

# WOMEN IN *DIALOGUE*: A RETROSPECTIVE

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I am very happy to see the publication of a new issue of *Dialogue* edited by *Exponent II* women. I have had dealings with both publications for more than forty years and know the positive influence that both of them have exercised. I am a prime example of how the two institutions have encouraged writing. I would probably never have done any writing without them.

I was not a precocious child who wrote little poems and stories praised by her parents and teachers. I had no idea of ever writing a thing. I did graduate from Wellesley College, in maternity clothes, and I completed a master's degree in English literature at Brigham Young University when my husband Richard had his first job there, but that was mostly so that I would have something to think about while doing household chores. My professors let me know that a faculty wife with little children was not a real student and so was out of place. The education was valuable, but it did not make me feel like an adult who had something to say. What happened was that I later moved into circumstances largely created by *Dialogue* and *Exponent II* that required me to write. And so I have written.

It was almost fifty years ago that a handful of Mormon ladies began to gather in greater Boston to discuss their lives. Many were student-wives engaged in menial and messy labor while their husbands explored big ideas and contemplated privileged futures. We all had much to say and said it over many times while nursing babies with toddlers crawling over our feet. We found great comfort in our mutual understanding and began to work together on various group projects.

On one occasion long ago, Gene England, the co-founder of *Dialogue* along with the late Wes Johnson and Frances Menlove, was coming to Cambridge, where we were then living. He was a family friend, not a colleague in any way, but I had had an inspiration that I was determined to act upon. And summoning such strength as I could muster, I told him that we had an underemployed group of smart women who worked well together and that I thought we could put together a women-authored and women-focused issue of *Dialogue*. And in one of his great roles as encourager, Gene, with no hesitation, told us to go ahead and do it. There were no questions as to our qualifications or intentions, no request for an outline of our plans. We were to go ahead and see what we could do. That would have been in 1969 or so. Our pink women's issue of *Dialogue* was published in 1971.

I had several such experiences with him. One time he called and asked me to write an introduction to a section of the reader's edition of the Book of Mormon he was planning to publish in seven small-boxed volumes. I was appalled. By then I had done a little writing, but I was no religious scholar. I shamefacedly admitted that I didn't know anything about the scriptures. I had grown up pre-seminary. I said I'd get Richard. Gene just laughed and laughed and said he wanted me to do it. I said I had nothing to say. He told me that I had to do it. So with heavy heart, I began to read the proposed scriptures. I read them and read them and eventually found out that I did have something to say. I eventually discovered that if I just kept reading material and thinking about it that I would always have something to say. Such was his power. Those little books were eventually published in 2008, after his death.

That was the spirit of Gene and of *Dialogue*: Go ahead. You can do it. As I was not a writer at all, I asked Laurel Ulrich, who was a writer and already a published one, to co-edit with me. She had moved to New Hampshire by then and was living a new life there, but she still came south to Boston often for meetings, and we had a steady email

correspondence. She wrote one of the articles for our issue. I suffered through writing the introduction and it was all I could do, but I was finally satisfied with it. Laurel later said I should have written an article too, but I had nothing more to say then. And so it went with our pink issue. We really did not know what we were doing. We requested articles from some people, looked through other submissions, discussed what articles we wanted to see, and hunted for people to write them. We gradually came on other things of interest through conversations and recommendations and gathered them in. We discussed all of this at our meetings, getting support for some pieces, deciding against others, and very gradually finding our way to involve and encourage the members of our group. At the close of the issue we listed twenty-eight contributors along with another eight members of our group “who made significant contributions.” Three of the contributors were men. Leonard Arrington was a major contributor with a nice article about pioneer women. He had long been a supporter of ours—I might say our first and most helpful supporter. Gene and Leonard made a big difference in my life, especially my life as a writer.

At early meetings of the MHA, the Mormon History Association, the organizers met informally afterhours to talk about plans, trends, and whatever. During one of these late-night sessions my husband Richard told Leonard that our group of Mormon women was involved in some novel projects, one of which was to edit a woman’s issue of *Dialogue*. Leonard found that interesting, asked some questions, and wrote about the conversation in his omnipresent journal. Richard told me about this conversation on his return home, and in a day or so I received a long letter from Leonard, the great man himself. He said how delighted he was to hear of our work and how important he thought Mormon women’s lives were and offered his help and that of his staff for whatever needs we had. It may have been on that occasion that he offered us the article that became “Blessed Damozels: Women in Mormon History,” which introduced us to those early educators, the

Cook sisters, to Louisa Lula Greene, Ellis Shipp, and Martha Hughes Cannon. I remember group discussions about whether we should “allow” any men into the issue, but when Leonard Arrington offered us his “Blessed Damozels,” we quickly decided to take it.

The other two men were Richard Cracroft and A. Laurence Lyon, two professors who wrote learned reviews of Carol Lynn Pearson’s successful musical *The Order is Love*, based on the historical LDS practice of the United Order in the 1880s.<sup>1</sup> I don’t remember how we came to have those reviews. I expect that they were originally solicited from the authors by the *Dialogue* editors and then offered to us as being suitable for our issue because of Carol Lynn’s status as the preeminent female LDS playwright.

It should be said that considerable time elapsed between Gene’s invitation to us to create a women’s issue and when we submitted the material to the new editorial board. We were very surprised to discover that they were disappointed with the material that we submitted. I recall that they did acknowledge that we had covered a large area of women’s activities, talents, history, and so on, but they regretted that we had not dealt with the “real” Mormon women’s issues. When we asked what those were, we were told: patriarchy and polygamy. This came as a surprise to our women’s group. Patriarchy and polygamy were certainly important historical issues, but they were not our issues. And was it not rather presumptuous for them to tell us what our issues were? Were we pitiful young Mormon women not allowed to have our own issues but required to inherit them from scholars who knew better than we did? There was some doubt about whether our material was acceptable,

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1. Richard Cracroft, “Fiddlin’ Around in Orderville, or, A Mormon on the Roof,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1971): 118–22; A. Laurence Lyon, “Lyrics and Love in Orderville,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1971): 122–23.

but the journal did reluctantly publish our articles as submitted in the summer issue in 1971, almost fifty years ago.

In fairness I should say that our group decided that if the *Dialogue* people thought that patriarchy and polygamy were the most pressing issues, maybe we should learn more about them. And with that spur we began a group study of Mormon women of the past. We chose topics and began to do research at the Boston Public Library. Susan Kohler drew our attention to the *Woman's Exponent*, the pioneer women's publication published from 1872–1914 and archived at Harvard's library. Invited by Cambridge Institute director Steve Gilliland to teach a class on Mormon women for the Institute, our group divided up topics, prepared and delivered lectures. We eventually turned those lectures into a book, *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah*, with plenty of information on patriarchy and polygamy. Down the line, those same women began publishing *Exponent II*. That series of events and activities created lifelong friendships and connections. We worked together. We made somethings out of nothing. We did things we didn't think we could do. We discovered that what was required was an idea. If someone could actually verbalize it, we could probably do it.

I've reread that pink issue on this occasion to see what was there, noticing first the remarkable, later called subversive, illustrations of Carolyn Durham Peters, whose work enriched *A Beginner's Boston*, *Exponent II*, and the pink issue of *Dialogue*. For this issue she set many nifty quotations as headpieces for the articles. Her frequently reprised drawing of the tree of knowledge with a low-hanging apple is seen throughout. Her wonderful full-page drawing titled "The Women's Movement: Liberation or Deception?" featuring the appled tree but now with a fork-tongued serpent named Liberation, showing alternative possibilities to the title's question, should be reproduced and worked in cross-stitch. The full-page board game, "The Find-The-Straight-&-Narrow-Path Game, FOR WOMEN PLAYERS ONLY," shows the way

to meaning and fulfillment and the many hurdles that hinder women's way.

It is worth noting that the final lines of my letter from the editor in that issue of *Dialogue* are, "Women have always been valued in the Church but not encouraged to say much. We hope that now and in the future more ladies will speak out and, what is more, be heard."<sup>2</sup> That was in 1971. I hoped then that we were on the cusp of much female expression, yet the Church still has a relatively quiet group of ladies. Evidence of this is a talk that President Russell Nelson, in his conference talk of October 2015, forty-five years later, while yet an apostle, felt inspired to urge women of the Church to "speak up and speak out."<sup>3</sup> Did he really mean it? I don't hear this message from others or see it in action. Yet, this current women's *Dialogue* issue forthrightly calls for articles about "Women Claiming Power." I notice that this audacious description is based in the present, describing contemporary action rather than looking to the past as in "Women Who Have Claimed Power." But while it's not "Women Exercising Power," at least it isn't "Women Who Had Hoped to Have Claimed Power" or "Women! Claim Power!" We hope to see some ongoing pioneer action here, even as we know that many women still feel helpless and hopeless in very limited spheres.

Maybe it was to be expected that the major articles we put in the pink *Dialogue* issue in 1971 dealt with potential relationships, marital relationships, and motherhood. I don't remember it as a conscious

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2. Claudia Lauper Bushman, "Women in Dialogue: An Introduction," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1971): 8.

3. Russell M. Nelson, "A Plea to My Sisters," Oct. 2015, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2015/10/a-plea-to-my-sisters?lang=eng>.

decision. It was just the way things were. Maybe as an unconscious defensive measure, we began our pink issue with our most conservative article, Jaroldeen Asplund Edwards's rapturously positive account of her happy family life with eleven children.<sup>4</sup> And I know from experience that she spoke true. In addition, we had articles about blended families, the complexities of attending graduate school with young children, a mother's decision of whether to work outside the home, and the Church leadership advice of the time to have as many children as possible. We talked around the edges of power but did not have the audacity to claim it.

There is a lot of other good stuff in that pink issue: pictures, poetry, and personal voices. We sought out and included a lot of women's ideas and attitudes, including composite articles in some subjects, such as one compiled by Shirley Gee on housekeeping, entitled "Dirt."<sup>5</sup> We thought we were being very diverse, but much of what we gathered was centered around the household.

By contrast the materials in the new women's *Dialogue* focus outside the dwelling place and beyond the basic family group. The plan of the current editors is to explore women's reaching out and "claiming power" beyond the home in such diverse directions as at church, where they seek to redefine their roles; in society, where they now exercise some key leadership roles; in the greater global world, where they explore the accomplishments of women in different societies; in the artistic world, where *Exponent II* has been a profound encourager of art; and wherever women explore concepts of Heavenly Mother, creating

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4. Jaroldeen Asplund Edwards, "Full House," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1971): 9–13.

5. Shirley Gee, comp., "Dirt: A Compendium of Household Wisdom," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1971): 84–87.

accepted doctrine as they go. Will the editors and contributors be able to create and describe this new world? Will women's roles continue to expand in the Church as well as in society? Will this issue be descriptive of the current role of Latter-day Saint women in the world? Will it encourage others to break new ground? Let's revisit these questions in 2070.

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