The Church's Proclamation on the Family uses the terms *provide* and *protect* to describe a father's primary tasks, and it uses the term *nurture* to describe a mother's primary task.[25](#) Gutmann says, "Strong mothers build secure homes. Fathers and fathers' sons maintain secure neighborhoods."[26](#)

Ideally, then, mothers first nurture children's feelings about right and wrong, and then fathers teach them the law of the family and community. This places fathers and other men into disciplinary roles, teaching sons with loving firmness to separate psychologically from their mothers until they internalize community norms within their own consciences. By this process, young men transform their aggression and resentment of authority into an internal sense of duty to protect and provide for their family and community. Then they can form their own homes as mature husbands, rather than childishly needing wives who behave like mothers to them.

Gutmann is distressed about radical feminist criticism of male authority in this long-standing pattern. That criticism undermines the male role, relegating fathers to being "second-fiddle mothers." This demeaning of men, says Gutmann, drives them from marriage into the "masculine default habitats" of "the bar and the adulterous bed," where they "feel like men, rather than failed mothers." Then men tragically turn their aggression against women and against community, becoming their enemy instead of protector and provider.[27](#)

By contrast, the Proclamation on the Family states that "marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God."[28](#) In that holy togetherness—the "equal partnership" of man and woman—each part makes a unique and crucial contribution, but these two parts are not two solos. They are interdependent parts of a duet. Both these individuals in each marriage and the larger society must assign equal value to each part.

Let's look now at a fourth category of women's undervalued moral influence, which lies in their gift for nurturing human relationships. There is some recent research showing that—as Janette Beckham once paraphrased the same research—women will often sacrifice an achievement for the sake of a relationship, while men will more likely sacrifice a relationship for the sake of an achievement.²⁹ And strong relationships hold both families and societies together.

Other studies tell us that the "feminine intuition" that sustains personal relationships blesses all intersections of community activity. Economists praise this female strength as an asset in the economy of the future, with its emphasis on personal networks.

The Church has long involved women in decision-making processes and personal ministering to local congregations. The Relief Society is a sisterhood for all adult women. Through this sisterhood, mothers and other women learn to strengthen not only family bonds but an endless multitude of other relationships, which are nourished—sometimes kept alive—by the milk of human kindness. Women's perspectives can profoundly enrich many fields of human endeavor without compromising the primary value of home and family.

I love the biblical story of Mary's relationship with her cousin, Elisabeth, to whom she went to share, to talk, and to receive support. Because women can give so much to each other in relationships of never-failing charity, one curse of the modern world is to isolate and alienate LDS women from one another—perhaps by making them more competitive, like men. Once more, I pray for two healthy hands, for both genders, hands in gestures of compassion, not competition.

If the adversary can convince LDS women to criticize each other rather than connect with and support each other, he wins the day by driving wedges into natural, womanly relationships of strength. Some of these wedges come from rigid women, who are too narrow in the degree of personal choice and diversity they will tolerate in other LDS women. At the other extreme, some wedges come from LDS women who dangle one foot in Zion and the other foot in Babylon, not wanting to be thought weird by their non-LDS friends.

Women in these two groups can really have at each other, turning the power of relationships from peace to war. Can we love and support each other without judging each other harshly? So many of us are trying our hardest to live the commandments, often against great odds in our personal lives and unique family situations. Heaven knows, the world isn't giving us much support in these relationships. Let us support one another, even when—especially when—we differ on matters of personal choice and circumstance. Those are usually differences of preference, not principle.

In summary, consider a true story from Australian history that illustrates the power of women as mothers of hope, women of fidelity, wives of commitment, and nurturers of human ties. When it was first a British colony, Australia was to Britain a vast wilderness jail for exiled convicts. Until 1850, six of seven Brits who went "down under" were men. And the few women who went were themselves often convicts or social outcasts. The men ruthlessly exploited them, rendering most of them as women without hope, powerless to change their conditions.

In 1840, a reformer named Caroline Chisholm put forward the idea that more women would stabilize Australian culture. She wrote to the British government that the best way to establish a "great and good" community was this: "For all the clergy you can dispatch, all the schoolmasters you can appoint, all the churches you can build, and all the books you can export, will never do much good without 'God's police'—wives and little children—good and virtuous women." Caroline Chisholm searched for women to "raise the moral standard of the people." For twenty years she traveled to England to recruit young women and couples who shared common-sense principles of family life. Over time, these women tamed the men who tamed the wild land; and civil society gradually emerged, aided by new state policies that raised women's status and reinforced family life.³⁰ I like the way one historian put it: "The initial reluctance of the wild colonial boys to marry was eroded fairly quickly." Eventually, thousands of new immigrants who shared the vision of these "good and virtuous women" established stable families as the basic unit of Australian society, and they did it

more quickly than it had occurred in any other western country.³¹

This striking story of women's moral influence grew from a deliberate plan to replace a "rough and wild" penal colony with "a more moral civilization" that capitalized on women's innate civilizing capacity.³² And so Australia became a promised land, flowing with a healthy environment of milk and honey. And the milk, literally and figuratively, was the milk of human kindness—the woman's touch, which nurtures those habits of the heart without which no civil society can exist.

Most radical feminists would today reject the concept of women as civilizing agents, because they fear that accepting inherent differences between men and women will cause gender discrimination that would place women in second-class roles. But the evidence shows that, despite many similarities, men and women do differ innately in some crucial ways. Hence the title of one popular book, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*.

Psychologist Carol Gilligan's 1982 book *In a Different Voice* shows how women and men perceive the same things in different ways, and they speak differently from one another. Gilligan found that women have a stronger commitment to care-giving than men do.³³ If society can value this gender gift without creating discrimination against women, we just might experience, as Anne Summers put it, "a genuine breakthrough in our thinking about the qualities contemporary society now has the greatest need for."³⁴

The recent women's movements opened many doors to women and awakened many men who had taken advantage of women's willingness to give their bread to others and keep none for themselves. But that pendulum has moved our attitudes too far, devaluing and damaging our culture's support for motherhood, sexual fidelity, marriage, and women's distinctive voices.

It is now time to pull that pendulum back, to find magnetic north, the moral compass point that will nurture our children and communities with the touch of human kindness. Surely society can restore the confidence of today's women in their own instincts without coercing them into being nonentities. Surely we can invite men to follow the examples of compassion they see in their mothers, wives, and daughters. We have already learned the hard way that women, children, and the entire culture are worse off when we seek equality between men and women by encouraging women to adopt permissive male lifestyles.

Let us seek a more responsible form of equality that celebrates and preserves the natural moral influence of women, thereby encouraging both men and women to honor the equal yoke and lifelong commitments of marriage. That kind of progress will make the civilization of the twenty-first century not only more equal but infinitely more civilized.

[MARIE:] While Bruce and I were serving in the South Pacific and Australia—a unifying experience like few we've had—we came to know what we have affectionately dubbed "The Thursday Island story." Thursday Island is a small island just off the northeast tip of Australia, nestled neatly between Wednesday Island and—you guessed it—Friday Island. (No, I'm not kidding.)

In this story you will see a woman's influence on a man, as you have with Bruce's examples, but you will also see a man's equally important influence on a woman.

"Brian" grew up in New Zealand in tough circumstances. His mother lived with one man after another, each of whom Brian longed to call Dad. But not one of them ever was. When he was about ten, he would see his mother's current boyfriend come home drunk and beat her. By the time he was twelve, this boyfriend had given Brian alcohol, and within a year or two he was into hard drugs. By his late teens Brian left New Zealand for Australia where he joined a drug gang in Sydney and spent all his energy feeding the habit, which by then was all the meaning there was left in his life.

One day, with no money and desperate for his fix, he determined to rob a stranger. Ready for the first time to

kill someone if he had to, Brian waited on a dark Sydney street near a train station. Taking a deep breath he approached a well-dressed man and jammed a knife into his ribs. "Give me your money, or I'll kill you," he hissed. As the man fumbled for his money, Brian caught a quick glimpse of a small family photo in his wallet. Seeing that photo made Brian's heart scream. "A family! How can I kill this man who has all I've ever wanted?"

Feeling shame burn through him, he bolted and—throwing his knife into some nearby bushes—began to run. He ran and ran, until he fell breathless and sobbing to the grass in a city park. When the sobbing subsided, he still felt frantic and totally worthless. As his mind wildly cast about for answers, he could think of only one thing. He would take his own life.

Impulsively, he climbed to the top of a nearby skyscraper to jump to his death. As he teetered on the brink, an odd thought stopped him cold. "If I jump, my last earthly act will be to leave a mess for somebody else to clean up." . . . and he stepped back from the edge. He had to find a better way to take his life. As he made his way back to his dingy apartment, it hit him. He would go to Thursday Island.

He remembered a very peaceful visit to that island years before. So with almost his last dollar, he caught a flight from Sydney. Once on the island, he hired a boat, agreeing to meet the owner the next morning at dawn. He would row himself to a tiny uninhabited island, where he could die and leave no mess for someone to clean up.

As he vacantly ate his final supper in a local hotel, he noticed three women singing on a small stage. One of them had a very mellow voice. He stayed, listening. Grateful for a little comfort, he offered the three of them a drink. Two said yes; "Lani," the one with the mellow voice, politely refused the drink but stayed and talked with him.

They talked until the place closed, they talked as he walked her home; and they just kept talking until dawn broke on the horizon. He had not told her his plans, and when he saw the growing light, he nervously blurted, "I've got to go now. Thank you. This has been the most peaceful night of my life." Then he hurriedly turned to leave.

"Stop, Brian," Lani called. "I don't know where you're going, . . . but don't go." The light in her eyes matched the soothing tones of her voice.

"It's too late. I've made up my mind." But his step faltered. He looked back at her face; then he looked toward the sea—teetering again between life and death. Something about the light in her eyes and her voice pulled him back through her door. She didn't ask him to explain; she just fixed him some breakfast. As he was finishing eating, two young men in white shirts appeared at the door. Lani was a new convert, and these missionaries were dropping by to see how she was doing.

Within a short time, they had taught Brian the discussions. He was baptized and decided to stay on Thursday Island. Not long afterwards, Brian and Lani were married. Then they had a family photo of their own.

Lani fed Brian spiritually and physically. Her spirit "sang" to him, calling to his heart. He heard the song and changed because of it, feeling true peace for the first time in his life. That was more than twenty-five years ago.

When we saw them last year, Brian and Lani were serving together on a full-time mission in Australia. A few weeks later, Brian sent us a letter in which he looks back on how much Lani has helped him. But also notices how much *he* is helping her. He writes:

"Lani is always a blessing to me. In her humble way, she lives the gospel. She is currently going through a trial of memory loss, and it gives her much anguish. At times I feel helpless to put her at ease. Then I remember

how she cared for me as I went through withdrawals from drugs and the nights she sat up till daylight comforting me as my mind wandered with its fears. Love and patience, selfless service, and faith in the Savior—that is how she helped me. I pray as often as I can. I love my wife and desire to be her strength. The Savior is helping us." [35](#)

A wife supports a husband. A husband sustains a wife. Each has held the other in comforting vigil. In a very real way, each is "afflicted" with the other's afflictions.

These very words are used in the Doctrine and Covenants where the Lord told Peter Whitmer, as he and Oliver Cowdery were about to leave on a mission, "Give heed unto the words and advice of your brother, . . . *and be you afflicted in all his afflictions*, ever lifting up your hearts unto me in prayer and faith, for his and your deliverance" (D&C 30:5-6; emphasis added).

In the Thursday Island story the progression looks like this: She calls to him in his afflictions with the love she feels from the Lord. He feels *her* love, and through her comes to know Christ's love for himself. Now with the love *he* feels from the Lord, he loves her even more and strengthens her in her affliction. The afflictions and the love become not just his or hers but theirs. Both, tethered to the Lord by their individual and now combined faith, are being drawn into the center by *His* love-into oneness with Him.

This progression reverses the unraveling relationship between the falcon and the falconer in the images from Yeats' poem which Bruce quoted earlier. *This* center—His center—will hold. Anarchy is no more; for Christ's goodness, like a fetter, has bound up our wander-prone hearts—bound them to one another—and then to Him. Paradoxically, *this* turning gyre that *seems* only to narrow actually opens into celestial worlds without end.

The Thursday Island story tells me that a man can call to a woman in ways that soothe and stabilize her. Recently I heard about a young man who was a catalyst in the turning of a young friend from her self-destructive ways.

"Michelle" was wanting to turn her life away from the foolish choices she had been making. Her confidence was shaky, but she very much wanted to change. By "chance," she met Scott, a returned missionary, at a dance one night. They each liked how the other moved on the dance floor. (They don't talk much on dance floors these days, you know.) But they did strike up a conversation, and then they struck up a friendship. One night, after several weeks of phone calls and a few dates, they had a serious talk in which her doubts about what her past might mean to her future came up. She was afraid her mistakes might forfeit her potential. He didn't say, "You dumbie." He didn't say, "You should've" or "You should." He thought a second. He looked at her intently and said simply, "I see you. I know who you really are."

Could the priesthood be playing a role in Scott's wisdom? Perhaps there is a parallel between the civilizing influence of Caroline Chisholm's women on the male convict settlers of Australia—and the Christianizing influence of the priesthood on the men of this Church.

While visiting a stake in Australia, Bruce met with three sister leaders. At that time, and since, Church leaders had, of course, been strongly encouraging women's full participation in stake and ward councils. Wondering if this participation was increasing as well as improving, Bruce asked these three women, "Are the men in your lives listening to you?" Their brows furrowed. "Do you mean our priesthood leaders or our husbands?"

Bruce made the question more specific by asking them to estimate what proportion of the sisters in their stake would say their husbands do listen to them and what proportion of these sisters would say that their priesthood leaders listen to them. After a little private discussion, they estimated that the priesthood leaders listened a little better than the husbands, though neither estimate was terribly high.

Sensing Bruce's dismay that the men—whether as priesthood holders or as husbands—were not better listeners, one of the sisters said, "I can tell, Elder Hafen, that you're disappointed, but things are getting better."

More than that, I don't know of any organization on earth that begins to do what the priesthood does in teaching men to listen to—and to value—women, and children for that matter. The men in my life," she went on, "take me more seriously than they otherwise would because they hold the Priesthood and the Priesthood teaches them how to treat, and how to serve, others."

The priesthood can connect men to God and thereby to others, if they desire. And then their desire is not simply about leadership; it's about love—about "gentleness and meekness, and . . . love unfeigned" (D&C 121:41).

The young man who assures his new friend that he sees her—for who she really is, and not for her mistakes—surely knows something of the love that comes when we are connected to God. Now her desire to find the Savior's love for herself is leading her to make better choices.

This discussion also applies to those who are single. When a single woman makes her own one-to-one connection with the Lord, she worries less about when, or if, she will marry. And it doesn't matter whether one's being single is because of not being married, being widowed, or being divorced; the principles are still the same. Whatever else happens, we need to become celestial beings whose hope is based in Christ and who are sealed His (Mosiah 5:15).

As we were talking with a young married couple recently, someone said that a woman can be haunted with self-doubt when the men in her life do not seem to value her. I like what Sue said about that: "A woman's self-worth depends not on how much other people seem to value her but rather on how well she is spiritually grounded. To depend on what others think of us lets them determine our sense of worth. When our happiness is based on someone else's choices, rather than our own, we become prime candidates for deadly hope. We hope someone will approve of us so we can approve of ourselves, but we simply cannot control other people's choices. We can, however, control our own choices and our own relationship with the Lord. I know from my own experiences that if we walk one step toward Him, He will always run at least two steps toward us. Hope based in Christ is not deadly, but full of life and light." [36](#)

Lea Rosser is a single woman who has taken responsibility for her own life by placing herself in the Lord's hands. A country girl from Yass, Australia, she obtained a university education and moved courageously to the big city. In Sydney, with still more grit, she got more education in city government and eventually was hired as the city manager for the shire where the Olympic games were just held.

But with the Olympics over, she lost her job and waited months, saying that she would "cast [her] net into unknown waters to see if [her] bait [was] suitable." Then, after months, within four days, she was offered a job and accepted a job, and this job used her very good talents and gifts. She reflects, "Here I was thinking [that] Heavenly Father wasn't going to 'plunk' me somewhere this time, but He did." [37](#)

It is obvious that Lea relies upon her connection with Christ, who is her touchstone. By looking to Him, she determines how she makes decisions and how she interacts with others no matter the setting—whether it's in the shire, or looking for work, at home with her parents, in the Church with young women, Relief Society sisters, or with priesthood leaders. She is tethered to Jesus. He is her falconer. Always. Because she is centered in Him, her center *will* hold.

A single woman, like Lea, in fact, may actually enjoy an especially meaningful relationship with Christ if she lives so as to become like Him. Though she sorely longs for marriage, she feels after Christ's companionship in her aloneness and cleaves to the promise of connection with Him.

This binding tether—she is His, and He is hers—brings stability no matter what gales about her. Because she is bound securely to Him, she is free to have a buoying, strengthening influence on others, an influence that is uniquely hers, uniquely a woman's, and uniquely Christian.

And those of us who are wives or husbands also have the challenge of becoming celestial individually in order to be celestial together. We can't become celestial if we are negative toward ourselves or each other.

"Tina," a wonderful young Aussie mum, felt discouraged and unworthy because of the "gap between the ideal of married life and the reality of her marriage," as she put it. "Geoff" had stopped attending church, and she felt alone spiritually. "Somehow," she wrote, "I had come to believe that I had to become righteous all by myself . . . to be worthy of God's love and blessings."

Then on a temple trip to Sydney, she came across a book on the Atonement. Its pages were for her "truth and hope and light being unfolded. . . . and [her] life changed." In spite of others' choices, she put her "spirituality back on track." She prayed for changes in her marriage, in her husband's choices, and in her own choices.

She was surprised when the changes didn't come in big ways, but they did come, and as she put it, "in the most subtle ways and through obedience to promptings." She wrote, "Last Sunday, with no forewarning and with no apparent catalyst, Geoff woke up and casually announced he was coming to church."

She learned to work not on trying to force her husband to be active but rather on standing "faithful regardless of others' decisions" and on making herself "the kind of wife and person that Geoff wants to be with forever." Her new understanding of the Atonement and her growing closeness to the Savior helped her be able to say, "[Even though] I have wanted to give up [many times, and] many times I questioned my testimony, [this trial] has been a good test for me. The Lord has blessed me with strength, understanding and healing. He has become my friend and my support."[38](#)

Tina was strengthened and healed independently of what her husband chose; yet when she became afflicted in his afflictions and did not criticize, he chose on his own to come back to church. No matter what others' choices are, she trusts in the Savior and in His atonement.

Now, speaking for myself, it's not my husband's inactivity in this Church that's been my affliction—it's his activity! Being assigned to Australia was one of the sweetest joys of our life *and* one of the hardest things I have ever done.

I could hardly stand it, for one of many examples, when I couldn't be with our daughter Sarah when she had her first baby. Her pregnancy had been complicated by terrible morning sickness followed by a rare and awful rash with itching that never stopped. She was afflicted! I took consolation in the care she was getting from her husband, Eric; they were joined at the baby's birth by her older sister Emily, who had come from out of town to fill in for me. But still, *I* wasn't there. All I could do was give advice and empathize over the phone, mail baby clothes, and pray from the ache in my mothering heart.

My prayers changed because of being away from those I love so much—especially during times of crisis for them; I prayed more honestly, deeper, and with greater intent. The intensity of the ache caused me to stretch longer for Him and His blessing upon my family and friends. And somehow this stretching expanded—and expands—my heart to make more room for Him. This very personal spiritual experience of being in Australia and New Zealand and the islands makes me want to urge every couple in the Church to serve a mission not only because you are needed so much but because your service and your sacrifice can expand your spiritual vision.

And yet there is plenty more changing for me to do, more turning of my heart toward the call of the Falconer. Like any wife and mother, I need to learn to communicate better with my family, to be more patient with them while they are learning to be patient with me, to be restrained and not indulge in criticism. Together, in our "turning and turning" toward the axis of Christ, the rough edges are getting smoother as we learn to forgive and repent—and to keep loving through it all. And in all of this, He is making better Christians of us. I would not trade any of what I've come to feel for Him, or the cost of this discovery, for the ease of no aching and no stretching. He is too precious to me now, and I feel too tender toward Him. I yearn for nothing more than to be,

in the long light at the end of this mortal day, at home with Him.

[Bruce:] Finally, a concluding symbol from both of us. Marie and I were once in the grey-green beauty of Belfast, Ireland. We noticed that some Irish women wore a wedding ring of unusual design called the Claddagh Ring, named for a place near Galway (and we have since seen some of these rings here). On top of the ring is a heart with two hands holding it—one on each side. A small crown rests on top of the heart.

The jewelry merchants in Belfast weren't sure what the symbols meant. They said vague things about hearts and love and romance. Then a book on Irish wedding traditions told us that originally, the ring was made of three parts: The bride comes to the altar wearing a gold band on her ring finger. On this gold band is a heart, supported on one side by a cupped hand. This symbolizes the offering of her whole heart in marriage.

The groom brings to the altar a second gold band, which he places on the bride's ring finger. This second band also has on it a hand, which then cups the other side of the heart. This symbolizes the giving of his whole heart to her in marriage. They are now of one heart. Then the priest would add a third thin band to the ring on the bride's finger. On this band is a golden crown which, when placed on the heart, symbolizes God's blessing on the marriage.

With their hands on either side of the heart, and God's crown on top of it, the marriage is like a triangle—she and he pledge to each other, and both pledge themselves to God. The crowning blessing is that God also pledges himself to them.

In a covenant marriage, both men and women individually draw moral and spiritual strength from God. Then they bless each other, their family, the Church, and society by sharing that strength with others, in ever-expanding, concentric circles of spiritual influence.

We have talked today about the moral and spiritual influence of women on men and men on women, not only in marriage but in all human relationships. The deepest wellspring that nourishes our sense of spiritual and moral direction, which gives us strength to help others, is God's influence on each of us individually. Each man and each woman is entitled to a direct relationship with Him, with no intermediary. Even in a marriage, the wife does not go through her husband to make contact with the Lord, nor does he go through his wife to make that contact. As the prophet Jacob taught, "The keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel; and he employeth no servant there" (2 Nephi 9:41).

As we individually draw closer to God, that relationship empowers us also to draw closer to and lift one another. Fed by the springs of His love, we can then be honestly afflicted in one another's afflictions. When that happens, we will perhaps sense in a new way what it means that the Savior was afflicted in our afflictions. By taking the burdens of others upon us, we are emulating at our level the great miracle by which He took our burdens upon Him. And the more our sacrifices approximate His, the better we will know Him.

Marie read the passage in which the Lord counseled one missionary regarding his companion, "Be you afflicted in all his afflictions." She and I first noticed this phrase while reading the scriptures together in Australia. I still remember how it lifted us when we looked through the concordance and found that Isaiah had used this same phrase in describing how Christ bore our afflictions: "In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he [bore] them, and carried them all the days of old" (Isaiah 63:9).

Sisters and brethren, when we bear one another's burdens, we are doing something Christlike, and we will thereby become more like Him.

I was thinking today that the first time I became aware of Marie Kartchner was in a BYU religion class called "Your Religious Problems." She was leading a class discussion on the religious issue that meant the most to her: "How can I follow the guidance of the Lord's Spirit in my life?" She has continued seeking the answer to

that question over all the years since that day. As I have tried to merge my heart with hers, I have felt the pulse of a heart attuned to sing His grace. And when those feelings come to me, I can only say with Shakespeare's Cordelia, "How shall I live and work to match thy goodness?" Surely "my life will be too short, and every measure fail me."³⁹

May God bless us, that His pure love will crown our marriages, our friendships, and our relationships of every kind, that our influence on each other will reflect his influence on us. I know the Savior lives. I know He loves us. This is His Church. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

¹ *Children's Songbook* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 111.

² Francis Fukuyama, "The Great Disruption," *Atlantic Monthly* 283 (May 1999): 55.

³ Patricia T. Holland, "With Your Face to the Son," in Jeffrey R. Holland and Patricia T. Holland, *On Earth As It Is in Heaven* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 85; see also Patricia T. Holland, "Many Things . . . One Thing," in *A Heritage of Faith: Talks Selected from the BYU Women's Conferences*, ed. Mary E. Stovall and Carol Cornwall Madsen (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 17.

⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1969), 287, 590; see also Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, *The Belonging Heart: The Atonement and Relationships with God and Family* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 255.

⁵ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, I, v, 16-17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, lines 41-50.

⁷ Victor Hugo, as cited by Jeffrey R. Holland, "Because She Is a Mother," *Ensign*, May 1997, 35.

⁸ Quoted in Kathleen S. and Howard M. Bahr, "Another Voice, Another Lens: Making a Place for Sacrifice in Family Theory and Family Process," Virginia F. Cutler Lecture, Brigham Young University, 13 November 1997.

⁹ Anne Summers, *The Colonization of Women in Australia* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books Australia Ltd., 1975, 1994), 70.

¹⁰ "Feminism's Identity Crisis," *Newsweek*, 31 March 1986, 58.

¹¹ First Presidency and Council of the Twelve, "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, November 1995, 102.

¹² Orania Papazoglou, "Despising Our Mothers, Despising Ourselves," *First Things* (January 1992): 11.

¹³ Richard Whitfield, "Sensitive Directions for Children's Moral Development," Presentation to World Congress of Families, Prague, Czech Republic, 20 March 1997.

[14](#) Personal communication with author.

[15](#) Leon Kass, "The End of Courtship," *Public Interest* (Winter 1997): 39.

[16](#) David Popenoe, "The Essential Father," in *Life Without Father* (The Free Press, 1996), 12 (manuscript version).

[17](#) David Popenoe, "The Case for Marriage and the Nuclear Family: A Biosocial Perspective," unpublished manuscript, 6.

[18](#) Quoted in Fukuyama, "Great Disruption," 72.

[19](#) Popenoe, "Essential Father," 25 (manuscript version).

[20](#) Popenoe, "Case for Marriage and the Nuclear Family," 6.

[21](#) Ibid.

[22](#) Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 125, 137-39.

[23](#) William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams, 5th ed., 2 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962), 2:1948.

[24](#) David Gutmann, "The Paternal Imperative," *The American Scholar* (Winter 1998): 118.

[25](#) First Presidency, "The Family: A Proclamation," 102.

[26](#) Gutmann, "Paternal Imperative," 118.

[27](#) Ibid.

[28](#) First Presidency, "The Family: A Proclamation," 102.

[29](#) Janette Hales Beckham, personal conversation with the author.

[30](#) Summers, *Colonization*, 355.

[31](#) Ibid., 337-53.

[32](#) Ibid., 354-57.

[33](#) Carol Gillian, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[34](#) Summers, *Colonization*, 46.

[35](#) Letter in possession of the authors.

[36](#) Letter in possession of the authors.

[37](#) Personal communication with the author.

[38](#) Letter in possession of the author.

[39](#) William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, IV, vii, 1-3.

