

EXPECTATIONS AND FULFILLMENT: CHANGING ROLES IN MARRIAGES

Chase Peterson

Mormons have a deep spiritual belief in the validity of joy. While sorrow and frustration are accepted features of all lives, we believe that in partnership with God's spirit and plan we can minimize sorrow and maximize joy, here and now and eternally. Not only is this pursuit possible, it is obligatory. Passivity, aimlessness, acceptance are not our character. Eternal progression is.

Purpose, growth, and fulfillment are attributes of joy. These qualities find expression in private and personal terms as well as in social and public ones. Social roles are often better understood because of the need society has to perpetuate itself. They are better advertised. Common law prohibition of self-maiming stems historically from the need of the social order for able soldiers, not from its concern for an individual's pain or damaged foot. Yet both private and social roles must be recognized, and where possible their potential synergism encouraged. The example of our present problems with culturally underprivileged minorities illustrates this need. Social values and personal values must, and can only, rise together. However, there are times in a life when a personal role is in conflict with one's apparent social role. At other times circumstances dictate changes in social roles which require personal strength and flexibility that are not always ready for the challenge.

In recent years, one example of such conflict has been well publicized. It is the problem of the "empty nest," the adjustment problems associated with the departure of grown children from the parents' home. For reasons which must be considered obvious, most people respond to marriage and reproduction intuitively and derive great satisfaction from its practice and the partnership with God it implies. But with departure of children, problems are created and exposed which demand serious attention. Because of our special and intense concern with the vitality of the family unit, these problems have special concern for Latter-day Saints.

RETIRING AT FORTY-FIVE

The good mother faces an unusual paradox. The better she has raised her

children, the more likely she is to be relieved of their responsibility. The apron string is cut. She is "fired" because of her competence at a time when her husband gains added responsibility in his employment in proportion to his ability. With or without great success, there is a natural time limit to her mothering profession. This retirement at age forty-five to fifty-five is ten to twenty years before her husband's, often before she would choose it, and very often at a time when her husband is at the peak of his activity. If the husband has not participated actively and meaningfully in the family, he is apt to be unaware of her loss of function because of these heavy demands of his work. He has less time, and perhaps inclination, to provide the companionship then than he might after sixty-five. As a consequence, if the wife is unprepared for her loss of responsibility, she may blame her children for abandonment, interfere excessively with their new lives, and question her husband's concern for her. If there is reason at this time to question the vitality of their mutual concern, it is often apparent that such questions would have been asked and resolved earlier at a more flexible age, had it not been for the intensity of their prior and too often separate commitments to children and job.

The biologic menopause strikes many women at this same time, producing in some of them chemical as well as emotional changes. Extramarital notions, in fact or fantasy, are the unproductive attempts of a few to reassert femininity. Disabling or distressing physical symptoms are the actual and subconscious responses of others. Inappropriate and sudden competitiveness in her husband's work is an awkward and usually unfortunate attempt at togetherness for some.

Because the ideal image of our family appears to have remained unchanged, the significance of the shift in economic patterns from agrarian to industrial, rural to urban, and fixed to mobile has been less appreciated than it should. The farm family had greater interdependence. There was a greater likelihood of family inheritance of a job, and because of this temporal and geographic solidarity there was a life-long role for every member of the family to play. The gathering of eggs, cooking for "thrashers," and the wisdom of the soil were in demand until death.

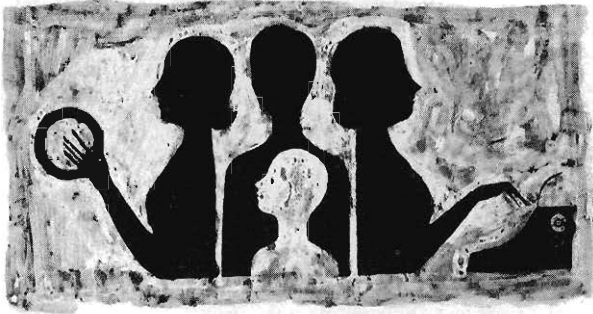
The contribution of the grandmother was great to such a family. Today it is obvious by its absence, especially when a new mother is far from her mother at the time of a first child. Medical personnel are surprised at the inexperience and poor judgment—the apparent lack of motherly sense—which many new mothers demonstrate. On reflection, of course, that is the natural state of new parents, but one traditionally corrected by grandmothers. The loss to the grandmother of her contribution is no less a deprivation. In any case, the nostalgic home of our past had more immediate family demands for every generation and would seem likely to have softened and even blurred the transition from one role to another.

The memory of the self-sacrificing mother of pioneer days may be an unconscious burden for modern woman. Rather than making a valid sacrifice in today's affluent society, this woman may be the fearful, overwhelmed, dominated mother who sacrificed unnecessarily her entire life to her children. Without this sacrifice her life threatened to be precarious and without meaning. The classic apron of the perpetual matron may be a holdover from those hard days.

It is possible that some still extol a sacrifice without always recalling the reasons for it. Such thinking values masochism above heroism.

Inadvertent glorification of the excessively feminine aspects of motherhood may exaggerate guilt feelings in the innately undomestic girl. This guilt rarely makes her into a better mother, and often deprives her of the natural expression of her unique motherly instincts which, apart from being "unfeminine" by other standards, are perfectly conducive to healthy child raising. This same guilt over motherly misgivings in turn blocks expression and growth in other areas of interest for which she may have more natural aptitude.

It seems probable that changing worldly moral and economic standards present an added burden to the mother. Realistically the family is the only bulwark for the maintenance of tradition in a world so susceptible to change. The parent who can separate the healthy from the diseased aspects of change, who can distinguish the transient appearance of evil from evil itself is better able to perpetuate fundamental and important traditions. This challenge is difficult for any parent. The successful parent is not overwhelmed by the sensually exhausting visual and auditory appearance of change.



A question to ask fathers is whether or not their breadwinning goes beyond the need to win more bread, to an endless piling-up of prestige medals—at a sacrifice of time which should be spent unheralded with the family. The industrial shift has severely reduced the man's meaningful role with the family and substituted for some a relentless proving of male vanity in public areas with no time for a fatherly role in the private home. This husband must decide that if he loves, he also cares, and that if he cares, he must love, and that he cannot be a passive spectator on a loved one's growth and development.

All these problems are common to the western world. As Mormons, we have several additional ones which are unique and others to which we have a special relationship. Our rural, agrarian bias is forthrightly stated. Many of us would agree with Thomas Jefferson and Brigham Young and others who have sought to preserve those values. The encouragement of stake welfare contributions in produce rather than money has long strained the backs—and hopefully lightened the hearts—of our businessmen's wards. In our glorification of the mother's art, it is natural that a state of overexpectation would be created. This is the theologic counterpart to the advertising which portrays floor-mopping as a thrilling experience instead of the honest but dull labor it is, a labor of love for an orderly home, but not an act of ecstasy. The concept of eternal progress and its increas-

ing joy has gained a familiarity which suggests to some that progress is the birthright of any Saint. The hard personal challenge implicit in the doctrine is underestimated.

HORIZONTAL ETERNAL PROGRESSION

The natural momentum of eternal progression suggests that success in one role leads to heightened capacities in that same role. This can be illustrated by a vertical analysis of progression—a better and better mother, a higher and higher monument to virtue and work. In distinction to this is the notion of horizontal exaltation and growth. As one role is mastered and completed, another is attempted from a new base. There is no obvious superiority of the horizontal over the vertical aspiration. But child-raising has its vertical limitations—they grow up and leave—and a parent must be able to move on to other endeavors.

When husband and wife fail to maintain a personal partnership, a woman may feel she has lost her status in the Gospel scheme when her mothering ceases. In other situations this loss can be expressed as an abrupt resentment against an apparently male-oriented priesthood, whose responsibilities do not “grow up and leave.” A distinctive illustration of this problem can be found occasionally in the wife of a middle-echelon Church leader. Arduous Church and job duties can mask a relationship which has deteriorated. She may not miss this companionship as long as his work has worldly esteem and her child-raising is fulfilling. But with her loss of function, their marital loneliness is exposed at a difficult age for correction.

Those who speak of the *natural* patterns of a love relationship, without defining what “natural” and “love” are, create a dangerously fertile environment for the germ of latent guilt, which afflicts many people in their sexual and family relationships. Spontaneous, loving growth into *satisfying* patterns, in distinction to undefinable *natural* or *normal* patterns, should guide a couple toward a goal of mutual joy without the need to look back, up, or to the side to see if they are normal. Mashed potatoes in preference to baked at the marriage table should be a matter of taste, not fiat. Patterns of housekeeping, sex, decor, community friendships, and recreation should similarly grow spontaneously in marriage, with the desire to love and please a mate the only useful and honorable guidepost.

Success in matching fulfillment with expectations should be possible for all of us. Awareness of the many pitfalls which block growth should go a long way toward avoiding them. Honest confrontation at age thirty with what must happen to a wife and children twenty years hence should lay the foundation for new plans, and new roles to be played. Properly understood, the Gospel plan is the ideal answer to this situation. If misunderstood, it can be a major cause of stagnation. Where so much is focused on child-raising, it is inevitable that some will be unable to blend other interests with it in anticipation of the time when these other interests must not only supplement, but replace, child-raising. A lifelong parallel concern with personal growth would soften the unavoidable regrets inherent in child-raising (“If only I’d . . .”) of even the finest mother. Some can realize great satisfaction and productivity in a deliber-

ate and skillful extension of motherly talents into the larger community of children. This widened interest is a logical extension of the Christian urging to broaden concern first to mate, then children, and then to the community of man. A mother's distinctive love and talents are always needed in our increasingly strained and unloved society. Foster grandparent programs show signs of blessing both the fostering and the fostered. The art lies in its application to the right children at the right time. Thus both horizontal and vertical growth patterns are available.

THE DEPARTURE OF CHILDREN AS AN OPPORTUNITY

The recognition of and pride in all of one's talents, latent and developed, open the spiritual lid to development. To do this, cultural molds may have to be ignored and tolerance extended by that same culture. Partners in a marriage must realize the danger of one trying to find purpose by living through the other. Each is a child of God and has a sacred personality to develop largely by personal effort, not just by association with the strong spirit. No one can create another personality or identity nor can one adopt or marry or reproduce into another personality. (The intimate character of Testimony provides a ready comparison.) Only when this is seen will the tenacious grip on others ease and family relationships have air to breathe.

The alert parent will recognize the compensations and adjustments which modern urban life requires to vitalize the ideal but largely nostalgic life we remember. This involves recognition of the importance of the father to the home and that he forego worldly acclaim for quiet, private responsibility if necessary. The marriage must achieve a companionship of respect, concern, care, and responsibility—the pattern of productive love.

If family and social roles were entirely to supplant personal roles, a dreary celestial paradise, susceptible to Twain-like satire, can be imagined. One's only pride and conversation would derive from endless references to one's offspring, who in turn could only think and speak of theirs. Somewhere, someone must stand for something personal and independent, in addition to being a reproductive and cultural link. A chain-letter investment scheme can feed upon itself for only so long.

If wife and husband are mutually involved in productive love attitudes toward themselves and their family, they experience the loss of parenthood simultaneously and can readily reinvest this productive love in their mutual relationship while the wife extends her interests in job, avocation, or Church. The companionship of her husband is one bond which stabilizes the woman through this transition period, but the challenge of self-realization remains the same. When a role is obsolete, a productive change to a new one is necessary. In marriage, an act which enhances the potency and potential of the mate simultaneously activates the other. Men must not deny this vital role in the family; women must sense the wonders of fulfilling their versatile natures through many channels. Then the departure of children can mean an opportunity for further growth towards new horizons rather than bringing an end to the meaning of life.