

# Eclipsed by the Sons

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I ORIGINALLY WROTE THIS ESSAY for a panel discussion at the second Counterpoint Conference for Mormon Women in 1994 in Salt Lake City. The eight years since then have changed the relative position of women in our society, but maybe not enough. We have seen women's lib free us in ways that were only beginning back then. Those changes form the base of this essay. I had been reared in a family of five brothers and no sisters. Another member of the panel had a totally contrasting experience: She was reared in a family of nine girls with no boys. Our assignment was to compare these experiences of being reared in such contrasting Mormon families. My essay still seems pertinent to LDS society today.

I want to review some of my experiences in growing up in that family of mostly brothers, then explore how I gradually achieved a kind of independence that took me to BYU, to marriage, and to my own husband and children.

Some of my first memories are of having lots of brothers, almost too many, and wishing one of them had been a sister, or that I could turn one of them into a girl or maybe a frog—or at least that my parents would adopt me a sister. I was the only girl among seven children. (The last born lived only a day). My father was a bishop, a member of the board of education, and an active politician, elected mayor of Highland Park just before it was dissolved to be reincorporated as South Salt Lake. I figured he knew everything and everybody. When people commented on the fact that he had only one daughter, he would say, "Yes we're glad we have a daughter, but only one. She's more trouble than all the boys put together." Being overly sensitive, I might have missed a twinkle in his eye and misinterpreted his teasing, but every time he made comments like this, I was sure he wished I had been another boy. I hated when people said, "I'll bet you're really spoiled with all those brothers."

Reflecting back, I realize that my father was probably just trying to be clever, but oh how I would have loved him if he had only said, just once, "You bet. We're glad to have a girl. I wish we had some more like her."

We lived a block from my grandparents' home. My grandmother was one of the last of the original pioneers, walking the final 500 miles in one of the last wagon trains to come to Utah before the railroad. She was eight years old at the time. Both of my grandparents were stumpy little Welsh people, Grandma barely five feet tall, and Grandpa not over five-and-a-half. Grandma had a New Year's Day tradition which might have been a Welsh one: To the first *grandson* with brown eyes who wished her a happy New Year she would give a quarter. During those depression years that seemed a lot of money. I could easily have gotten my Happy New Year to Grandma first for that quarter, but I was only a girl. Even Grandma made me feel that girls were not as special as boys.

At church, too, the boys were honored as scouts, deacons, teachers, and priests. Much praise was heaped upon them, but little notice was taken of Beehive activities while Gleaner Girls were just that—left to glean what recognition they could. My brothers assumed they deserved all the honors. Many of my suggestions were met with their favorite comment: "Oh, don't be dumb." I knew they used it on each other, but it seemed especially harsh aimed at me. Even so, my brothers were good boys, often protective toward me, especially warning me not to wear my too-tight sweater nor to keep company with the wrong kind of boys. If I wanted to do something that didn't meet my mother's approval, she would often say, "People will think you're a fool if you do that!" Maybe that's why, after I had children of my own, we adopted in our family a saying: "Don't worry what people will think. They seldom do."

We lived in a semi-rural area, just south of the dividing line between Salt Lake City and the county. Across the street from my grandparents' house lived two Chinese brothers who were vegetable farmers, Ju Gin and Ju Hoy. When they had saved enough money, Ju Gin went to China to get the wife his parents had picked out for him. As his daughters tell it, his parents took him to a park, and on the other side of the park was another couple with a teen-aged girl. They asked him if he would like to marry that girl, and he said, "She looks all right to me." The girl's parents asked her if she would like to marry that man, and she said, "He looks all right to me." Knowing of arranged marriages didn't help much with my sense of a girl's importance.

My mother and grandmother befriended that young bride and taught her to bathe, dress, and take care of her babies as they came along. Since it was the heart of the depression, I often helped my mother tend those babies. In exchange, the Ju Gins would give our family a few dollars and lots of produce. On hot summer days, I tended the babies in our orchard while their mother worked in the fields. When it was feeding time, I pushed the new baby in a big wicker buggy up through the field to where Mrs Ju was working, so she could nurse it.

The Chinese couple's first baby was a beautiful little girl. Of course,

they were disappointed because they wanted a boy. They named her Mary. My mother, as the bishop's wife, felt the baby should be taken to church and given a proper name and blessing. The little Chinese mother agreed, saying only that, if she didn't have to keep her eyes closed, she would go. She dressed little "Melly" in cute clothes, put layers of rouge, powder, and lipstick on her own face, and went to church with us. This was the beginning of her large family of nine children. Each time she was expecting a baby, they wanted a boy! Out of the nine children, she had five girls and four boys. There was much rejoicing at the birth of a boy, but not much for the girls. When one of the boys died at a very young age, the parents were grief stricken and said they wouldn't have cared so much if it had been one of the girls. Mother taught them that they would have that little boy again in the hereafter. This comforted them. The mother eventually joined the church, and the babies were duly given a name and a blessing and then baptized at eight, thus saving them from being "heathens."

As they grew up, my mother saw to it that the children went to primary and Sunday school. On their way to church, they would drop in at our home for inspection. My job was to comb the girls' hair. Mother made sure they were clean and their clothes were in proper condition, so the other children would not tease them or make fun of them.

These Chinese people felt that my parents were indeed favored by the gods because they had so many sons. My brothers earned their money for school and spending by helping Ju Gin get his produce ready for market. There were rough boys in the neighborhood who cheated Gin and played mean tricks on him, but I remember my mother counseling my brothers to work an extra ten minutes and not charge him, to be honest, and not do the mean things the other boys were doing. The Ju family thought highly of my brothers.

When World War II began, my parents told Ju Gin there was farm land available in Southern California and advised him to go there. They would have done anything my parents suggested. Mother told the children to find the church where they would have many friends. The faith seemed justified: Of the eight children, three or four of the daughters stayed active in the church.

Gin bought a farm near Knott's Berry Farm, prospered on the land, and came close to selling to Walt Disney. Eventually the land became too valuable to farm. Today several of the family, including the parents, are very wealthy business people, apartment owners, and store owners.

Several grandchildren of the Ju family attended BYU, went on missions, and married in the temple. When one of the granddaughters was contemplating marriage with a Caucasian, the grandparents said they would not come to the wedding, but when she explained he was a Mormon, they said, "Like the Soderborg boys?"

"Yes," she replied.

They then consented to attend the wedding. His being like the Soderborg boys was what made the difference. No mention of the one Soderborg girl!

My parents may not have put so little value on their one daughter as these Chinese did on their five, but it often seemed to me that they did. They seemed to always plan for my brothers: My brothers *must* go to the university. They *must* go on missions. Yet nobody made any long-range plans for me. Oh, how I felt left out, having no special plans and almost no plans of any kind made for me. After high school, there seemed to be only three or four choices for girls: to become secretaries, nurses, or school teachers, or to get just any job and a hope chest and talk about meeting the right boy. Missions cost a lot of money, and it was more important for the boys to go. I don't remember any talk about my going on a mission. I don't even remember thinking about it much. If a girl went, she was usually thought to be an old maid who had given up on finding a husband, or perhaps she wasn't attractive enough to get a man.

I don't remember my parents talking about college for me, either. They liked to display my brothers' graduation pictures on the mantel in their caps and gowns, but they didn't seem concerned about the absent picture of their daughter. All my brothers graduated from the University of Utah. When I decided to go to Provo to BYU, I had to arrange everything myself. To save money for college, I worked for a year in the diet kitchen at the county hospital, then headed for Provo. My friends accused me of saying there were better boys there. Perhaps there were. There was certainly a different emphasis. In 1940 I took a speech class from Alonzo Morley, in which he gave us some sage advice: "You boys work hard and get your degrees, but you girls find yourselves a good husband."

Such advice must have been part of the general atmosphere; I don't even remember being particularly shocked or irritated at the time. I vowed I would not marry a man who was not a college graduate nor who had not been on a mission. I did find myself a husband during that freshman year, though, even if he wasn't going to school at the time and had not been on a mission. About the second or third time I went out with Marden, he took me home to Morgan to meet his family. I was surprised to find he had five sisters. They were refined and soft spoken. They treated me as if I were one of them. His mother was a beautiful, gentle woman starting into her fifties, but in the beginning stages of crippling arthritis. His father scolded a son who made jokes about my name, but all three of the brothers had good manners. About fifteen people sat down to dinner that Sunday. I couldn't even see any fidgeting while Father Clark offered a long but grateful blessing on the food.

No doubt the sisters were a refining influence on Marden. I've often

said that I fell in love with his family before I fell in love with him. I couldn't help seeing how thoughtful he was to his mother and sisters. How fortunate I was to find a man who was especially sensitive to his mother.

While I was attending the Y, it seemed that the male students dominated the class discussions. The girls had been conditioned not to be too competitive with the boys, to let them beat us in sports, not to let them know if we got higher grades, because it would hurt their tender egos. The men should be in charge of all business deals and of almost anything else that required brains, as they supposedly had better abilities than the girls in such matters. For me personally, I kept hearing my brothers' "Don't be dumb!" That freshman year in college didn't do much to help me develop any real sense of self-esteem.

The war in Europe was threatening our young men. That summer Marden and I decided to get married, so I stayed home for part of the next year, mostly to earn some money, gather a trousseau, and generally prepare for marriage. I learned to be a teletype operator for Western Union, so I could be transferred. After giving me an engagement ring in June 1941, my husband-to-be left for Los Angeles, where his first job was in a Glendale restaurant waiting tables and doing dishes. He was soon doing war work at Lockheed. We were married that October and moved immediately to Hollywood just six weeks before Pearl Harbor. We often joked about our first child being born just nine months and one hour later. Diane was a dainty blue-eyed daughter. I was elated to have a girl, but at the same time wondered if I shouldn't be a little disappointed at my first baby not being a boy. Whatever sense of worth I had lacked with my own family, though, becoming a wife and mother made me feel that being a woman might not be so bad after all.

My six children were much better distributed than my parents' children: girl then boy, girl then boy, then (after a seven-year doctoral period for my husband) boy then girl. I'm afraid, though, that I'd been conditioned to praise the boys a little more than the girls for their academic achievements. More than eighteen years separate our oldest daughter from our youngest. When Diane, our oldest, went through college, the choices seemed pretty much the same as when I was a freshman. We all just took it for granted that girls couldn't be engineers, doctors, architects, scientists, etc., because we didn't have the kinds of minds that could understand those subjects, especially physics, math, engineering, or other technical courses. Diane became a very fine junior high school English teacher, perhaps influenced by her father. Sherri, our second, majored in French, but with no particular profession in mind. She is now a writer, editor, and public relations officer for the Salt Lake school district.

By the time our youngest daughter, Krista, started college, I had become an enlightened feminist, responding to both current ideas and my

own college experiences and reflections. I told her she could be anything she wanted. When she chose physical therapy, little did I realize she'd have to study physics, math, and other things girls weren't supposed to comprehend. Why, she'd even have to carve cadavers. She received her degree in physical therapy from the Chicago Medical School/University of Health Sciences and had a year of intensive residency training at Kaiser Permanente in orthopedic manual therapy, specializing in back problems. She practices now in North Carolina. Compared to me at their age, all three are liberated women.

It took me a long time and lots of study and experience to feel at all liberated. By selling Tupperware in Seattle, I helped my husband through a Ph.D. program, I also bore six children, and helped design and build three homes—all this before I decided to get serious about my own education. I figured that my husband was educated beyond me and I had better try to catch up. Twenty-seven years after my freshman year, I graduated with a B.S. in Housing and Home Management (Environmental Design). Diane graduated three years before I did.

In 1970 I accompanied my husband, together with our three youngest children, to Finland, where Marden was a Fulbright professor at the University of Oulu, at the time "the northernmost university in the world," only a hundred miles below the Arctic Circle. I thought we would find many peasant women sweeping the streets (we did find a few) and doing heavy manual labor. I felt that everyone would envy us, being from America, where women no longer had to do such jobs. To my surprise, I found many professional women doctors, dentists, architects, and professors, many of them speaking four or five languages and sometimes more, which made many of our American women seem almost illiterate. Even in Russia, when we visited there, we noticed far more professional women than we were used to seeing in America.

After that year in Europe, I felt I needed more education. I was restless for something. I took a few exploratory courses and decided to go back to school, seriously, for a master's degree in educational psychology. I found it quite challenging to study with students who were my children's ages. Oh, how times had changed since my freshman days. The women were more competitive, more challenging, and more willing to express themselves. I discovered many new and exciting ideas in psychology. I discovered Freud, Jung, Maslow, Fromm, Rank, and Karen Horney, who soon became one of my favorites. If she felt some of the men's theories were wrong, she wasn't afraid to disagree.

After studying Freud, I felt that he either didn't like women or didn't understand them and had set womanhood back about fifty years. His theories of penis envy and the Oedipus complex disturbed me. After working with Freud for several years, Horney came to the conclusion, just as I had years later, that he was wrong about some of his most basic

theories. She claimed that a child can feel hostile impulses toward a parent without needing an Oedipus complex to explain them. A child, she argues, tries to deal with anxiety by clinging to the parents for security reasons, not from a desire to possess them sexually, as Freud taught. I found Horney's theory made much more sense. She became my heroine, an example of thinking women who were courageous enough to disagree with men when they seemed wrong.

By the time I got my M.Ed., I was over 50, and too old to enter the school system. But I found my training wonderfully appropriate for being the wife of the bishop of the BYU 29th Ward, made up of young married students, for over ten years. I developed much insight into the lives of these young families and the many problems they were facing. Marden and I team-taught a family relations class, where we stressed how important it was to treat each other with dignity and love. We especially warned against being sarcastic and against telling jokes at a partner's expense. We knew how much sting those little barbs could have (I remembered some of my father's teasings only too well). Even with such teaching, though, we saw too many husbands and wives very much in love but hurting each other with little jokes or slighting remarks, often made just to be clever. We also saw distressing examples of husbands using their priesthood authority to control or subdue their wives. They apparently felt that because they held the priesthood, their judgment was automatically better than their wives'; they were the bosses and should have the final say. Long years of tradition and example had gone into such attitudes, and they were difficult to counter. One of our young wives was valedictorian for the school of engineering, and another was a top student in the law school. We were occasionally amused when a wife excelled over her husband academically.

In the spring of '89, my husband and I took a tour to China. We were simply fascinated. We were in Tienanmen Square about three weeks before the demonstrations started. The next fall, some of our friends were returning to China to teach, for the third time. We decided we would go too if my husband were released as bishop in time. I was 69 when I put in my application to go to China as a teacher, although I had never taught school before. My husband and I were assigned to Qingdao University, located about halfway between Shanghai and Beijing on the coast of the Yellow Sea and across from the Korean Peninsula.

In China women are expected to retire at age fifty-five, yet here I was beginning a new career and already fourteen years beyond that age. When our students saw us, they immediately dubbed us Grandma and Grandpa and treated us with great respect. I had between forty and fifty students of my own. When I walked into that first classroom, you can be sure I was nervous. That first class had some brash young people who could attend school for only one year because their test scores were not

high enough to allow them to go the full four years. Some were government officials' children and weren't motivated to study much. After my first stage fright, I figured I knew more than they did, spoke better English than they, and could teach them something.

After a month of teaching, one student told me the report my students were giving of me: My lines were good (indicating the way I dressed), my colors were pretty, my body language was nice, and my speaking voice was very good (they could understand what I was saying). Thus I had all the qualifications of a foreign expert.

One of the most interesting questions I was asked (by a boy) was, "Why did you want to give up your old age and come to China to teach English?" I assured him we weren't giving up anything, that we enjoyed being with young people and hoped we were giving as much joy to the students as we were getting from them. As you might suspect, the boy students were usually given preference over the girls. I could sense that some of my girl students believed the boys were smarter; the girls were also timid about expressing themselves in class.

During one quiz I noticed a boy copying from a girl's paper with her consent. When I checked them, they were word-for-word, even to the mis-spelt words and bad sentence structure. When I confronted them, they explained, "We used the same dictionary and chose the same words." The boy wasn't even sensitive enough to feel he was doing anything wrong.

My students were very curious about family life in America. I told them that in America there were people who, if they could have only one child, would rather have a girl. Some of my male students were deeply offended and made appointments with me to come to my apartment and set me straight about this strange statement. Remembering my childhood and my Chinese friends, I was somewhat prepared for these sessions.

I asked the boys why they wanted sons instead of daughters. "Because they're stronger and can work on the farm." But you don't live on a farm, I countered, and besides girls can drive tractors just as well as boys. "They're smarter than girls," they ventured. I said some of my smartest students were girls. They said, "Boys can carry on the family name." I told them that in America some girls retained their family names or were given family names for middle names, as I was. Finally I said, "Wouldn't it be nice if every family could have one of each?" One boy responded for all of them: "Yes, every boy needs a sister to do his home work." (Maybe that explains something of the cheating.)

A girl we called Janet, who was not really one of my students, but was one of the smartest and most talented girls in the school, asked if I would help her with a speech she was preparing for a contest. She started by saying how frightened she was and that her knees were shak-

ing. She then went on to give a good speech about being a woman. I said, "Janet, you must never begin a speech with an apology. I want you to go out on the stage, stand tall with your shoulders square, look straight at the audience, and say in a loud clear voice, 'I am proud to be a woman,' and then tell why." I think she kind of startled some of the male students, but she walked off with first-place honors.

On our brief visit to India, I noticed little girls acting as nursemaids to their younger siblings, sometimes carrying babies almost as big as they were, or little girls who couldn't have been more than seven or eight working at looms while the boys were carefree and having a good time. Maybe every boy does need a sister to do his homework.

I would hope the days of any girl being eclipsed by the sons is past, but recently I was reminded of my father's attempts at wittiness. One of my brothers was destined to be an old bachelor, or so we thought. When the rest of us were having our babies and a girl was born, he would say, "A total loss, a total loss." When he was thirty-nine, he surprised us by marrying a wonderfully sensitive girl. They had four sons, rather close together. Our daughter, Krista asked her uncle Ray, "Isn't you going to have any girls?" I told her no, that the Lord had heard what he had said about girls and wasn't going to trust him with any. However, the fifth child was a beautiful little girl, the leavening influence in the family of rowdy boys.

Recently this brother and his wife came to visit us. Her face was scarred quite badly from falling off a ladder while picking fruit. As I commiserated with her, my brother spoke up with his rough humor and said, "I finally gave her what she deserved!" This time his humor had gone awry: I observed the twitch of hurt in his wife's face. I hope he hasn't passed that insensitive humor on to his sons, but having heard it for so many years, how could they escape?

I have another brother, Don, who had four daughters in a row. He had great hopes for a son. When the fifth baby arrived and was another girl, he was so unhappy that he wouldn't tell the men at work for several days that his wife had had another girl. The sixth child was the longed-for son, but in a deformed, imperfect body that allowed him only four or five weeks of life. Today Don is the recipient of much love and attention from his daughters. A man who has daughters is indeed fortunate.

Very recently, we attended the missionary farewell of a young man. His younger brother had just been made a deacon and was asked to speak. The young boy said how proud he was to be a deacon, then he would become a teacher, then a priest, then an elder, and then he could go on a mission like his brother. During this recitation, it occurred to me that I had never heard a twelve-year-old girl looking forward to the next seven or eight years of going through Beehive and all the other artificially-named classes for girls or even going on a mission.

On July 22, 2000, I traveled to Cerritos, California, to celebrate Ju Gin's one hundredth birthday with his eight children, thirty grandchildren, and forty-seven great grandchildren. Of our own twenty-one grandchildren, only five have been girls. We hope they have all been made to feel at least as desired as their brothers and much more important than if they had been born in India or China. We love and admire them and couldn't do without them. We certainly desired them and feel no sense of their being less than their brothers. We believe their parents feel the same way. In fact, their scarcity in the family may make them seem even more precious.