

THE BLESSING I TOOK

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I never wanted a son.

I feel the heavy ugliness of those words like rough stones in my hands, taste them like shame on my tongue. Children have always been alien creatures to me, even when I was a child myself, and boy children, especially, have proven foreign and unrelatable. Beyond the stereotypes of short attention spans and impulsive violence and general unwieldiness, I felt an added uneasiness shrouding the potentiality of bearing a son someday like a layer of fine spiderwebs, an uneasiness that I would resent him for the privilege he would inherit, particularly in the Church. Opportunities and experiences I had secretly longed for would be handed to him when he was still a child, his maleness the only real cost of admission, and I harbored a deep insecurity that he would gradually lose respect for me when he realized his place relative to mine in the institutional hierarchy, his eagerness for my opinion slowly ebbing like the tide going out.



I found out I was pregnant when what I thought was the three-day flu I'd caught from my husband lasted for two weeks. When I learned my baby was a boy, I wrestled with the idea of him and, sometimes, literally wrestled his body with my hands when his elbows or bottom protruded at uncomfortable angles, playing a game of abdominal whack-a-mole. As the fog of malaise finally lifted a few weeks after I entered my second trimester, I tried to consciously create space for my son in my heart and my future the way my body was creating space for him in my womb, but I couldn't wrap my mind around him, couldn't claw my way through the smooth cocoon of denial that enveloped me.

After our son was born, we settled into the familiar grind of the newborn routine. It always takes me by surprise, the bond I form with my children, but this time, especially, the fierceness of the love I felt for my son was completely unexpected. It was a relief that this most basic of evolutionary developments had been activated in my DNA, as though all of the foremothers I carried in my genetic code had turned a key and wrought this miracle.



When my daughters were blessed in church, two and four and a half years before, they each wore the long lacy gown I'd been blessed in as a baby. My husband had carried them to the front of the chapel, accompanied by a suited coterie of friends and family members who encircled our baby in a formal but welcoming embrace. A small part of me would have liked to be part of that sacred circle, but I was content to allow my husband this special moment with our babies.

But as I envisioned my son's future milestones in my mind—being baptized at eight, ordained at twelve, increasing in priesthood office through his teens, set apart to be a missionary—I saw myself on the periphery: an observer, supportive but mute, while my husband and other men pronounced blessings and bestowed keys.

My son's baby blessing was the one chance I had to physically be with him—central, united—for an ordinance milestone. I can't fully explain why holding my son during his blessing was suddenly so important to me, why I felt such a deep and driving need to be more than just an observer and claim my authority as his mother, but the idea grew roots and branches and I felt in my bones that my son and I were to experience this ritual as we had weathered his birth: together.

When our son was two weeks old, my husband called our bishop to schedule the blessing in our home and to clear my plans to hold my son during the blessing. I looked up baby blessing guidelines in the Church handbook and read that “only Melchizedek Priesthood holders

may participate in naming and blessing children,”¹ but I would not be participating in the way the men were, hand to shoulder, channeling power and priesthood through a completed circuit. I would merely be a chair, a lightning rod at the circle’s center. Passive furniture, not active participant. The handbook also stated that “leaders should make every reasonable effort to avoid embarrassment or offense to individuals or families,”² and I could think of nothing more reasonable than granting a mother’s request to hold her infant while he was blessed in their home.

I listened to my husband’s half of the conversation as he spoke with the bishop on the phone, heard the silence on both ends of the line when my husband said, “Lindsay wants to hold the baby during the blessing.”

“Because she wants to be part of it. Because it’s meaningful to her.”

“She doesn’t think she holds the priesthood. No, she won’t speak or participate in the actual blessing.”

“Because she wants this to be something we do together.”

After several minutes of repeating himself, my husband hung up the phone and turned to me. “The bishop was completely bewildered as to why you’d want to, and he’s never heard of anyone doing it before, but he finally said he could not think of a reason you couldn’t hold the baby.”

I was nursing my son in the rocking chair in our room, and I clasped his small body more tightly to my chest to stop the shaking in my hands as I came down from a confrontation-by-proxy-fueled adrenaline high. I felt relieved but also somewhat upset at the line of invasive and insulting questioning my husband had endured on my behalf. It seemed such a small, benign request, the tiniest adjustment to the status quo, but even the asking was perceived as a threat.

1. *Handbook 2: Administering the Church*, 20.2.1, available at https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/handbook-2-administering-the-church/priesthood-ordinances-and-blessings/priesthood-ordinances-and-blessings?lang=eng#title_number9.

2. *Ibid.*

The bishop called my husband the next day and told him he'd changed his mind, that he'd read through the handbook and determined that my holding my son would qualify as "participating" in the blessing.

We decided to put the blessing plans on hold.



Two months later, we got a new bishop. I was still raw from our previous attempt to schedule the baby blessing, so I didn't broach the topic again until my son was five months old. With my husband's support, I decided that this time, we would not ask permission. I would never again put myself in the position of asking for permission to perform an act that was mine by right and place a man between me and my own authority.

After sacrament meeting on the day of the blessing, I approached the counselor from the bishopric who would be attending the ordinance at our home that evening. I thanked him for taking time to join us, told him what time we'd be expecting him and who would be in attendance, and then said, "And just so you're aware, I'll be holding my son during his blessing."

"You can't do that," he said. His response was immediate, a reflex.

I drew a deep, silent breath and felt for the slim iron rod of resolve I'd cast over months of thought and prayer. "I'm not asking," I told him, my tone amicable but firm. "I'm telling you that this is what I'm going to do. If you're uncomfortable and would rather not participate, we'll do it on our own."

"We can't have you doing that, either," he said, and beyond his indulgent half-smile, I saw the flicker of panic in his eyes, the shifting of his body slightly back from mine, the incline of his chin.

"I will not ask for permission to hold my own child," I told him. "I am claiming my authority as my son's mother."

As we went back and forth, I marveled at the authority in my voice, the calm of my demeanor, the lack of contention. The encounter was awkward in the way that all disagreements are awkward, and it was

uncomfortable to fight my conditioning to acquiesce to Church leaders, but I had none of the distress I normally experienced when an authority figure told me no. The peace I felt was cool water for my budding testimony that these men only had the power over me that I chose to give them.

Finally, the counselor said he understood where I was coming from but wanted to run things past the bishop, who was out of town. I said that would be fine and reiterated that since a baby blessing is not a saving ordinance, I had no problem with keeping our son's blessing a family affair and not having it recorded on Church records.

Later that afternoon as we ate dinner with our guests, the bishop left me a voicemail. He said he'd called the stake president who then called the Area Seventy, and all three of them agreed that I could not hold my baby while he was blessed. He said we could proceed with the blessing in the prescribed manner or we could reschedule it for a different time. A moment from my conversation with the bishopric member earlier that day surfaced in my mind: when I had explained my understanding of the handbook's guidelines, he had said, "But it just isn't done this way." "Why?" I'd countered. "Do you think that my touch will invalidate the blessing?" He had said "Of course not" and spluttered at the ridiculousness of such an idea, but now I found myself wondering whether my question had been so ridiculous after all. What other reason could men or God possibly have for not allowing a mother to hold her baby while a blessing was given?

I texted my bishop and thanked him for going up the chain for me. I asked him to contact the counselor and inform him that we wouldn't need him to come by after all.

We blessed our son in our home as planned with our fathers and my husband's uncle and cousin participating and our mothers, my grandmother, and my husband's aunt unofficial witnesses. I, somewhere in the space between participant and witness, held my son in the center of the circle.

Because I touched his skin, held his body while he was blessed, the Church does not recognize my son's blessing as valid.



I wish that I could report that the experience of standing up to authority and holding my son during his blessing was empowering, that I felt strong and victorious while playing this smallest of roles in my son's ordinance. The truth, though, is that it was awkward: advocating for myself with my bishopric was violating and uncomfortable, my husband's uncle challenged our holding the blessing without a member of the bishopric present, and I didn't know exactly how to hold my baby to allow access to the men blessing him, so their hands perched awkwardly on his small head, their arms positioned directly in front of my face. My husband was flustered by the change in procedure, and he fumbled over the words he'd rehearsed, his speech flowing faster than his brain could finish forming the sentences. My stomach was in knots all that afternoon and long into the evening after our guests had left, and I shook with my own audaciousness, the hugeness of openly defying the men to whom I'd unquestioningly given a lifetime of obedience.

The next day, I woke up feeling sick that things hadn't gone as smoothly as I'd hoped and guilty for not telling our family members that the blessing was unauthorized. In an ideal situation, I would have explained. I would have gotten informed consent before making anyone party to an off-the-books ordinance. But we found out so shortly before we were scheduled to begin, and I was exhausted, barely able to balance my own anxieties about the broken protocols and incapable of stacking borrowed insecurities on top of my already teetering load.



When boys in the Church are given new stewardships and responsibilities, they are provided with instruction, mentoring, and training. There

is skyscraper-sized scaffolding built around boys and their roles and development: there are entire sections of scripture and temple liturgy that teach them what it means to hold the priesthood, what their spiritual and hierarchical progression looks like, even what some of their future responsibilities as gods will entail. Boys receive detailed instructions in handbooks and pamphlets and manuals spelling out everything from how to perform and where to put hands during each ordinance to how to dedicate a grave and properly consecrate oil. There are also unofficial responsibilities given to boys to groom them for leadership from an early age: the rotation of deacons who sit on the stand next to the bishopric as the “bishop’s messenger” during sacrament meeting each week, the eleven- to fifteen-year-old boys who pass the sacrament despite the scriptures specifying that only priests are to administer it, the young men who are assigned to be ushers during stake conferences and guard the doors during the sacrament, the priests whose class meets in the bishop’s office, very often with the bishop himself in attendance. There is none of this scaffolding or leadership grooming in place for girls. Specifics about women’s roles in the church and in the eternities are nearly completely absent from scripture and temple scripts. Girls are not trained how to perform ordinances, are not given authority, are not mentored to lead adults and mixed-gender groups, are not provided with standardized institutional opportunities to serve the entire congregation in visible, meaningful ways.

How, then, are women to claim authority in the Mormon context? I know several women who have agitated for and been granted permission to hold their babies during blessings or have written and read their own blessing for their child. Other women participate in blessings of comfort or healing with their husbands by laying their hands with his on their children’s heads. Though it now operates mostly underground, there is a long tradition of Mormon women blessing each other, and I have stood in those circles and received instruction from other women about where to place my hands, what to say in the absence of a

priesthood script, how to claim access to inspiration and God's power. When a woman sets out to perform any of these small but vital deeds, enacted with shards of authority chipped from the jealously guarded territory of the priesthood, each subversive act is a grain of rice that tips the scales the slightest bit closer from "taboo" to "normal." Like me, most women who venture beyond the borders of commonly accepted practices experience uncertainty and insecurity akin to performing a dance without having been taught the steps.

This willingness to embrace awkwardness is what differentiates the trailblazers from those who come after and walk in their footsteps, what separates the improvisers from the rulebook followers, what divides the demonstrators from the couch sitters. It is both the cost and the reward of forging new paths that others may follow.



My son is nearly three now. He has thick tangerine-colored hair, bright blue eyes, an impish grin, the roundest cheeks. I still worry about raising a boy, worry that he won't recognize his privilege or use his influence to help the marginalized, worry about the difference in opportunity between him and my daughters in the Church. But the tide is coming in, and with it, an armada of women ready to claim their own authority, trusting that the power of God is as abundant as seashells scattered on the shore.

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