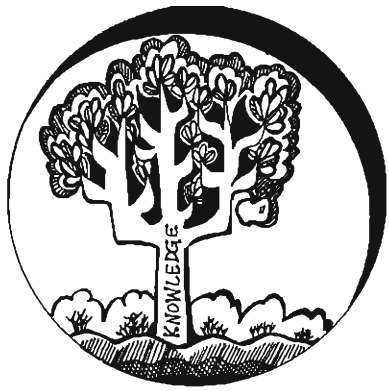


WOMEN IN DIALOGUE: AN INTRODUCTION

Claudia Lauper Bushman

In June of last year a dozen or so matrons in the Boston area gathered to discuss their lives. The Women's Liberation movement was then in full flower, making converts and causing all women to search their souls before reaffirming their traditional commitments. Our group was not particularly down-trodden, and actually we felt somewhat freer than usual. Revisions for a new edition of a Relief Society-sponsored guidebook had just been completed. This book, *A Beginner's Boston* (22,000 copies sold, current price $3.), had been such an artistic and financial success, that the collaborators felt emboldened to begin new projects and confront big problems. By late summer we had bound ourselves to do an issue of *Dialogue*.

While to all outward appearances we had nothing to complain of, the first meeting was an impassioned exchange of frustrations, disappointments and confessions. We had expected some serious confrontations because all attending are not in complete agreement on various issues, and there were some. More notable, though, were the shared feelings and mutual support that emerged. The effect was cathartic. We decided to meet again and have come together irregularly ever since.

The original dozen or so are women in their thirties, college-educated with some graduate degrees, mostly city-bred, the wives of professional men and the mothers of several children.* While this group remains, we have added another dozen or so, including several young professional wives without children and some singles. This amorphous group is officially open to anyone interested and we try never to mention it without proffering an invitation. We have no officers, no rules and no set meeting time. During the dainty refreshments provided by our hostess of the day we decide when next to meet.

Although we sometimes refer to ourselves as the L.D.S. cell of Women's Lib, we claim no affiliation with any of those militant bodies and some of us are so straight as to be shocked by their antics. We do read their literature with interest. Several people who have been invited to join us have declined, and rumors persist that we are involved in heretical activities. One doubter who visited admitted she saw no harm but felt the meetings

*Of those families with children, the current average is three and two-thirds each. Of the four children born to group members this year, one increased the family's children to five, one to six and one to eight.

were a grievous waste of time. Others who came to scoff have stayed to join in. While some members admit that they return home shattered and with headaches, others consider the meetings positively therapeutic and rely on them for mental health.

We try to speak honestly and openly, but otherwise the scene resembles a Primary preparation meeting or morning brunch with ladies chatting together while toddlers trip over their feet and infants demand attention. In truth these are the same ladies who man the Church auxiliaries and volunteer for clean-up committees. Several women are involved extensively in community and educational programs as well as in Church work. We currently have no working mothers among us, but those who are now childless definitely plan to combine work and child care. Although it is poor form to identify wives by their husbands today, three of our group are married to bishops.

We spend no time railing at men. In general, members affirm the family as the basic unit in society and hope to work out strong partnerships with husbands to provide the best possible upbringing for their children. The programs of the Church are appreciated in working toward these goals.

The standard model for Mormon womanhood is the supportive wife, the loving mother of many, the excellent cook, the imaginative homemaker and the diligent Church worker, a woman whose life is circumscribed by these roles. This model has been so clearly presented to us in sermon and story that we feel strong responsibility to cleave to that ideal and guilt when we depart. And so our group, largely made up of supportive wives and loving mothers who are also excellent homemakers and Church workers, has discussed the genesis of that model, how much of it is scriptural and how much traditional, and whether other models have met with acceptance in Church history.

We looked for diversity because, in all honesty, we are not always completely satisfied with our lives as housewives. Our families are of primary importance to us, but they do not demand all our time. We benefit from outside interests and can usually manage them without skimping on the baked goods. Our educated intelligence, which we have been taught is the glory of God, sometimes cries out for a little employment. Does it undercut the celestial dream to admit that there are occasional Japanese beetles in the roses covering our cottages?

We have also been concerned with the problems of single women and of women with strong career orientations. The Church emphasis on the standard model makes deviants defensive. Our society puts terrible pressures on single girls to marry while allowing them very little initiative in the process. Career women pursue their special interests but feel frowning disapproval from on high. Although these women may build happy and satisfactory lives, they continually need to justify their positions. Housewives may complain of their tedious treadmill, but at least they have official approval. The singles chastize them for not counting their blessings.

While doctrinally it is perfectly clear that wives should support their husbands, indeed are pledged to them as their husbands are pledged to the Lord, and that having children and lots of children is a good rather

than a bad thing, we question whether these priorities preclude other varieties of behavior. Looking for help in pronouncements from Church leaders and in Church history, we were delighted to discover that women have always played a vital role in our society, often outside the house. Brigham Young, pained by the sight of strong young louts doing light work instead of clearing sagebrush, pressed women into jobs. More interested in utilizing every available pair of hands than giving women fulfillment and satisfaction, he required that they make themselves useful in shops, schools and telegraph offices. And it was he who made this revolutionary pronouncement:

> As I have often told my sisters in the Female Relief Societies, we have sisters here who, if they had the privilege of studying, would make just as good mathematicians or accountants as any man; and we think they ought to have the privilege to study these branches of knowledge that they may develop the powers with which they are endowed. We believe that women are useful, not only to sweep houses, wash dishes, make beds, and raise babies, but that they should stand behind the counter, study law or physics, or become good bookkeepers and be able to do the business in any counting house, and all this to enlarge their sphere of usefulness for the benefit of society at large. *In following these things they but answer the design of their creation.* (*Discourses of Brigham Young,* pp. 216-17.)

The heritage of Mormon women is impressive in its complexity. How ironic that polygamous wives, the very epitome of mistreated and downtrodden feminity in the eyes of the world, should have been among the most independent, liberated women of their time. Those poor women whose husbands courted sweet things beneath their eyes and married them with or without the wife's permission were also the managers of their own farms, the sole support of their children and sometimes professional women as well. The frequent government crack-downs on the oft-wed elders gave some ambitious women a chance to skip town and to be educated in the East, leaving their children with their sister wives in the day care centers of the past.

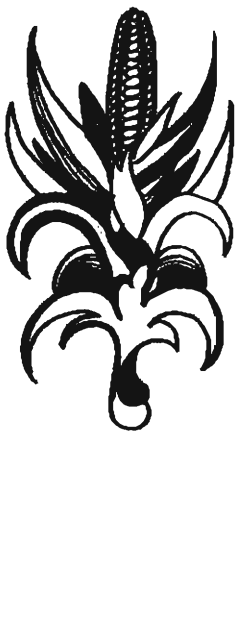
We can say of polygamy that we wouldn't want to live it, and that it was probably as hard on the men as women, yet the dedication of those early saints is impressive indeed. And if many polygamous wives suffered bitter torments, others apparently schooled their feelings and genuinely accepted the other wives as loved sisters. While a woman's role as a mother was increased, her wifely duties were lessened, and she was forced to manage her own family as head of the household. Few Mormon wives lead such autonomous lives today.

The independent lives of nineteenth century Mormon women give us pause, but we don't argue that women should be "freed" from their traditional home-centered commitment. All women should not be out working at careers, and those who choose to stay at home probably need more support today than their working sisters. In our day the career woman is increasingly justified for her good use of her faculties and her service to mankind, while the housewife is depicted as dowdy and dull; not only oppressed, she is so dumb she doesn't know it. Housewives deserve our unqualified defense. As members of the Church we have knowledge of eternal priorities, and surely housewives are devoted to these. If some women find themselves in

prison at home, others consider it heaven on earth and make it that for their little angels. It is as serious a fault for women who need outside involvements to berate housewives as for housewives to feel threatened by working women.

We argue then for acceptance of the diversity that already exists in the life styles of Mormon women. We have too many native differences to fit comfortably into a single mold. Though the ladies of our group love each other dearly and have much in common, we are unable to agree on many things. Some feel themselves censored and oppressed by conservative members, others refuse to have their names linked with our too liberal production. We make the usual disclaimer of group responsibility for individual effort. Despite lengthy discussions to forge a platform for the liberated female Mormon, we could not come to an agreement. We could only conclude that a wide range of life styles and opinions should be allowed.

In assembling this issue we have looked for examples of widely varying life styles possible within an orthodox gospel framework. We have invited several noted people to write for us and have welcomed contributions from friends and strangers the Church over. But mostly we have encouraged the efforts of our local sisters. Our major achievement, if we can claim any, is that ordinarily silent women have examined their lives and written about what they have seen. As a result our *Dialogue* issue is remarkably intimate. Even when Big Subjects are being examined, the treatment tends to be personal. We have plenty to say, but most of it is illustrated by our own lives. We offer our issue of *Ladies' Home Dialogue* without apology. For a woman eager to do something unique and meaningful, but bogged down with the minutia of everyday life, the pattern of another woman who has surmounted the same obstacles has real worth. 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.



REGARDLESS OF WHATEVER ANY WOMAN ACCOMPLISHES OUTSIDE THE HOME, NO ONE WILL HAVE A GREATER REWARD IN HEAVEN THAN A FAITHFUL, DEVOTED MOTHER WHO HAS HELPED HER CHILDREN TO KNOW GOD AND JESUS CHRIST WHOM HE SENT, AND TO LIVE ACCORDING TO THE TEACHINGS OF THE GOSPEL, CONTRIBUTING WHEREVER SHE CAN TO THE WELL-BEING OF MANKIND.

NATHAN ELDON TANNER