

# On Being Female: A Voice of Contentment

*Barbara Elliott Snedecor*

FOR MANY YEARS, I have read with increasing interest the abundance of articles and essays dealing with the way men and women should behave—both within the Church and in the world at large. At varying times, these readings have evoked in me feelings of sympathy, restlessness, dismay, and most often a deepening sense, surprisingly enough, of my own contentedness with being female and non-Melchizedek. My contentment seems somewhat startling to me because for many years I was a passionate tomboy, wishing above almost all else to be a *boy* and to have all their wonderful privileges, athletically, professionally, academically, and spiritually.

It is with some hesitancy, then, that I have decided to add my thoughts to the many tender voices that have already shared their feminine perspectives. I offer here my private feelings on traditional male and female roles, my right to priesthood power, and finally, my sense of the female element in the Godhead.

I was born and raised in New York City. When I was fourteen, after receiving intense spiritual witnesses, my family and I joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Our conversion was by no means a quick and easy process.

I considered my home to be very normal at that time. My kind and gentle parents shared their deep faith liberally with their children. My older sister was a great friend, and my older brother and I had genuinely good times together.

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*BARBARA ELLIOTT SNEDECOR is most often a wife and mother, and is less often an author, editor, and teacher.*

In high school, my innocent perceptions of life changed as I, new convert to the Church, took my now clearly defined values and morals into the classroom. Quickly I learned that my kind and loving home was not necessarily the norm. Many students who came into my high school from urban areas endured regular doses of pain, unhappiness, and abuse.

My experiences in a small women's college in Westchester County, New York, widened my perspectives even more. There I heard that women should actively seek the privilege of being educationally separated from men and that that type of undistracted learning was superior. I also learned that a young girl had a right to be selfish: to be concerned only with herself. In my dormitory I also saw firsthand how drunken and drugged people caroused and partied, how strangers shared the same bed — and parted strangers still — and how some young women loved other women instead of men.

Circumstances forced me to leave that small college and continue my education at Barnard College of Columbia University. I commuted every day beneath the gray sprawl of New York City, thriving intellectually on new enlightenment from my classes, but finding at every subway station the unanswerable contradictions between lofty thoughts espoused at a university and the squalid life so prevalent in my city. My intensive reading, writing, thinking, and observing bruised me; I could not solve the injustices I saw. Life seemed so sad at times; only the message of Jesus Christ offered any final consolation.

At Barnard, too, I learned what it meant to be “liberal” — to think freely, to doubt, to be encouraged to doubt. And I came in contact with young women who were aggressive advocates of women's rights, who saw men as their most imposing enemy.

Then in my last year there, I found myself deeply and unexpectedly in love with a young returned missionary. I came back from a summer semester at Columbia with an engagement ring on my finger, much to the shock and sorrow of many of my friends who had anticipated a far different future for me than the standard married Mormon fare.

All this comes by way of introduction. And although I am aware of the darkness lurking beyond my world, I have never personally experienced abuse, discrimination, or domination at the hands of a powerful male. I know, however, that others have. Though I have tasted mostly the sweet, I have been an observer of the bitter and sometimes a confidante to the suffering.

Despite the terrible realities that I know exist between many men and women, I nevertheless feel great joy in my femaleness. My years of marriage and motherhood have only intensified these feelings, for I

could not have dreamed when I was single, young, and vain that I knew so little about life. Marriage has taught me deep, eternal truths; they are not learned without struggle. My experiences as a wife have expanded my capacity to serve, have widened my view of sacrifice, and have taught me to mold my own needs to another's. I have learned to feel wrenching pain and hurt and disappointment for my unmet expectations and yet to feel, too, a sense of renewal and deepening and merging of love that is the great wonder of marriage, of hearts committed and combined and forgiving.

So, too, my role as mother has moved me in unmeasured ways. Little did I know how intense my feelings of love and caring could become for our children. As I struggle to learn patience, to sacrifice, to teach my children yet also let them choose, I grow in a way I imagine eternal parents must know. Even the raw pain that comes when children err teaches me forgiveness and love in the face of hurt that can split souls in two.

In the deepest part of me, then, I rejoice at the gift of my own femininity. I no longer dream, as I did when a child, of how wonderful it would feel to be a boy. I must gratefully acknowledge, too, that I have reaped many rich benefits from the twentieth-century women's movement that have enlarged my sense of the possibilities available to women.

But I also believe, as I have traced my feminine roots back to Eden, that there *are* basic differences between the assignments given by a loving Father to Adam and Eve—and by extension, to all of us—that should not be ignored or deemed as merely old-fashioned.

I see Eve as the victor in the garden, the one who with great tenderness and foresightedness partook of the fruit that humankind "might be." In some instinctual way, Eve sensed that the power of life and of faith comes in our right to choose. While Adam remained innocent to the Father's plan, Eve actively chose to implement it, allowing them to follow what Father had intended all along.

I believe that the decrees, or "punishments," that followed after Adam and Eve had partaken of the fruit were meted out as any compassionate and loving parent would declare them. Assignments were given that would teach and develop the errant children. To Adam, Father gave the burden or work, that by the sweat of his face he should earn his bread. To Eve, Father promised sorrow, that her children should be born of sorrow and that her husband should rule over her.

The division of roles in the Garden seems clear enough. Man was to work, perhaps developing and drawing upon his own strengths to do so. Woman was to bear children, to draw upon her own gifts to be

the mother of all living, to nurture her sons and daughters, to have her desire be towards her husband. In its simplest sense, these were the heavenly Edenic decrees—man should work and woman should bear children and be ruled over by her husband.

Of course, nothing is as simple as planned. Indeed, most all of life and time has strayed far from the ways of Eden. History is replete with pain and distortions and abuse of the Father's plan as he had intended it for his righteous sons and daughters.

In our own twentieth-century American society, we find many alterations of Father's simplistic Edenic decrees. Although it was Adam's basic assignment to work, the daughters of Eve are joining the work force in large numbers and for many reasons. Even within the Church, more than 50 percent of women work. At various points in my own marriage, I have left the home to work, and at all other points, I have produced additional income from within my home to help in small ways to alleviate the enormous weight that falls mostly on the shoulders of my husband.

But when a mother works, much additional stress is heaped upon her, and changes inevitably occur in the way in which the family runs. Speaking from personal experience, I believe that women should realize that as they take on the additional burdens of employment, some elements of family life will change and some will inevitably suffer.

When a mother *must* work, therefore, because of a death or divorce or because one income is simply not sufficient in today's expensive world, she should be given enormous amounts of emotional support because she is taking on additional burdens beyond those which she was to carry. A woman who must take on both nurturing and bread-winning deserves admiration and emotional support and help with her children from Church leaders, the community, and family.

When a mother freely chooses to work outside the home, *not* out of necessity, she should similarly be aware that she is voluntarily shouldering responsibilities beyond those originally intended her. Her task will be difficult, challenging, and hopefully rewarding enough to compensate for the other areas of home and family that cannot help but be altered in some ways.

Certainly, a woman who is not responsible for nurturing children should have the right to work, to develop her talents, and to receive, as all women should, equal pay for equal performance. Similarly, I would never categorically state that women who are talented intellectually must stay home, only to feel suppressed and miserable and trapped by their assignment of "mother." They should, however, enter the work force with an awareness that life will certainly be more hectic for themselves and for their family.

Finally, let me say a word in behalf of the children who are left in other people's care when mother and father both work. I do believe that Heavenly Father hoped for his children to be given a mother and a father who would care for them and nurture them through their childhood. I am well aware that the steady presence of a mother is not always possible in today's world, but when it is, a woman who is at home should rejoice in that privilege.

I do see the roles given to man and woman, then, as essentially separate assignments. Yet, out of necessity, these roles must sometimes overlap in today's most complicated world. Similarly, when moving to matters of priesthood ordination, I see the assignment of priesthood power as essentially a male ordination. Here, too, however, I find I must make allowance for overlap in times of necessity.

Perhaps my naiveté is glaringly obvious, once again. Perhaps I am a victim of my own happy past, my education, the successes of the women's movement, and my stable and compassionate marriage. Perhaps I simply have not suffered enough. As an eastern convert, I must also recognize that I am not as cognizant as my counterparts in the West of matters of priesthood overbearance and repressive power. Neither do I have the stigma of a polygamous past hanging over me—a version of marriage which, for all my scrutiny of D&C 132, has never conclusively been read in my mind as the eternal way marriage must be, but rather, a practice that we sometimes live, if deemed necessary (see Jacob 2:23-35).

I have observed that when the need to bless arises for my husband, the assignment always evokes in him the greatest feelings of humility, even inadequacy. To speak in the name of God seems a tender and difficult task that often comes unexpectedly to a father or a home teacher or a friend, whether the priesthood bearer feels ready to bless or not.

But in a time of deep need, when my six-month-old's life hung in the balance, I did not hesitate to lay my own female hands on the head of my son and pronounce a mother's blessing on him, invoking the power of the priesthood which I surely shared with my righteous husband—as surely as I shared body and soul with him and had created this now terribly sick child with him.

I acted in a purely instinctive way then, without thinking whether or not I was doing right or wrong, certain that no loving Father in Heaven would refuse my plea for the power of God to sustain such a tiny child. So I blessed my son, pleading for priesthood power, petitioning the Father to keep him alive until I could get him medical help, until he could receive an anointed blessing.

Later, I learned that my own father, hearing of his grandson's terrible plight, left his desk at work and went to the board room of his

office, knelt and called on that same priesthood power to keep my son alive. And my husband, driving madly from work to the hospital, laid his hands on Peter's head without oil and without a companion, inviting the priesthood powers of heaven to keep his son alive.

I believe these three blessings, each bestowed in a less-than-official manner, one by a woman unordained, and two by men operating by themselves, without oil, all helped keep our son alive through many medical trials. I would not hesitate to bless again if circumstances were similarly life-threatening, if I were completely alone, and if my marriage, sealed by the Holy Spirit of Promise, was faithful and steadfast.

Additionally, I believe that a righteous, faithful Mormon female can offer a prayer of blessing in behalf of her child even when she is married to a nonmember or inactive husband, as surely as she can offer a prayer at her child's bedside at night. Certainly there is inherent goodness in the power of a mother's loving plea, as in a father's. Certainly each individual, male or female, claims his or her own right to heaven, irrespective of priesthood power.

Admittedly, I confess I have never felt the need for large administrative or ecclesiastical assignments in the Church. I know there are women who see priesthood ordination as a means of empowering them to become bishops and high priests and General Authorities; but if their desire is for power, I doubt the Lord will quickly grant their wishes. If their private longing is the right to render greater service, then perhaps, in time, the Lord will move in that direction, as he did in granting priesthood to all worthy males. It is clear now that in our temples women *are* ordained to priesthood power to officiate in those ordinances in which women are required to administer to women. My own mother and mother-in-law have officiated in unnumbered washings and anointings, sealing their blessings with priesthood authority. In that sense, priesthood power to administer *is* already held by many women in the church.

Although I have resolved the issues of priesthood and of my womanly role peacefully, I have only recently, after many years of searching, begun to resolve my feelings about the female element in the Godhead. The lack of female in the Godhead first began to gnaw at me when I was a young wife and new mother in Boston. There I came in contact with many *Exponent II* women who were most articulate and sensitive in their desire for a Mother in Heaven and for priesthood power. I began to wonder quietly and to anxiously question, Where *was* the female element in all of creation? Surely life was not an asexual creation, for all around us was evidence to the contrary. Yet how strange that the female was never mentioned. In college, I had been excited by our belief that creation was not "ex nihilo" but rather a

matter of reordering or reorganizing already existing elements and spirits. In charge was the Father, greatest of all spirits. That I could understand and accept.

But surely a male could not spiritually or physically beget life on his own. Friends suggested that perhaps, in the endless eternal scheme, the male and female elements of the Godhead had simply merged into one, and there was no need to distinguish one from the other. Another suggested that the female was so sacred she was not to be mentioned, a notion that made me laugh.

After attending Carol Lynn Pearson's play "Mother Wove the Morning," my wonderings intensified. Where was the Mother in Heaven? Would we never know her and never find consolation in our knowing?

Months after seeing the play, late one Sunday afternoon, I attended a baptismal service for a young woman in our ward. The speakers that afternoon were all young people I knew well. Their talks and prayers had a lucidity and candidness that touched me deeply. One bright, promising young woman startled me as she spoke on the Holy Spirit. "The Holy Ghost," she said, "can only be in one location, yet its influence can be felt among all the children of our Father in Heaven at any given time."

Something moved inside me. Her statement seemed to me the purest definition of a mother I had ever heard. While a mother can physically be in only one place at one time, her deepest desire is for her influence to be among all her children wherever they may be, whispering to them, to guide them, protect them, and help them to choose wisely. Would it be wrong to think of the Holy Spirit as the female element in the Godhead?

I think of the language we use to describe the workings of the Holy Spirit—the way it whispers, the way its power seals marriages, the way it produces warm feelings, working gently and kindly on our hearts. That seems the means by which a Heavenly Mother would want to communicate, gently helping her children along the pathway home.

I imagine the Council in Heaven with Mother and Father wanting so to teach their children the value of good and evil; and when the Son's plan was finally decided upon, I could imagine the fear arising in the Mother's heart, as she realized she would lose many of her children. "So many will be lost! Don't you see?" she might have said to the Father. "Many are following the plan of the Son only because they wish to choose their way in life, not because they wish to return home!" I could imagine her despair and the sorrow of her loss as a third of the hosts of heaven were cast out.

I could imagine another plan being proposed from the depths of a mother's love, a plea to sacrifice her physical existence for the right to whisper to her children. I could imagine, too, the grief of Father and Mother as they parted, one still with a physical form, the other only a spirit. Yet parents would sacrifice in such a manner for their children. A mother would relinquish her identity to save her children. The Father gave their Son, the mother her self. For the moment, my imaginings were vivid. The great motherless gap in the heavenly scene had been filled.

I thought, too, of the questions I had, of scriptures that had often puzzled me. Where was the female element in the creation of the earth? Vaguely lines from Milton drifted through my mind. Who was that Spirit that Milton petitioned so early in *Paradise Lost*, that spirit

that dost prefer  
 Before all Temples th' upright heart and  
   pure,  
 Instruct me, for Thou knowst; Thou from  
   the first  
 Wast present, and with mighty wings  
   outspread  
 Dove-like, satst brooding on the vast Abyss  
 And mad'st it pregnant. (I: 17-22)

To my delight, in Genesis, Moses, and Abraham, I found the *Spirit* of God brooding on the face of the water in the early stages of creation, in the waters, where the simplest forms of life originated, where asexual reproduction changed as the life forms became more complex, requiring both male and female elements. If Mother is spirit, then she was there in the beginning, involved in the creative process.

After the creation, the first "official" appearance of the Holy Spirit occurred when Adam was questioned by an angel as to why he offered sacrifice. The Holy Ghost then became active, bearing witness of the Father and the Son and enlightening Adam and Eve to understand the glorious results of their disobedience.

"Blessed be the name of God," said Adam, "for because of my transgression my eyes are opened, and in this life I shall have joy, and again in the flesh I shall see God."

Similarly, Eve received essential enlightenment through the Spirit, stating, "Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient."



“ . . . And the Lord God called upon men by the Holy Ghost everywhere and commanded them that they should repent” (Moses 5:10, 11, 14).

So, too, was the Spirit there when the Son of God was conceived, accounting for both male and female parents to plant the seed of divinity within Mary (Luke 1:34–35; 1 Ne. 11:18–20). And the Holy Spirit was there at other critical moments in her son’s ministry. When he died, he left the earth with her spirit, with her comfort, once again, to nurture, to minister, and to reveal.

Many times I have heard men and women comment that women seem more susceptible to the promptings of the Spirit, that perhaps a woman’s nature allows her to be so receptive. Perhaps the dialogue of the Holy Spirit to a woman is really the exchange of a loving mother with her daughters, a dialogue of female intimacies, instinctively familiar.

Such ideas were new to me, although perhaps others had already suggested them and been laughed at. My new thoughts tasted strange but also vaguely wonderful, although there was only a feeling—and perhaps a hope—that my perceptions might somehow prove true. Heavenly Mother might have relinquished her being for the right to minister spiritually to her children, to witness to truth, to lead her sons and daughters in the paths of wholeness and truth, the pathway home.

And a part of me felt that whether my thoughts were true or not, I had discovered a new way to look at the Godhead, now wonderfully complete with a Mother—in the form of a Spirit—and a Father. I am intrigued by the thought still, and as I search the scriptures and think on the various evidences and ministrations of the Spirit, I have begun to take comfort in my thoughts as a new way of seeing. I find that as I allow the Holy Spirit’s actions to be those of a Mother, an enormous and rich set of possibilities enters into my own life and into the events recorded in the scriptures.

In final conclusion then, may I state that I see all of life and faith as a process of growth and movement. The notion of perfection has always seemed something more directional than attainable to me. So I present these varied and imperfect notions—some traditional, some exploratory—on man and woman and priesthood and female diety with that feeling in mind. Perhaps these thoughts will cause movement in new directions. At the very least, they may participate in the rich music of dialogue.