

You and Your Essential Role Today

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By small and simple things are great things brought to pass.—Alma 37: 6

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My dear sisters, it is wonderful to be with you. Do you know how magnificent you are, and how much you add to this Church? I am grateful to be here with you and to consider together what our essential role is as members of this great Church and as sisters in the Relief Society.

I wonder if sometimes we underestimate how much influence we are having and how much difference each one of us can make in our homes, our families, our wards, our communities, and even the world. Important work is being done by sisters just like you and me. I know of a ninety-year-old woman who listened to the Spirit and knew that somehow, in spite of her blindness, she could make a difference; a ward Relief Society that found a way to help children they'll probably never meet; and a woman who, as she was following the example of the Savior, reached out and helped the one.

It is critical that we never forget the one. As President Gordon B. Hinckley has said, "We are becoming a great global society. But our interest and concern must always be with the individual. Every member of this church is an individual man or woman, boy or girl" (*Ensign*, May 1995, 52).

I learned this principle of the importance of the one as a mother. I spent many a spring and summer afternoon on the sidelines with other mothers visiting my way through baseball games. But whenever it was my son's turn at bat, I stopped visiting and paid close attention. It was his turn to shine, his opportunity to make a play, and in that moment the team depended on him. Sometimes he walked to first base, sometimes he struck out, sometimes he made a base hit, and once in a while he hit a home run. Each turn at bat gave him an opportunity to learn, make changes, and improve. Each turn gave him a new chance to make a difference in the game. His individual contribution was essential to the success of the team. His participation helped him grow. But each time he took his turn at bat, I held my

breath and hoped for the best.

Sisters, spiritually speaking, in the game of life it is our turn at bat. How we approach the plate, swing the bat, and follow the words of the coach will make all the difference in this final inning of the world. This is more than a game—it's a battle, and we must stretch our spiritual muscles if we are to contribute. The Lord wants us to help further His cause. We can do that better as we increase our faith in Jesus Christ through repentance, obedience, and sacrifice; as we learn to pray powerfully many times during the day; and as we recognize revelation and act on the impressions, which come from the Holy Ghost.

The Lord wants all of us to understand His word, which requires us to ponder the scriptures each day.

We can do better in how we treat each other. The time has passed for members of this organization to criticize, tear down, or complain about any other sister. If there are issues with someone, try to work it out. Recognize your part and repent; then forgive and forget. If we seek the Lord, He will help us. Each sister must feel free to share her unique spiritual gifts and abilities. As we serve each other with love and kindness, the gift of charity will spring to life. The important thing to remember is that the gospel unifies and provides a common base, and the Lord smiles down on us when there is unity of heart.

In other words, the time to practice is over, the game has begun, and we are each a vital member of the team. All of us have the opportunity to pick up our bats and get ready. No one else can do the job you or I were sent to do. We will move forward the work of Relief Society one sister at a time. In our general Relief Society meeting in September 1999, President Gordon B. Hinckley gave prophetic counsel to the women of the Church: "Each of you is a part of this vast enterprise, the Relief Society, a great family of sisters, more than four million strong. In your worldwide membership lies the power to accomplish incalculable good." He issued this challenge: "Rise up, O women of Zion, rise to the great challenge which faces you" (*Ensign*, November 1998, 97, 99).

Those words struck deep in my heart. As our prophet spoke to us, I had the profound feeling that he was asking us, the women of the Church, to magnify our role in a way we have never considered. As sure as Moroni waved the title of liberty to unite his people in battle (Alma 46:12–13), our prophet called each individual sister in Relief Society to take her place in the battlefield of the twenty-first century.

President Hinckley's plea was for us to realize that women of covenant are different from the women of the world. His hope that we are crucial to preserving the family was clearly given to us. He is confident that we can make a difference in the world and help prepare for the second coming of our Savior.

Perhaps you felt like I did—thrilled at the confidence he placed in us, yet frightened by the responsibility. I reflected on my paternal great-great-grandmother, Sarah Stoddard, who years ago made her own decision to be a woman of covenant. A short paragraph in her history tells us that the call to leave Nauvoo and travel west came just one month after she

had given birth to her sixth child. Clearly she was in no physical condition to make the difficult journey. The baby was new, and she had yet to regain her health and strength. I can see her in my mind, trying to decide between staying in her familiar and comfortable circumstances or once again walking away from earthly possessions and traveling with her husband and young children to a place the prophet had seen only in vision.

But decide she did. She packed their things and with her family began the trek west. I imagine her emotions as she turned for one last look at her home in Nauvoo and saw it in flames.

Her journey west did not last long. She died along the way. Five weeks later the baby died. And a short time after that, her husband died as well. The three are buried in a small gravesite in Montrose, Illinois. The five orphaned children alone continued to Salt Lake. My great-grandfather, Charles Henry Stoddard, was the eldest of the five remaining children.

Women of the world might say that my grandmother made the wrong decision. But women of covenant know she made the right one. She probably gave no thought to the power of her faithful example, but she laid the foundation of her testimony in my great-grandfather, who passed it to my grandmother, who passed it to my father, who then passed it to me. I only hope that I have been able to carry on the tradition and pass these seeds of faith to our children, who we hope will pass them on to theirs. Many blessings have flowed from Grandmother Stoddard's decision to follow a prophet.

So, what about you and me, we who are the pioneers of the next century? What will be written about us? Do we have a firm understanding of our role and mission as women who belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? I can almost hear you say, "Can I really make a difference? I am only one, and my contribution isn't great."

Sisters, I testify that each of you is part of the great work that President Hinckley envisioned. As each faithful sister quietly surrenders her will to the Lord, she becomes a pure vessel He can work through. Critical events in the world turn on very tiny hinges. Actions that may seem small and insignificant in the moment will reap eternal benefits. In Alma we are taught, "Now ye may suppose that this is foolishness in me; but behold I say unto you, that by small and simple things are great things brought to pass; and small means in many instances doth confound the wise" (Alma 37: 6).

Let me give you an example. Ammon was sent to the Lamanites to teach them the gospel. He became a servant to the king and was blessed by the Lord to earn the king's confidence. Ammon taught King Lamoni the plan of salvation and redemption. The king believed all his words and cried, "O Lord, have mercy; according to thy abundant mercy which thou hast had upon the people of Nephi" (Alma 18: 41). As he said these words, he fell to the ground as if dead.

The queen sent for Ammon and listened to his words. She was reassured that her husband was not dead; he was having a spiritual experience. She had great faith in the words

of the prophet Ammon. He exclaimed, "Blessed art thou because of thy exceeding faith; I say unto thee, woman, there has not been such great faith among all the people of the Nephites." When King Lamoni awoke and saw his queen, he stretched forth his hand and said, "Blessed be the name of God, and blessed art thou" (Alma 19:10, 12). With that, she too fell to the ground, as did the king again, Ammon, and all their servants.

Imagine the scene: the rulers of a nation perceived dead, a powerful prophet also stricken. What would you think?

In walked Abish, a woman, a humble servant, "having been converted unto the Lord for many years, . . . and never having made it known, therefore, when she saw that all the servants of Lamoni had fallen to the earth, and also her mistress, the queen, and the king, . . . she *knew* that it was the power of God" (Alma 19:16–17; emphasis added).

She was prompted to do a simple thing. She ran from house to house, telling the people what had happened. She knew that a miracle was in the making. A multitude soon arrived and witnessed a scene that changed their destiny. Abish took the queen by the hand that perhaps she might raise her from the ground; and as soon as she touched the queen's hand, the queen arose and stood upon her feet. The queen then took her husband by the hand. He arose with a new heart, and because of this experience, an entire nation became converted to the gospel (Alma 19:29–30).

Abish, our sister, in the right place, at the right time, listening and acting on the promptings of the Spirit, did incalculable good. And so can you and I.

I am grateful for the scriptures and the powerful influence they can have in our lives. Have you ever thought where you would be without them? Are you taking the time to feast upon the words of Christ? President Gordon B. Hinckley has said: "I love our scriptures. I love these wonderful volumes, which set forth the word of the Lord—given personally or through prophets—for the guidance of our Father's sons and daughters. I love to read the scriptures, and I try to do so consistently and repeatedly. I like to quote from them, for they give the voice of authority to that which I say. I do not claim distinction as a scholar of the scriptures. For me, the reading of the scriptures is not the pursuit of scholarship. Rather, it is a love affair with the word of the Lord and that of his prophets. They contain so much for each of us" ("Feasting upon the Scriptures," *Ensign*, December 1985, 44).

Think of your favorite passage of scripture. Perhaps it is Lehi's message of the tree of life, or Enos and his experience with prayer. Maybe you love to read about the birth of the Savior or His Sermon on the Mount. We are highly favored to have this instruction at our fingertips. I testify that we will draw closer to the Lord as we seek it. Along with reading ourselves, we can each encourage others in gospel literacy and learning.

There are many ways to study. Each of us has probably read 1 Nephi a hundred times. You know what happens; we resolve to read, and then we stop, so we start over again. We don't need to. We can pick up right where we left off; or we might want to change direction and study by topic or principle. If we need encouragement, we can find a friend

and study together—or even share thoughts over the phone or by e-mail. Let's share our feelings about what we read and make our talks and walks full of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Scripture study will bless our lives as we gain understanding of God's laws. Through our obedience to His commandments, we will increase in personal righteousness, which opens the door to the blessings of heaven. President Joseph F. Smith said: "God will honor those who honor him, and will remember those who remember him. He will uphold and sustain all those who sustain truth and are faithful . . . to the truth, now and forever" (Conference Report, April 1900, 50). In Romans we are told: "For as by one man's [or woman's] disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). Obedience to gospel principles is essential if we are to lead the women of the world to Jesus Christ. Our good example will make a critical difference in the lives of all we know. The Lord needs each one of us, and He is waiting for us to give ourselves to him. We do that by being obedient and submissive to His will.

C. S. Lewis suggests, "Christ says, 'Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours'" (*Mere Christianity* [New York: Macmillan, 1952], 167).

We are the women President Kimball was referring to when he said: "To be a righteous woman is a glorious thing in any age. To be a righteous woman during the winding up scenes on this earth, before the second coming of our Savior, is an especially noble calling. The righteous woman's strength and influence today can be tenfold what it might be in more tranquil times. She has been placed here to help to enrich, to protect, and to guard the home—which is society's basic and most noble institution" (*Ensign*, November 1978, 103).

We need to look frequently at the Proclamation on the Family. Our leaders have asked us to read and understand and speak out in defense of the family, as outlined by the First Presidency. Ponder the significant role you play in the success of your marriage, home, and even your extended family. Make your family an example of what the Lord intended families to be.

I know it isn't always easy to keep an eternal perspective as you run from the grocery store to ball games. It's hard to feel close to husbands when you divide just to conquer a Saturday full of activities. Some of us are single parents trying to fill both roles. Some of us are single and yearn for the problems I am speaking about. I am aware of the problems and difficulties that you face, and so is your Heavenly Father. I know how you feel because I've been there. But the more we focus on our problems, the bigger they will seem. Several years ago I was buried in laundry, dishes, and housework. I had six children in eight years. My husband was involved in demanding Church callings, and he was also building a business.

Those were the days of empty checkbooks and hand-me-down clothes. It was easy to get discouraged and feel that life was passing me by. I often wondered, "What about me? When is it my turn?" I felt a lot like a cartoon I recently saw in the paper:

A mother was standing over a sink full of dishes and talking on the phone while trying to fix a bottle for a crying baby who was hanging on one of her legs. A little child was holding a book, coaxing for a story while pulling on her mother's other leg. Another child had climbed a stool and with a glass in hand was begging for a drink. Her little girl was standing at the doorway of the kitchen pleading, "Can Emily come and stay with us? Her mommy works!"

One day I was visiting my mother, who was dying of cancer. I was feeling overwhelmed. I was torn between supporting my husband, caring for my young family, and spending time with my mother. My mother lifted my spirits as she said, "Aren't you blessed to have such beautiful children? Look at how healthy and strong they are. Aren't you blessed to have a husband who loves the Lord and serves Him?" Through her counsel, I recognized the need to appreciate what I had and even to repent. My focus shifted quickly as she quietly taught me that an attitude of gratitude can make the difference in how we feel about life. It is up to us to adjust to our situations and focus on solutions, not just on our problems.

I have found that a feeling of sincere gratitude invites peace. And one of the best ways I know to invite a spirit of gratitude into our hearts is to kneel in sincere prayer. Everyone of us can find something that we can be grateful for. The prophet Alma urged, "Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good; yea, and when thou liest down at night lie down unto the Lord, that he may watch over you in your sleep; and when thou risest in the morning let thy heart be full of thanks unto God; and if ye do these things, ye shall be lifted up at the last day" (Alma 37:37). Practicing an attitude of gratitude has lightened my burdens many times.

I learned another significant lesson during this time in my life. One night, after a long, discouraging day, I knelt in prayer and poured my heart out to my Heavenly Father. After I had rehearsed my plight, I closed my prayer and opened my mind and heart. I will never forget the clear message the Spirit sent me that night. I was told, "Forget yourself, and think of others."

The principle of service burned bright in my heart. I thought of the example of service the Savior set, and I had a desire to follow Him. I had been taught an important lesson. There is always someone who is suffering more than we are, if we will just take a minute to think about it

Mother Teresa tells this story: "One night a man came to our house and told me, 'There is a family with eight children. They have not eaten for days.' I took some food with me and went.

"When I came to that family, I saw the faces of those little children disfigured by

hunger. There was no sorrow or sadness in their faces, just the deep pain of hunger.

"I gave the rice to the mother. She divided the rice in two, and went out, carrying half the rice. When she came back, I asked her, 'Where did you go?' She gave me this simple answer, 'To my neighbors—they are hungry also!'

". . . I was not surprised that she gave, because poor people are really very generous. But I was surprised that she knew they were hungry. As a rule, when we are suffering, we are so focused on ourselves we have no time for others. This woman showed something of the truly generous love of Christ" (*A Life for God: The Mother Teresa Reader*, comp. LaVonne Neff [Ann Arbor, Mich.:Servant Publications, 1995], 82).

All the women of the Relief Society can set important examples of devoted service. Let me share one story. I recently spoke at a meeting after which I met and visited with a lovely woman. She said, "Sister Smoot, I am here because of a wonderful Relief Society president who played an essential role in the lives of my family. My mother had a nervous breakdown and spent my growing-up years in a hospital. "My father was trying to raise us and provide for us at the same time, and it was not easy. This dear Relief Society president always sent a loaf of bread across the street every time she baked. When she bottled fruit, she would send ten quarts to us. She often came over while we were away and cleaned our house. We were not members of the Church. None of us joined the Church while she was alive. I hope she knows that through her example all four of us children are now active members of the Church because of her example and service."

That Relief Society sister probably never saw the fruits of her labor in this life—just as my great-great-grandmother did not. But charity never faileth, and its influence can span generations. Think of the good that will pass from one generation to the next because a Relief Society sister cared about a family in need. And we can follow her example.

You may be thinking to yourself, *How can I know what the Lord would have me do for Him?* Elder Henry B. Eyring said, "You could, this moment, begin to think of those for whom you bear responsibility. If you do, and do it with the intent to serve them, a face or name will come to you. If you do something today and make some attempt to help that person come unto Christ, I cannot promise you a miracle, but I can promise you this: you will feel the influence of the Holy Ghost helping you; and you will feel approval. You will know that, for at least those minutes, the power of the Holy Ghost was with you" (*To Draw Closer to God* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997], 50).

May I invite you to take the next few seconds, no matter where you are, and offer a prayer. Think for a moment who in your neighborhood the Lord would be the first to visit. I imagine it would be one who has suffered a setback, a disappointment, or a physical struggle. Think about who you could help.

Now, if you saw a face or thought of a name, would you offer another prayer and ask our Heavenly Father what He specifically wants you to do for that person? Write it down.

Would you be willing in the next week to act upon your promptings?

Can you begin to see the acts of charity flow? One act will follow another, and then another, until we will be unable to count them.

This is my relief and my society. This is welfare and compassionate service. It is visiting teaching and fellowshipping. It is retention and attention. It's becoming involved in a cause larger than ourselves. Our hearts will change, as did those of King Lamoni and his queen, because the Holy Ghost will lead us to higher ground. We will be united in our efforts to lift and lead and love others into the fold of Jesus Christ. It is taking our turn at bat and hitting a home run.

Not long ago I received a letter from a sister who shared this experience with me: "One of the most difficult times in my life came shortly after my husband and I were married. Our little family had been blessed with three beautiful and healthy children, but I struggled to regain my health. I experienced many days of discomfort and discouragement. It was on one such day that my doorbell rang early in the morning, and there stood the small, round, elderly woman who lived across the street. She was a convert from Kentucky and was living in a basement with her daughter. Although her own health wasn't good and she had received no specific assignment, she stood on my doorstep that morning and simply said, 'I've come to rock the baby.' She took my tiny new son from my arms and told me to go back to bed. She assured me that all would be well with my little ones. I protested for about thirty seconds and then crawled back in bed and slept like a baby myself. Her simple help was a powerful blessing to a young mother. Her quiet service made a lasting impression on me."

Several years later, this same woman moved into another area. She said, "One day my phone rang, and it was one of the sisters in my neighborhood. She explained that she had just received word that her father was in the hospital. It was serious. Could I come and tend her children? It was in the middle of my busy life, but I placed my tasks aside and went to her home. I rang her doorbell, and as she placed her new little son in my arms, I thought, *I came to rock the baby*. It felt wonderful, and I was grateful to be entrusted with the care of her children, as a loving grandfather passed from this life to the next."

Simple things have the potential to give power to our lives. As we serve others, we are serving our Savior, for "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40). As we move into a new millennial era, I, like President Gordon B. Hinckley, have a vision of the incalculable good we can do:

I see us as excellent visiting teachers, lifting our sisters through word and example.

I see sisters enjoying Homemaking meetings as they enrich friendships and learn gospel principles and practical skills.

I see sisters on Sunday with scriptures and hearts open to the good word of the

gospel, sisters who are willing to obey, repent, and improve.

I see sisters fasting and praying for each other.

I see sisters who center their lives on firm testimonies of Jesus Christ and His restored gospel.

I see sisters who receive guidance from the Holy Ghost.

I see sisters learning and teaching the gospel literacy program, instilling in many the desire to read and study and learn.

I see sisters in homes that have become havens where prayer is practiced, scriptures are read, kindness is expected, and unity prevails.

I see sisters involved in family history and genealogy.

I see sisters, dressed in white, walking the peaceful halls of sacred, holy temples.

I see sisters working in unity in presidencies and with the priesthood—sisters who remember the Savior's warning against contention: "If ye are not one ye are not mine" (D&C 38:27).

I see sisters setting family values and creating homes of wondrous upbringing—families reclaiming family home evening from simple activities to teaching moments.

I see sisters having fun together, laughing at their own mistakes, taking time to smell the roses and enjoying life.

I see sisters flooding the earth with quiet acts of charity as they write notes of encouragement, check on neighbors, and listen to children.

I see sisters with an "eye single to the glory of God"(D&C 4:5).

I see sisters daily serving their family, immediate and extended, remembering the routine things they do each day are essential.

I see sisters focusing as leaders on bringing women and their families to Christ.

In other words, I see you!

We don't need to worry about what history will write about us. We will let our quiet works speak for themselves. But I promise you there will be those whose lives you touch in simple moments who will tell others about you. And they will wonder, "How did she ever do it? How did her faith become so strong? I wonder what I would have done if her challenge had been mine?" Those who follow our generation will testify that we took the

torch of obedience and brought it flaming brightly to them. We made the most of our turn at bat!

Elder Boyd K. Packer has urged us to "rally to the cause of Relief Society! Strengthen it! Attend it! Devote yourselves to it! Enlist the less active in it, and bring the nonmember sisters under the influence of it. It is time now to unite in this worldwide circle of sisters. A strong, well-organized Relief Society is crucial to the future, to the safety of this Church.

"We now move cautiously into the darkening mists of the future. We hear the ominous rumbling of the gathering storm. The narrow places of the past have been a preliminary and a preparatory testing. The issue of this dispensation now is revealed before us. It touches the life of every sister. We do not tremble in fear—*for you hold in your gentle hands the light of righteousness*. It blesses the brethren and nourishes our children" (*Ensign*, November 1980, 111; emphasis added).

I pray that we may catch the vision that President Hinckley and President Packer have for the women of Relief Society. I testify that each of us in our individual roles is essential if we are to accomplish the work that lies before us. May you feel the love that our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ have for each of you. I testify that they live and that they love us. And as we catch the vision of our essential role today, by small and simple things great things will be brought to pass.