

ALL ON FIRE: AN INTERVIEW WITH SONIA JOHNSON

Sonia Johnson was interviewed by Mary L. Bradford April, 1981, in Sterling, Virginia.

Let's begin by asking you to tell us about the book you have just written.

My lawyer in California introduced me to a woman editor at Doubleday who took me out to dinner. I told her I would like somebody to help me write the book. It never occurred to me to write it myself. She told me, though, that what I needed to do was go home and think of a possible chapter and write it. Then when she saw the kind of thing I had to say and the kind of person I was, she could tell me what ghost writer would be best suited to help me. So I came home and wrote a chapter which now doesn't exist in the book, entitled "Mother in Heaven." I said, "Listen. I teach writing. I'm not so carried away with myself that I think that what I wrote was great literature. It wouldn't hurt my feelings if you should tell me that I need a ghost writer." She said, "No, you really do need to write it by yourself. We really want your voice to come through."

Have you chosen a title?

My working title, which my editor didn't like, was *From Housewife to Heretic*. It sounded too limited to me too. I had been making pages of titles, three legal size pages. The one I like best of all is "All on Fire," a quote from Susan B. Anthony. I was all geared up to push that when she called and said the editorial board thought the other title was just right.

Will your book help the ERA?

I hope so. That's what I wrote it for.

Have you told all in it?

I don't know about *all*. That statement always has sexual overtones. And there isn't much sex in this story.

But will it answer all the questions people have?

The editor said, "I think people want to know where you came from, and why you did what you did. Why of all the Mormon women were you the one?" I said, "I don't have any answer to that." She said, "Why don't you have that as a goal, to figure that out as you write? Think to yourself, this is what readers want to know—where did you come from? Why did this happen to you? It can't be all circumstances. There are other people in similar circumstances, and they didn't do it." I thought to myself, "Maybe I'll figure this out while I write the book," but I still haven't a clue. It seems more mysterious to me now than it did before. That's why I worry about the book because it certainly doesn't clarify anything for me.

Wait—I can't say *anything*. It was good therapy, and it helped me put things into perspective. I started writing it a year ago, and it is still hard to get distance on the events. Obviously it is not what I am going to think in ten years. But it helped a lot. It helped a lot about Rick. I wrote out that story, from the time we met until the breakup. It helped me understand my family better. She wanted me to write about the home I came from, my youth in the Church, and as I wrote, I began to see some sense to it all, a pattern. And while I was writing the trial scene, the tears were falling on the typewriter, the keys so slippery I could hardly type, sobbing away and typing. It was a catharsis. How will it go as a book? I don't know! Catharsis itself doesn't make a good book. William Styron could take all the raw stuff, and make magic. Magic, you know! I sure wish Styron had written it! Wouldn't that be a good story!

After Dialogue published one of your poems in a recent issue, people said, "She does appreciate what she has lost." What do you think of that statement?

Actually, I can't even conjure up the feeling I had when I wrote that poem. I am sure it's how I felt at the time, but I don't feel that way anymore, and I don't think I felt it for very long. It was only a year ago, but I felt it less and less as the weeks went by until now I feel that I have not lost—but gained.

Everything that was valuable to me I can keep. What don't I have?

You don't have your husband; you don't have your membership in the Church. You can't take the sacrament or speak; you can't participate in the ordinances.

If the ordinances are real, they are still valid. That was a dishonorable trial. These men can't tell God to do things that are not honorable. He is not going to say, "Okay, guys, anything you say, whether it was decent or not, whether she deserved it or not." That's absurd. What kind of a god is that?

God knew exactly what was going on. God knew my heart. He knew what I was doing—He could see it better than I. Certainly, I have more respect for God than to think he would be bossed around or bullied by unrighteous men. In my case they most certainly were that, so I never worried about the ordinances. If they are necessary, I have them intact. As for my husband, I would have lost him anyway. He intended to divorce me before we got the court order. He was having a crisis in his life. He was succumbing to what I call the "Blond Chick Syndrome." It's a cultural pattern. Men seem to feel that they must discard the old one and get a new one. How exciting to find a younger woman! To start off without any responsibilities, no children—young again.

In an interview you gave us a year ago January, the word had just come out about the divorce. You said something about how you had been too busy looking at the trees to see the forest. What did you mean by that?

The divorce took me totally by surprise. It happened very fast to him, too. It was a great shock, but as far as losing anything, I still have all the Church's teachings, and I have gained a lot of self-knowledge besides. I feel a deep, inner peace and serenity. It wasn't that I was particularly lacking this before, but I just feel better about *me*. I feel confident about the future. I feel that there isn't much that can harm me now. I have faced the worst and it didn't break me. I feel good about myself and about human nature.

I am not an extraordinary person, so if I react like this to crises, then what does it mean about the whole human race? It bodes well. Really it does. When it comes to the crunch, human beings are more than they know.

Did you go through some bad times? Depression? Ups and downs?

Not ups and downs. *Down* and then gradually, continually *up*. Even during the worst times—Rick living with another woman, the Church trying me—everything at its most confusing and heartbreaking, even then, I felt peace right at the core of things and never despair. I felt that I was doing what I had to do. There were no options. This was clearly the path. I felt surrounded by love, not just from the people around me, but I felt that I was borne up on wings of angels. This doesn't mean I felt happy. I just felt sure. I knew what I was saying was the truth as far as I knew it. We don't know all the truth, of course. We know the truth partially at best, but I never told anything that I didn't actually know was true. And that sustained me.

If the ERA passes, what would you want to do?

I would like to do what I am doing now for the rest of my life. I wish somebody would pay me all my life to speak for women's rights. That's exactly what I would like to do. But what chance is there? You see, I am supporting the family and I am doing it all alone. Rick let me buy him out on this house, so now I own the house free and clear—no mortgage. It was a decent settlement, but I have these kids and their college to think of, and if I look for a teaching job, it will be because that is what I know how to do.

Aren't you making enough contacts to give you opportunities for other jobs?

I hope so.

Remembering the last testimony meeting in your ward, just before your excommunication—What would you have said, if you had been allowed to speak?

I remember that I had two things in my mind at that time. I have written it in the book and I hope that I can remember correctly. Kris Barrett had defended me in an atmosphere that was virulently orthodox. Every single person had praised the bishop and had born testimony to the truthfulness of the bishop, a monument to Bishop Willis' courage, his inspiration and his righteousness. I can't tell you how thick the atmosphere was: one of follow the leaders if it kills us! She got up and said she loved me, that I had done a lot of good for her and that she hoped Bishop Willis could hear the right voice. She cried a little. The place was paralyzed. She had broken a taboo. There had been an unspoken agreement *not* to do what she had done. When people break taboos, others want to tear them apart. They all knew me, and they all doubted a little bit, but their doubts went out the window that day. They were determined to be converted. When she went up there and knocked the whole edifice down, you could feel that everybody was furious with her. I knew they wouldn't stone her, but if it had been another day and age, they might have done her in. The first thing in my mind was to get up and say something that would help Kris.

How can I say this—so it doesn't sound like bragging? I inherited a gift for oratory. It came from my father's family. My father's family had it as far back as we know. So I was looking at the audience that day, and I knew exactly how I could turn it around. You get a feel for the audience, you know. I had done it with that same audience the Sunday after I testified before the Senate Subcommittee. As soon as I had come in, I had felt the animosity toward me. I'm telling you, if looks could kill! But I was confident that I could turn them around. And I did. At least half of them flocked over to me, told me that they loved me, that they didn't agree with me but they loved me. So I knew I could do that. And so that was the first thing I wanted to do, that day.

And do you know that afterwards a man walked up to Kris and said, "You make me want to puke." Isn't that sickening? Just because she loved me. Here is this Church where charity is never supposed to fail! Charity failed on every hand. Charity was falling on its face everywhere.

The second thing I hoped to do was to bear testimony to the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ—not the hierarchy, but the Sermon on the Mount and the way Jesus treated women and the poor and the sick and the other people nobody paid any attention to—the despised people. That’s what I thought of. Those things are so beautiful.

I knew that they would think I was talking about Joseph Smith and Spencer Kimball. I wasn’t thinking about them at all. I hadn’t seen any indication that President Kimball even understood what my trial was all about. I wanted during my last time as a Mormon just to be one of them, to participate in this odd little ritual of the testimony meeting that I was beginning by that time to understand. I think it’s meant to bolster everybody’s orthodoxy, to keep people away from fringes of heresy.

That was a long answer to a short question.

Your friends tell me that they often heard you express sympathy for Bishop Willis and that you put yourself willingly in his power.

I understand what you mean. As I sit here today, I think to myself—in fact, it just occurred to me now—It seemed that something had to be played out.

Fate?

No, not fate. I just felt that I had to do it. All the way along, the whole thing seemed irrevocable. I had to play it by their rules. For some reason I still think I did the right thing. I know there is a lot we don’t understand and that truth is always partial. We get only a glimpse, but I think we know a lot more than we think—in what Freud would call the unconscious—and I hate to use that term because I hate Freud so much—but I think there is more than what we know with the conscious mind. I found that when instinct told me to do it that way or this way. If I followed the feeling, things seemed to move toward closure. Whatever I did do, I could tell it was right, even if it was a terrible experience. I would get reaffirmation that it was the right way. I learned to trust that feeling. Heavens, don’t ask me why because things did get progressively worse!

You kept going back to Bishop Willis, trying to engage him, and you felt right about it?

Yes. It all began with my Senate Subcommittee testimony. Later, when I was speaking to a group in Boston, someone asked me a question about that testimony. “Why didn’t you call your bishop or your stake president, tell him you had been asked to speak and ask for his advice?” I told her, “I guess by that time I had ceased to ask permission.”

But I did know that somehow or other the leaders of the Church had to be engaged. I knew that if I wasn’t willing to go to them, they could get off scot-

free. Why shouldn't they have to be immersed in this? It seemed to me they should not be let off.

So you were more interested in involving them than in saving your own skin.

Yes, getting them personally involved. When it first started, I didn't know how widespread the church involvement was. I didn't even know my church history. I didn't even know it had happened in the past. You have asked a hard question: Why did I do it? I guess I just felt as if I ought to. It ought to be a difficulty and an unpleasantness for them. They ought to *feel* it somehow. That was one reason—the other was simply that my instinct told me: Go this way.

When you were excommunicated, were you given any instructions?

No, none.

Has anybody tried to bring you back in?

No. My former home teacher calls every two or three months. He's a busy man. He's a nice guy; if the washer broke, or something, he'd come.

You know of no particular program for bringing you or your family back into the Church?

Oh gracious, I should say not. I may be wrong, but I really don't think they want us back very much.

Do you think you intended to embarrass Bishop Willis personally?

Oh, I don't think so. I didn't mean to. I didn't feel that I was baiting him.

I first started talking with him about women right after President Kimball announced that women were now to pray in Sacrament Meeting. I had watched in our ward to see if women were praying, and they weren't. So I went to Jeff and said, "You have convinced me that you have followed the prophet in all things, so I am surprised to see that you haven't paid any attention to this latest mandate." So women started saying the opening prayers in Sacrament Meeting. I was content with that for awhile but then I noticed that they were always opening prayers. So I went back to him and I said, "Jeff, do you recall that the prophet said women could say any prayers in any meeting they attended, so how come they're allowed only to give the opening prayers?" He said he felt as if the priesthood needed to end the meeting. "Well, the prophet doesn't think so! Who are you to put yourself above the prophet? That's sexism, don't you see." He could never understand what sexism was. I was always trying to give him examples.

So you felt you were educating him?

Well, my daughter was helping. I didn't even know until weeks after that she did these things, but she went to the bishop one day and asked if she could take the microphone around to people giving their testimonies. He was very disapproving: "That is a priesthood function." And she said, "Handling the microphone? Where does it say that?"

A couple weeks later, she asked me, "Does it say that in the Doctrine and Covenants? They didn't have microphones then!"

She went to him another time and asked if she could hand out the programs at the door, and he told her no, that was an Aaronic priesthood duty. She said, "This is ridiculous. The girls don't get to do anything in this Church! The boys get to do everything!"

She was always saying things to me about how they were telling her in MIA class how she was supposed to shine her brothers' shoes or something to get them ready for priesthood meeting. She thought that was ridiculous too. "What does he do to help me? Why doesn't he shine my shoes?" Kari was shrewd right from the start. She will never get a testimony of the Church. Those things stood in her way from the start.

While we're on that subject, was Kari the reason your family went to the Hamilton Branch instead of your own ward?

Well, Rick too. He just couldn't bear it anymore. That ward is so sexist.

Why didn't you go with them?

Because I was organist and I loved it. Besides, I had a stake in what was going on there. I loved the organ though, and I miss that the most now.

No one attempted to bring you back?

Kari had a teacher or two who tried, but the girls in the ward treated her terribly and the boys treated the boys badly. I realize those things are never one-sided, of course. Kids can be cruel to one another.

Rumor has it that you are never with your children.

That's ridiculous. I don't go as much as people think. Considering that I am making a living and doing it singlehandedly, I am here a lot. I am home three weeks and then gone for two days, then home for a week and gone for two days. What other single parent can make that claim?

I was on a Philadelphia T.V. show last week where one of the Mormon women there asked, "Who was with your children during all this?" and I said, "I was." She said, "You couldn't have been!" I said, "I was as much as

any of the other women who went down to Richmond to lobby against the ERA!"

Do you feel bad that your children are not in the Church? What do you want for them?

I'll tell you what I don't want! I don't want them to learn that only *men* can make decisions, that only *men* are to have revelations from God and that only *men* are real people. I don't want my children in the Mormon Church. It teaches that women are not worthy.

I don't care what you call it. You can call it having a different role. In the end, the message is women are not worthy and that's the message my daughter was getting. At the time I was trying my best to indoctrinate her. I told her that women just have different things to do, but she said we just have different things to do that are just work. We don't make any decisions. We are never given a title. My daughter said, "Do you realize that there are bishops and elders and presidents, but we don't have any titles. We are just nobody."

The problem is not so much that you want prestige as that you just want a decent feeling about yourself. Why shouldn't you feel worthy? You are a daughter of God.

At first, I felt bad. There are a lot of good things in the Church. But now I look at it and I think maybe there was more harm than good. I expect that my sons will honor women in a whole different way than I ever knew any women to be respected and honored in the Church. I don't *know* that they will, but I hope that they will.

I heard that your son was quoted as saying that he now belongs to the church of the ERA.

This was my Noly?

Yes.

No, what he said was, "I belong to an ERA family."

Your friends describe you as a kind of bulldog, a very persistent person. When you find a subject that fascinates you, you follow it to the end. You are not easily deflected.

I guess that is true of most people when they really care about something.

No, some people are easily distracted.

Well, the ERA is what I have been most single-minded about apart from the Church itself. I was pretty single-minded about the Church in my day. I read everything about the Church, by the church leaders or about the church

leaders in my Dad's library. I don't think there is anything Dad doesn't have in his library. If I didn't read the books myself, he read them to me. He was one of those people who follow you around, book in hand, always reading, and reading about the Church. I couldn't get enough of it. I felt a real hunger.

That's how I felt, only more so, about the subject of women's rights. Somebody once said to me, "It seems to me that you are not really very well-balanced. Would you say that you're obsessed?" I said, well, if you mean by "obsessed," would I give my life for the ERA, I guess you can say I am obsessed. And this embarrasses people.

You see, most of us are not that single-minded. We might give our lives for our children, for instance, but not for an issue.

I don't think that's true. We know men have been willing to die for issues—civil rights issues. And we think that is natural. We know men are worth that kind of sacrifice. Women have never been considered worth it. There has not been a revolution over freedom for women, as far as we know. Revolutions are always fought for men's rights. If you give your life for men's rights, you are called a hero, but if you talk about giving your life for women's rights, we are all embarrassed. Women are simply not important enough!

Aren't there other methods of getting our rights? I have heard it said that if you want to persuade somebody, the best way is to model the behavior that you want others to adopt.

Now, how could we have done that with King George when we wanted independence for this country? When you are not a part of the Constitution, when there are sixteen thousand discriminatory laws in this country against you, how do you model that? Doesn't there come a time to say this is ridiculous? For instance, I am being taxed just as if I had legal rights. Property rights in this country, except for about eight states, are simply hideous! Women are in economic bondage.

I was looking at the Reagan Budget cuts. Did you know that ninety-three percent of the recipients of welfare are women and children? I saw a study by the National Advisory Council on economic opportunity which said that by the year 2000 the people living below the poverty line will be exclusively women and children. We are the poor! We will be the ones starving to death in cold rooms in our old age. That seems to me to be very, very serious. Why, in a country like this, can't we do something about the fact that women and children have hardly any possibilities of climbing out of that poverty? It's time for revolution.

In the beginning, it was the rich who were feeling it—people like Thomas Jefferson were being taxed. Poor thing! Did you read what they had to eat in those days? But it made them frantic that they were being taxed! Those men who stirred up the insurrection had the things that we women don't have,

yet they would not stand for it! You talk about modeling behavior! It was a total insult. They rose up, and we are a nation.

Nobody can believe things are as bad as they are because nobody takes women seriously, nobody, including women. What do we have to do to show that things are bad? In some states women make only forty-nine percent of what men make. The national average is fifty-nine, but in some states, it's as low as thirty-three or forty. In California, women lawyers make fifty percent of what male attorneys make. There is something wrong with that. Bitterly, bitterly wrong. What I am saying is, we don't even recognize how grave that injustice is until we begin to ask, what if men made about fifty percent of what women make? And then we would say, "Oh, my gosh how terrible." If men were living under the situations women are living under today, in two minutes the streets of this country would be full of rampaging, outraged men. They wouldn't stand for it. Women too would say, they can't do this! The things I have found out are hideous, but they are happening to women. I am saying that it matters. It matters to me as much as it mattered to Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry who said, "Give me liberty or give me death."

So you think that passing the ERA will give women these basic rights?

It will take a lot of work, but it's like the place in the Bible that says, "Build your house upon a rock." The first thing our forefathers did was to build on a rock—the Constitution. Some people—like George Mason—refused to sign the Constitution because it did not include women. It doesn't include women. It didn't include anybody who wasn't white and male. It still doesn't include us.

Everything we do for women is a lot of work. Trying to pass laws, and then trying to keep them on the books is like building a house on sand because these laws, no matter how good they are, are unenforceable when it comes right down to it. They are ephemeral. A state legislature can vote a law out so it doesn't mean anything.

Barbara Mikulski was so marvelous February 4 on women's day in Congress. She said that asking for equal rights without the amendment is like saying we want independence without the Declaration. Or asking for emancipation without the Proclamation. You must always have a statement of your philosophy first. What we have tried to do in this country is to do without the Declaration or Proclamation, working for equal rights without the commitment of our Congress and our government. The ERA says that we will stand behind justice for women in the courts of this country. Until we pass it, everything else is so much balderdash.

It seems to me that women feel threatened because it seems to them that if they fight for their rights, they will have to hurt the people they love—their husbands, the men they care about.

I guess they are shortsighted. In the long run, they hurt people by not doing anything. If you don't move, you hurt everybody. You need a long-range

view, I think, to see how it helps everybody, including men. It is not good for men to be oppressors. It's not good for your sons, your husband, not good for anybody.

What can Mormon women do then?

I say that the first thing they can do is find out what is really going on in the women's movement. You see, the Mormon women only know what the Church has said the women's movement is. They have never gone to other women to find out what *they* say they are and what they say their goals are. They don't bother to inform themselves, and I think that's heretical, not to inform yourself. It's one of the things we are supposed to do in this Church, I always heard.

If they knew what the woman's movement is really about—that it's really about homemakers and poor women and about women with children who don't have money or skills who might lose their husbands or have already lost them; if they would really find out what the woman's movement is about, they won't want to fight it. At least, they will learn *not* to fight against women. It doesn't take *everybody* working for something either. It takes a minority. In the beginnings of this country there were fewer than a third of the colonists who wanted to break with England. It always takes a minority to move out and ahead. It just takes the Mormon women—for heavens sake!—to find out what its all about and then to stop getting in the way of it!

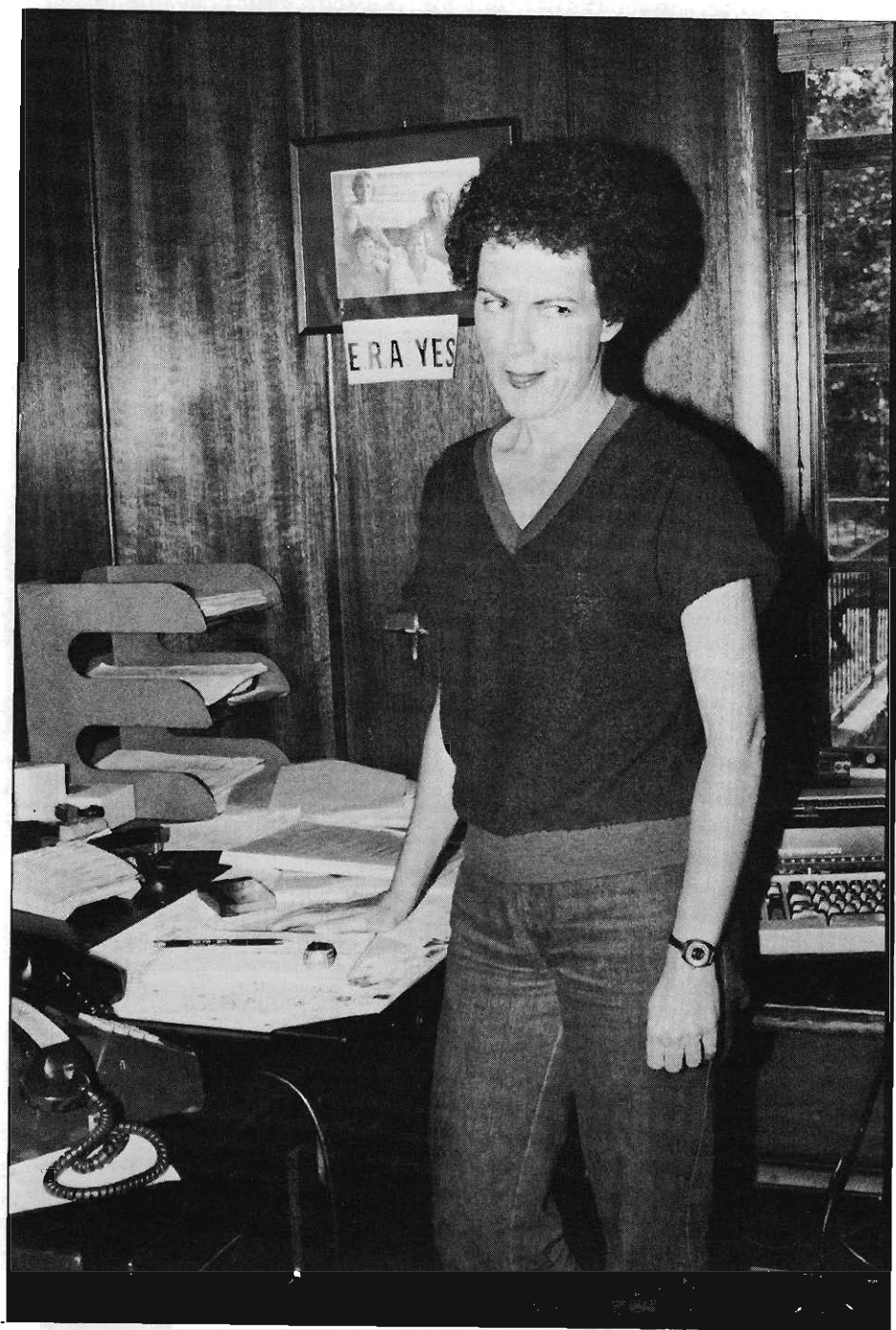
I think all women should feel terrible about doing something that they don't have a clue about, accepting men's word without any investigation and becoming total sheep! Now that's the very first time I have used that word. That's the very first time. You know, every place I go, some Mormon woman will rise up and say, "We're not sheep," and I will say, "I didn't say you were." *They* know they are.

You haven't used the word in your speeches?

No, I haven't used the word until now. Those are bright women, good women.

Aren't there women who have looked into it and are sincerely against the ERA?

I suppose there are, but I haven't met any. I have never met anybody who is against it who has read the legislative history and the intent of the amendment. They haven't ever sat down and read it as it is. I mean never. They have always read it out of Phyllis Schlafly or someplace else. No one has ever read the committee debates on it. I have asked them, and they don't know the document, the legislative history—the Senate Committee reports and the debates. I know the brethren haven't read it either.



Many Mormons are against the ERA because they fear the power of the federal government and think that if you keep the power in the states you can vote out unrighteous laws.

You see, that shows how little they know. There is not going to be a building in Washington called the 27th Amendment building or the ERA building. It's not like OSHA.

What about the fear of federal judges?

It's an excuse. What they don't know is that those judges right now have no guidelines about sexist law at all. There is nothing in the Constitution to help them. If people are frightened of judges, they ought to be more frightened without the ERA. Those judges can do anything because the Congress, the American people, have not told them what they want them to do. The 14th Amendment leaves it wide open. It's the very thing they say about ERA—wide open to any interpretation because Congress has not spoken. The ERA has the most complete legislative history of any amendment to the Constitution. Congress has said exactly what it means.

Does that mean that enough states have passed an ERA to create a legislative history?

It means that if somebody finally brings a case to the Supreme Court, the judges can look at what Congress has said and know what to do. The court traditionally follows Congress. Suppose a case about sex discrimination comes in. They say, "Okay, how does Congress interpret this amendment?" Congress talks about all those things the Church is opposed to. It talks about abortion, about homosexuality, about privacy.

People will argue with this and say, "Well, the court won't pay any attention to that." But it always has! The ERA actually puts it right back into the states. It's only an amendment, after all, not a law. People don't even understand how our Constitution works. The ignorance about it is amazing. Phenomenal. I was ignorant too. I never knew how the government worked.

Do you see the ERA as a calling?

I never felt that exactly.

You don't feel now that you have a "testimony" of the ERA? Has ERA taken the place of religion in your life?

Nobody assumed that because Patrick Henry wanted his freedom he was no longer religious. People let men do politics and still be religious. Women too can be religious and political at the same time. People must somehow explain me away to lessen me. I can't be both a mother and a patriot. You have to be

one thing—a mother and wife. If you are not a mother and a wife, then you're a women's libber. You can't be a full person with multiple interests. It's more than having a career and a home. It's being full. We are seen as narrow and small without the ability to encompass more than one thing. Reporters ask me questions they wouldn't ask a man, for instance. I am always getting asked sexist questions by people who should know better. You, for instance. If a man had been excommunicated through union activities, would you ask him if the union had taken the place of his religion?

I might if he were a well-known church leader.

What I am saying is, church male leaders can have other jobs—as heads of corporations, for instance, and no one questions that or suggests that they should concentrate only on being fathers. Women are treated like one-celled amoebas.

Getting back to your personal life, would you characterize Rick as the stereotypical Mormon husband?

In a way, but actually Rick was different. He wanted me to go on to school when I just wanted to be the wife and mother, intending to quit school and go to work to put Rick through, as soon as we were married. The brethren had told me if I did, I would be happy. I took their word for it, and I thought God wanted me to do it that way. Rick's wanting me to go to school bothered me a lot. He always wanted me to go on from one degree to another.

So he was interested in your progression?

More than I was, by a long shot. He was a convert to the Church, and I had an awful hard time getting him to go to priesthood meetings. He used to say to me, "Sonia, those men imply bad things about their wives. They all sit over there and rejoice that they're not women. They say things like 'If I wasn't around to help my wife understand the scriptures she wouldn't know anything.'" All this putdown of females. This was years ago before any of our consciousnesses were raised.

It didn't matter to me then. I used to say, "Oh, you're imagining things."

So in a way he was ahead of you on the subject of woman's rights.

Very much so. That is the main reason he went to the Hamilton branch. It was intolerable here in our ward. The men were such women haters.

Do you think you will marry again?

Oh well, not really. I don't suppose there is much hope of it.

Why do you say that?

Well, in the first place, I don't go places where I meet many men. I meet mostly women. I certainly don't feel the need right now, either. I am doing exactly what I want to do.

What about physical affection?

It's like a friend said to me once, "Nobody ever dies for lack of sex." They die from lack of love but not lack of sex. If I feel no need of sex now, it's not that I won't sometime in the future.

Someone asked me, "How are you meeting your needs? Who is giving you love?" And I said, "About 50,000 people." Every place I go women are so loving to me and so grateful for something they perceive I've done that I am just overwhelmed by it!

Do you feel bitter?

I don't think 'bitter' is the word. I am angry, but 'bitter' connotes that I wish the Church ill as an institution. I don't. I am still angry about the Church's right-wing politics which is anti-women. This makes me angry as the dickens, and I hope I don't ever stop being angry about that. Somebody from a radio station in Arizona called me to ask that question, and I said, I wish the Mormon Church well, but I feel very little interest in it anymore as a religious institution.

So you don't feel any need to come back into the Church?

No, I don't think I will ever come back.

What if the Church changed its mind on the ERA?

Oh, they would have to change their minds on too many other things. Half the apostles would have to become women. Women would have to be called to decision-making bodies.

You would like a husband-wife bishop team?

If the wife could be called 'bishop' and the husband 'assistant bishop!' Somehow or other, women have got to be given their due. I just don't think that will happen in my time. I do feel a need for something, though, and more so lately. Mostly for the children's sake. They miss the ritual of going to church on Sunday and the structure of it, so I am going to have to think of something to do about that. Last Sunday was the first time I really felt this. I would like to find a Quaker meeting. I am attracted to that not because it is the only true Church—the Only True Church concept has left my thinking altogether. But the Quakers are my kind of people—decent people who care about issues like war and peace and poverty and are not hierarchical. There is no bullying

in the ranks; there is no punishment idea—conforming or being zapped by God. But I don't think the children would find enough structure there. If it were just me, I would gravitate toward a congregation where people think like me. The Unitarian Church has good things for children. I will go to see what they have, but obviously, the main thing I will have to do is teach them myself. We talk now about everything: how we live and how to live with integrity—what we owe other people. But they need to be able to discuss these things with other young people in a place where there is intellectual freedom and they can come home and talk about them afterwards.

If you were going to write your own Articles of Faith, what would you add to what you have just said?

I think we just have to care about other people more than we do. We must be more concerned that people are living and dying in poverty. I think if we are not concerned about that, then we will not be whole. Even though we are middle-class and never see this kind of suffering, we must do something.

Poverty seems to be uppermost in your mind.

Especially among women. It is incredible. The women's movement—and I know the leaders personally, I know Gloria Steinem personally; I know Bella Abzug personally, I know Ellie Smeal personally—these mothers of the woman's movement care about the suffering of women. Whenever the husbands are out of work, or have left or died, it all devolves upon the women. Economic crisis! Women are in it all the time! These are the women who are not articulate about it, who feel powerless, and there are millions of them in this country. All you have to do is go to the places where they come, and my gosh, the misery that is afoot in this land. Sometimes you can't face it.

The reason people don't want to know about it is because it is so heart-breaking. Often when I visit cities, I visit projects like battered wives' shelters. I often ask to visit these places so I can find out what it is I mean when I talk about justice for women.

One of Beverly Campbell's arguments is that laws are not worded in a way that they can be enforced. She says women must learn to write good laws themselves.

That's true.

She says that laws protecting battered wives and others cannot be enforced because they are not written well.

They are not enforced because the American people don't care enough. People still believe, and the Church still believes, that whatever happens in the home is sacrosanct. If a woman is being exploited there, no one has a right to interfere. It's patriarchy—male rule—and if women suffer, it's too bad because God ordained it. It makes us think that it doesn't really matter to God

if a women is being beaten and killed in her own home. It's patriarchy, the belief that men are supreme, and once women get equality, then men cannot exploit them. When I say women are in slavery, people say to me, oh well, those are strong words. The United Nations put out these statistics when I was in Copenhagen: Women do two-thirds of the world's work. For that they make one-tenth of the world's money. Now, that's slavery!

Aren't both men and women just trying to support their families?

Well, maybe, but there is no way we can make a man support his family if he doesn't want to. Our church talks about how the wife has a right to be supported. There is no right to support. Guess how much property we own in the world?

One-hundredth of the world's property! That must outrage God, and it seems that Heaven must be in total frenzy to get this corrected! I think that's why women are rising.

Back in the days when I still believed in all the church doctrine, and for some time after my excommunication, I thought from what I could see that the Holy Ghost was telling women to rise. The Holy Ghost was telling me! Everytime I would meet women who had had a feminist awakening, they described it in words like a testimony meeting. They were filled with love, and understood where women were and what needed to be done. That's what we call the Holy Ghost.

Is that what gives you your energy? Your zeal? Does feeling that you are right keep you from cracking?

I grew up in a church that knew it was right, and now I know it is wrong. So I am very wary of saying that I know I am right or that I've got the only true way. It is so clouded over by rhetoric and convention. We don't see the women in their suffering, the little old women alone in their rooms. What about me? I have no Social Security. I don't have a husband's pension. No savings, and I am getting older. Many women live in one room with no heat, eating cat food until they die.

There are some men in that condition too, but we don't care about *anybody* who is poor.

Women are waking up all over the world all on their own. I met one woman from Africa. She said that as she was walking back from getting water with a bucket, she suddenly put her bucket down and said, "This has got to stop." On their own, before they have any contact with women from the Western world—something is waking women up. It's happening worldwide.

Remember how we used to preach about the rock that was cut out of the mountain without hands? It's like that. Who knows where these women are coming from every day, by the thousands?

Would you do anything differently?

Minor things, perhaps. But I did what I thought was right at the time.

Do you still pray?

Yes. I pray in a different way than I used to, though. If I kneel down as I did before, it conjures up too many bad images, so I must learn new ways. I appreciate that the avenues between me and whatever else is up there are still open. There is a lot of love coming from somewhere. I feel very kindly toward those heavenly beings.

In a telephone conversation a few months ago, just after the last LDS Conference, you said, "Mormon women now have the upper hand. Men are now in a precarious position." What did you mean by that?

How long can men keep up the nonsense that only men should make decisions about how the Church—how the world is run? The whole attitude of the world is changing. It is obvious that women are just as bright, that they can run institutions, and that they ought to have a say in the Church that demands all their time and love. When they fought the ERA, they didn't ask women; they assumed they could speak for women. I think we are coming to the point where women aren't going to let men do that anymore. God would never expect people who are total non-experts on this subject to give advice to experts. Women are the experts on being women, but we are told who we are and what we are and what we must feel by men who haven't a clue—who haven't even had a menstrual cycle! Women aren't going to take that anymore. How can they tell me when I am feeling fulfilled? We are all different! We are not clones!

God made us as various as men. Women are as different from one another as men are different from one another. All men don't want to be farmers. Neither do all women want to bake bread or whatever. Women are to the point where it is harder for men only to invoke God because it makes God look so foolish. And God is not foolish!

Women in the Mormon Church are as safe as in their mothers' wombs right now. This is the time for them to move.

Are there any other hopeful signs? Like BYU Women's Conferences, where there has been emphasis on different lifestyles?

Yes, even Beverly Campbell says that! Beverly Campbell is a frustrated feminist! She would like to be on our side, and she may someday be because she says the things we say, and then she has to backtrack and try to make them fit in to the way men meant them. You know, she can't do that forever. Well, maybe she can, but anyway, *Exponent II* finally seems to be saying things without being so fearful. Women are losing their fear. They feel the rightness of it. They are not stopping to equate men and God.

The new Managing Editor at the Deseret News is a woman. She is a popular choice, apparently, a single woman who has worked hard at her career.

That is a hopeful sign. I wish Mormon women understood their power.

Senator Paula Hawkins appears in the Church News with her husband who says he is not threatened and has even joined the Congressional Wives Club.

Very good. When are the women of the Church going to recognize that the women being held up for them as models are the women they are told not to emulate?

It's a double message: These women who are telling them to behave certain ways are women who are not like that themselves. Beverly Campbell, Elaine Cannon, not a one of them is a woman with millions of kids staying home and baking bread. I think women are beginning to figure that out. The women the men honor are not the women in the home. If they really want to keep women in the home, I don't think their actions show those are the women they really think are terrific.

Are Mormon men beginning to understand?

The only Mormon men I associate with anymore are the Mormons for ERA—about 400 or so of them. There are about 1,200 members of the Mormons for ERA altogether.

I understand that you met Fawn Brodie before her death.

We sat and ate an ice cream cone on the Northridge campus and talked for a whole hour.

How did she strike you?

Oh, she was warm and supportive of me—a lovely person. She said something about "I think you usurped my place as the leading female Judas Iscariot"—or traitor—I can't remember the exact words. We laughed and she said she was not sorry to give up the title. I asked her what it had been like for her. She said it was different for her, you see, because by the time she wrote *No Man Knows My History*, she had no illusions about the Church and didn't believe it anymore. It didn't bother her to be excommunicated.

I said, "What about your family?" Her family was really some family! She said, "My father was always accepting of me, but my uncle—David O.—was really upset." She told me about going into ZCMI with her father, and his introducing her to some man who said, "Is this your good daughter or your bad daughter?" and he said, "All my daughters are good."

Did she give you any advice?

Not that I remember. I feel so lucky to have met her just before she got sick.

Did you grow up thinking of her as a hiss and a byword?

Oh yes, evil . . . evil. Before I met her, though, I had already begun to figure out a lot of things about these people we had always thought of as terrible: Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon. I began to see how the Church interpreted their lives. I understood that they weren't really the way they had been portrayed. I know. I am one. Fawn Brodie was really wonderful, quiet, bright, and kind.

If women had the priesthood, wouldn't that mean the demise of the priesthood? Who would have authority then?

Yes, then you would have to consider ordinary people's views and feelings. We would all be considered equally important.

People could get together and divide up duties and roles? You could just draw lots every time? From what I've read, that's not the way to keep a group going.

If you traded off on jobs, it wouldn't get to be hierarchical. Now, whoever controls the money is at the top.

So economics is what lies at the bottom of it? Ownership of property?

Yes, we need an economic revolution. People say to me, why do you think the ERA is so important? It won't do anything. But they fight it anyway. There are little powerless, poverty-stricken women fighting the richest institutions we have, including organized religion. What I would like to say to Beverly Campbell, if I had a chance, when she talks about how the Church wants women to have equality, I would like her to tell me what the Church is doing about that. I would like to ask her if she believes in patriarchy, and if she does, how she can believe in patriarchy and equality at the same time.

It's another compartmentalized Mormon thing. Patriarchy means that if you are male, you are born into the ruling class. Rulers are always higher, and they keep the money for themselves. This is patriarchy: the men on top the women underneath, economically and every other way. Mormons have splits right down the middle of their heads. "Of course I believe in equality; Of course I believe in patriarchy." I mean schizophrenic as the dickens. They don't know what patriarchy means; they don't know what equality means. They haven't even thought through it enough to understand that they are believing in two ideas that are antithetical. Patriarchy is antithetical to equality, absolutely, totally. Therefore, you can't have God believing in patriarchy and equality at once. If God, the Deity, believes in equality of human beings, then he would not set up one sex above the other.

Is it possible to have the gospel without the patriarchy?

Yes. We can still believe in baptism, the Holy Ghost, the laying on of hands, faith, repentance, even the Articles of Faith without patriarchy. I think the Church will change eventually. It will have to.

What good does civil disobedience do, especially in a church setting where certain civil laws don't apply?

It dramatizes and symbolizes and helps bring people to accountability. If a person is committed enough to risk and to sacrifice, this helps society change. Because the Church entered the political arena with both feet, it deserves to be treated like any other political body. And if the larger society changes, the Church will have to change too. If there develops too great a dissonance between church and society, then the pews will be empty, and the Church will have to change.

If people finally come to believe that women are truly equal, the churches will all have to change their politics. Now my father, for instance, doesn't believe the Mormon Church could survive if it were not built on patriarchy, that the gospel itself is founded on patriarchy. I, for one, don't care whether or not the Church gives the priesthood to women so long as we get our legal rights.

One last question: If the ERA had not become an issue in the Church, would you have stayed in the Church, or do you think you might have found yourself in other kinds of trouble?

I like to think I would still have cared enough about women's rights to want to help them. It might have taken another ten years. I used to care a lot about the blacks but remained quiet about them. Even without the ERA, though, I was getting very disquieted by certain happenings in the Church and religious problems were piling up on me.

Do you think you have changed? Have you acquired any non-Mormon habits?

Yes, in fact, I have. I have acquired the habit of free thought.