

“How Vast is Our Purpose”
Jean B. Bingham, Relief Society General President

This address was given Friday, May 5, 2017 at the BYU Women’s Conference
© 2017

by Brigham Young University Women’s Conference. All rights reserved

For further information write to:

BYU Women’s Conference

161 Harman Continuing Education Building

Provo, Utah 84602

801-422-7692

E-mail: womens_conference@byu.edu

Home page: <http://womensconference.byu.edu>

As you listened to the remarkable stories and testimonies of these wonderful sisters, as well as Sister Eubank’s inspired remarks at the opening session yesterday, many of you now feel a heart-to-heart connection with them. Their example and testimonies, full of faith and love and learning, have enriched our lives. As I began to get to know these two stellar women who are so capable and full of faith, I’ll be honest: I felt a bit intimidated. As those who know me well are aware, my story is quite “ordinary.” Growing up, although I enjoyed learning, I was not the top student in any class. I cannot boast of any expert skills: I play the piano, but only enough to stumble through a hymn. I love to visit art museums to see the paintings and sculptures by great masters, yet my artistic talents were limited to doodling designs in my notebooks. I learned to sew a wearable skirt, but tailoring a suit was definitely beyond my ability. Although I was blessed with good health and loved to run through the park or swim in the lake, I didn’t participate in school sports at any level. I was never asked to the prom, I wasn’t the president of anything, I was never one of the popular group, and one strikingly attractive friend said to me after scrutinizing my features, “Well, you’ll never be beautiful, but you could be cute.” In other words, I was just average.

Some of you may relate to these kinds of experiences, feeling that you are also “just average.” You don’t have to raise your hand, but have you ever felt ordinary, maybe even less than average? If you’re human—and particularly, a female human—you have probably experienced those times of self-doubt and discouragement that you are not all that you want to be.

And yet, even in my “ordinariness,” Heavenly Father saw value, and has helped me begin to develop the gifts and graces He knows will help me become all that

He has designed me to be. Know that your Heavenly Father will provide all that *you* need to become “extra”-ordinary as a daughter of God. The wonder of His heavenly economy is that every single one of us can be spectacular because of our unique bundle of talents and abilities. Unlike the world, in His kingdom there is no winner’s platform that only has room for one or two. *Each* of His daughters has been taught and prepared and gifted premortally with marvelous potential to become a queen in the celestial kingdom.

What do you want to accomplish in your life? What are your goals and aspirations? If your long-term goal is to enter the celestial kingdom to live with our Heavenly Parents and with loved family members forever, that singular focus will take you farther than you now think is possible. We are promised, “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man [or woman], the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.”¹

You have incredible potential for good because you are a covenant daughter of Heavenly Parents. The evidence of your inherent potential for greatness is the simple fact that you were born on the earth because you made the choice in the premortal world to accept Heavenly Father’s plan of salvation and to follow the example of His Son, Jesus Christ. And because Jesus Christ was willing to take upon himself the sins and infirmities²—or inadequacies—of each of us, and fulfilled that sacred trust through His Infinite Atonement, we can have every confidence that we can become all we were divinely designed to be. As we make and keep sacred covenants, we demonstrate our desire to fulfill that divine potential.

Answer this question: Do you think our Heavenly Parents want us to succeed? Yes! They want us to succeed gloriously! And do you think They will help us? Absolutely! We know that God’s “work and glory is to bring to pass the immortality”—which has already been accomplished through the Savior’s Atonement and resurrection— “and eternal life of man.”³ His goal is for every single one of us to return to our eternal Home, having increased the talents and gifts with which He blesses us through our obedience and perseverance during this mortal life. We know we cannot do this on our own, but through Heavenly Father’s love and the Savior’s grace, we can accomplish all that is required for exaltation.

That thought sustained me when I was called to this responsibility just a few weeks ago. Knowing that I do not have all the wisdom and ability to fulfill what will be required, I nevertheless take comfort and strength from the knowledge that God “has all wisdom, and all power, both in heaven and in earth,”⁴ and if we just try, just do our best, imperfect as that will be, the Lord will be “on our right hand and

on our left, and angels will bear us up.”⁵ All He requires is “the heart and a willing mind,”⁶ and as we are obedient to His commandments, we will be strengthened to accomplish all that is required in this life as well as for entrance into His kingdom in the life hereafter. That choice to become a disciple of Christ gives us the opportunity to wield a more-than-might-be-expected influence on those around us.

Sisters, every one of us has this same promise and potential. It matters not where we live, the makeup of our family, the size of our bank account, whether we are a world-class expert in some field, or how long we have been a member of the Church—we can each be a powerful influence for good. Living with integrity at home and in the community, using a gentle voice and kind words with a challenging child or difficult co-worker, demonstrating your standards by your modest way of dressing, reaching out of your comfort zone to become acquainted with those who live around you—there are many simple actions we can do that will influence others to also rise to a higher plane.

I recently read this statement by a woman leader of the Church. Who do you think said this: “Never have women had greater influence than in today’s world. Never have the doors of opportunity opened wider for them. This is an inviting, exciting, challenging, and demanding period of time for women. It is a time rich in rewards if we keep our balance, learn the true values of life, and wisely determine priorities.”⁷ That was Belle S. Spafford, in 1974, who was the general Relief Society president for over 30 years! Interestingly, her statement is just as true today.

So, what will we do with this time of great opportunity and challenge? “How vast *is* our purpose, how broad is our mission?”⁸

Those of you who are familiar with the history of the settlement of frontier areas around the world know that many towns began as haphazard gatherings of rough men who came to do business and find their fortunes. It wasn’t until women arrived in increasing numbers and insisted on establishing churches and schools and an orderly environment that real progress was made on what could be called civilized living. Elder D. Todd Christofferson explained this process and the reasons why: “From age immemorial, societies have relied on the moral force of women. While certainly not the only positive influence at work in society, the moral foundation provided by women has proved uniquely beneficial to the common good. Perhaps, because it is pervasive, this contribution of women is often underappreciated.... Women bring with them into the world a certain virtue, a divine gift that makes them adept at instilling such qualities as faith, courage, empathy, and refinement in relationships and in cultures.”⁹

Women are given gifts that allow them to see the details as well as the big picture, often at the same time. Discover those gifts and use them, dear sisters!

I remember President James E. Faust telling us in his rich yet humble voice, “You sisters do not know the full extent of your influence. You sisters enrich all of humanity.... Each woman brings her own separate, unique strengths to the family and the Church. Being a daughter of God means that if you seek it, you can find your true identity. You will know who you are. This will make you free—not free from restraints, but free from doubts, anxieties, or peer pressure. You will not need to worry, “Do I look all right?” “Do I sound OK?” “What do people think of me?” A conviction that you are a daughter of God gives you a feeling of comfort in your self-worth. It means that you can find strength in the balm of Christ. It will help you meet heartaches and challenges with faith and serenity.”¹⁰

So, who *are* we as Relief Society sisters? Although each woman is unique, there are feelings and divine gifts and experiences that we have in common which bind us together. We are daughters of our Heavenly Parents, who love us and want us to become like Them. We are full partners with the priesthood in the work of salvation—the saving of the souls of men and women—which is the focus of all our efforts. As sisters and brothers, we were given and accepted responsibilities in the premortal world for building the Kingdom of God on the earth. Speaking of the “great and noble ones” (that’s you!), “Even before they were born, they, with many others, received their first lessons in the world of spirits and were prepared to come forth in the due time of the Lord to labor in his vineyard for the salvation of the souls of men.”¹¹

As Emma Smith, the first Relief Society president phrased it in 1842, “We are going to do extraordinary things!”¹² You may not realize it yet, but Relief Society can help you accomplish extraordinary things.

What does Relief Society mean to *you*? As adult female members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, you and I belong to one of the oldest and largest women’s organizations in the world. With more than 7.1 million sisters around the globe, we have a bond that can be eternal.

Relief Society is more than a class on Sunday. “It is a divinely established sisterhood. It is a place of learning. It is an organization whose basic charter is caring for others as expressed in [our] motto, “Charity Never Faileth.... Relief Society provides a home away from [our] heavenly home, where [we] can fellowship with others who share [our] beliefs and values.”¹³ It is a safe place for sisters to bring their questions, and for those who are searching for identity and

purpose. It is a place that will help us blossom individually and improve collectively.

What does Relief Society mean to me? Relief Society has changed over the years—and has changed *me* over the years! To paraphrase, “it’s not just your grandma’s Relief Society.” When I left home to go to college, I automatically became a member of Relief Society. I gathered with other young women my age to learn the gospel and to serve others in an organized way. My first callings were as a Relief Society teacher and a visiting teacher. It was easy to knock on the door of an apartment in my complex and to chat with the girls who were of my similar age and circumstance.

Later, as a brand-new mother, I was called to teach Relief Society mother education classes. My circle was expanded as the women in my new ward accepted me with open hearts and provided great examples as role models of faithful sisters who valued motherhood and delighted in their role, as well as those who were pursuing education or were employed and established in a career. It was more challenging to visit teach because of the distances involved, but I was blessed to be visited by women who genuinely cared about me and showed me how to extend that love to other sisters who were in different stages of life than mine.

As a more mature (read “aging”) woman, my circle has been expanded yet again to include many younger than myself. Now I am the “experienced” one who can share my hard-earned insights as well as be invigorated by younger sisters who are enthusiastic about what lies ahead. Over the years, I have learned to be persistent in contacting less-active sisters whom I have been given to visit, and because of our common experiences as women, have found wonderful friends that have enriched my life. As I work to express the Savior’s love through serving them in ways that are meaningful to them, their hearts soften and they often become receptive to the Spirit.

There have also been bumps and challenges along the way. Not every interaction at Relief Society has been perfect. There have been women who were insensitive to my feelings, who didn’t respond to me in a Christ-like way, and on the other hand, I’m sure I have been the cause of unintended hurt to some of my sisters in the gospel. One experience was so painful that I wanted to move to another city to avoid any more trauma and drama! Yet each time, in remembering the example of our Savior, Jesus Christ, the “eyes of [my] understanding were opened,”¹⁴ and through His grace, I came to genuinely love and enjoy those sisters who had heretofore been difficult for me to appreciate. If you have had a less-than-comfortable experience at Relief Society, remember that we are all learning, so persist in loving your sisters.

And what do we *do* as Relief Society sisters? If you are familiar with the updated Relief Society purpose statement, you know that “Relief Society helps prepare women for the blessings of eternal life as they increase faith in Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ and His Atonement; [as they] strengthen individuals, families, and homes through ordinances and covenants; and [as they] work in unity to help those in need.”¹⁵

So, number one, we work to fulfill our divine potential. To do that, we “all work together”...to love, “to cheer and to bless in [the Savior’s] name.”¹⁶ We participate in the work of salvation, which includes member missionary work, convert retention, activation of less-active members, temple and family history work, and teaching the gospel¹⁷—all things which you are already doing. All baptized members of the Church, including children, participate in this work, which is accomplished with steady effort, a bit at a time, in the family and the workplace or school, the neighborhood and the community—anywhere and everywhere we have an influence.

And where and how do we do this work? As we put our arm around a shy sister at church, as we reach out to a young woman who is struggling, as we work to feed and clothe and teach a child on a daily basis, as we share what makes us happy about the restored gospel with our neighbor, as we mourn with someone who has lost a loved one, as we attend the temple at an inconvenient time, as we help a refugee navigate the bewildering array in a grocery store, as we expend effort in learning and developing our talents with the goal of being an instrument for the Lord, as we patiently tutor a new member who is learning to do family history, as we prepare to teach a Primary or seminary class—all of these actions and many more acts of simple but meaningful service are part of the work of salvation. That is our mission, and it truly is vast, but it *is doable* when we each do something—and keep at it!

For instance, a busy young mother in Arizona wondered what she could do to help a newly-arrived refugee family in her community in some small way. She soon learned that she could help furnish a few articles for their empty apartment. When she and her children visited the family to bring the articles, she realized that the mother had no purse to carry her personal items. And a woman needs a purse! She knew that she and many of her friends had extra purses that could be useful to these women, so she sent out a request on social media. That simple beginning has blossomed into a warehouse full of items needed by just-arriving families and has also become the means of providing many community members with a welcome opportunity to give of themselves, as well as created a sweet bond between these women of different faiths.

Sister Eliza R. Snow, the second general Relief Society president testified, “If any of the daughters and mothers in Israel are feeling in the least [limited] in their present spheres, they will now find ample scope for every power and capability for doing good with which they are most liberally endowed.”¹⁸

So, what “extraordinary thing” will you choose to do? Choose something according to your available time and resources. “Do not run faster or labor more than you have strength and means...but be diligent.”¹⁹ Whether your “work of salvation” is largely in the home at this time in life or your influence extends to a global scale, or somewhere in between, the Lord is pleased with your efforts when you are focused on serving God’s children and the eternal goal of returning to Him as a “new and improved” version of your spiritual self. As President Dieter F. Uchtdorf phrased it so succinctly, “Exaltation is our goal; discipleship is our journey.”²⁰

As we go forward in this journey of discipleship, may we each determine to reach out in small and simple ways that bless our families and others in “extraordinary” ways. May we treasure our relationships in this divinely designed organization, and come to know and follow Jesus Christ whose teachings and perfect example will lead us back to our Heavenly Father. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. 1 Corinthians 2:9
2. Alma 7:11-13
3. Mosiah 1:39
4. Mosiah 4:9
5. D&C 84:83
6. D&C 64:34
7. *A Woman’s Reach*, Belle S. Spafford, Deseret Book, 1974, pg 21
8. “As Sisters in Zion,” *Hymns*, 309
9. “The Moral Force of Women,” D. Todd Christofferson, GC October 2013
10. “Womanhood: The Highest Place of Honor,” James E. Faust, GC October 1999
11. D&C 138:55-56
12. *Daughters in My Kingdom*, p 14.
13. “Womanhood: The Highest Place of Honor,” James E. Faust, GC October 1999
14. D&C 110:1
15. *Handbook 2*, 9.1.1
16. “As Sisters in Zion,” *Hymns*, 309
17. *Handbook 2*, 5.1

18. *Daughters in My Kingdom*, p 44.

19. D&C 10:4

20. "It Works Wonderfully!," Dieter F. Uchtdorf, GC October 2015