

Junior Companion

Holly Welker

MORMON MISSIONARIES IN TAIWAN weren't hard to spot, not only because of those white shirts and name tags. First of all, they were usually of European descent, and those white faces became luridly conspicuous among a group of brown people. Secondly, two thirds of the missionaries in our mission were male, and American men often towered over Chinese men. My first area as a missionary was in Tainan, a small city in southern Taiwan, and I arrived there in August of 1985. When I got off the train that first day, my welcoming committee was the most obvious sight at the station: a group of young, clean-cut, white men surrounding the single solitary sister who was to be my first on-island companion and trainer, Sister Bingley.

At the end of a week occupied with adjusting to a foreign country and settling into life as a proselyting missionary, I got a visit from my mission president, who wanted to check on me. "I'm OK," I told President Gardiner. "I'm finally starting to believe that I *live* here, that I'm not just visiting, since I keep waking up in the same bed and sitting at the same desk. And I like being here so much better than the MTC. I feel like you trust us here. I never felt that way in the MTC."

"I trust people as long as they give me no reason not to," he said. "It's easier. I don't have time to be suspicious of people."

"That makes sense to me," I said. "I'm not very suspicious myself."

"What about the language?" he asked. "How are you getting along with Chinese?"

"Oh, Chinese," I said. "It's the bane of my existence. I don't know how I'm ever going to learn enough to teach in that language. It's so hard."

President Gardiner laughed. "Yes, it is. But you'll do fine. I have to say, if that's your biggest problem, then you're doing very well. To be honest, you're getting along better than I expected."

I wrinkled my nose. "I don't know whether to be flattered that I'm adjusting so well, or disappointed that you thought I wouldn't cope."

"It's not that," he said. "It's hard. It's a very different culture, and

culture shock can be tough, even for people who are glad to be here. And being a missionary isn't easy, either."

But many things facilitated my adjustment to missionary life and Taiwan. For one thing, Sister Bingley and her previous companion had built a solid investigator pool; the work was going well. Bingley and I were lucky because we had a family in our investigator pool—it was always better to teach families because they could be socialized into the church as a unit and encourage one another to stay active, so their retention rate was higher. There was also the fact that families provided potential priesthood holders, something the church desperately needed in Taiwan. Most of the people joining the church in Taiwan at that time were women, who couldn't hold the priesthood and often didn't earn much money and so didn't pay as much tithing as men, all of which made them less desirable as members. Sisters could not teach single men, and elders could not teach single women, but because women joined the church more readily than men, sisters usually had more work and more baptisms. There might have been a little resentment over that behind the fact that a young woman who joined the church was known, somewhat dismissively, as a "*syaujye* baptism." (*Syaujye* means Miss.) Still, it was at least a baptism, and sisters' higher success rate might have been why both of my mission presidents wanted Salt Lake to send a higher percentage of sister missionaries.

Another element helping my adjustment to missionary life was the fact that I liked not only Sister Bingley, but the elders in my district. They were good-natured, decent young men, even if they weren't the most enlightened guys I'd met. Sister Bingley felt fairly maternal towards them; she was always insisting we make cookies for them if they had a bad day. Occasionally the elders would reciprocate. One Sunday they served us dinner. Since we weren't allowed to go into their apartment, we sat outside their house and ate the teriyaki meatballs Elder George, our district leader, had made. It was a nice change of events when they cooked for us, we all thought, but in real life women cooked dinner for men—that was just how it worked. Furthermore, as the elders explained that day, marriage worked exactly the way that missionary companionships did, with a senior companion and a junior companion, and the junior companions were always the women.

"That's crap," I said. "It's not the same. With missionaries, you're not stuck with one companion your whole life, and you're not a senior or a junior companion your entire life, either; you start out as a junior companion, but eventually you get to be in charge and make some decisions. I don't think women need to be junior companions, once they get married, for the rest of their lives."

"Well, it's not exactly like that, but someone has to be in charge," said Elder Cole.

"No, someone doesn't have to be in charge," I said. "It seems to me that marriage could be a partnership, where people make decisions together, instead of one person deciding for both of them."

"I like that idea," Sister Bingley said.

"But that's not how God set it up," Elder George said. "Don't you see? Someone has to be in charge, and it has to be the priesthood holder. That's how God wants it to work."

"No. Look, with junior and senior companions you've got someone who's been here longer, and that's supposedly why they're in charge of making decisions and leading discussions: because they have more experience. But that's not always true in the world. Men and women have different levels of experience, about different things."

"Sister Welker, if God doesn't want someone to be in charge, why did he give men the priesthood?" one of the elders demanded.

"Hell if I know," I leaned back in my chair and looked at the sky. "If that's true. . .if that's true. . .This whole junior-senior companion business is such a gross analogy. The whole thing, the sexism and the 'male domination by god-given right' business just makes me so hopeless."

"Sister Welker does get pretty worked up about things, doesn't she," Sister Bingley said. "But I don't want to be a junior companion my whole life either."

"Well, Sister Welker," Elder George said, "at least we can tell you think about these things."

In order to introduce all his missionaries to the revised discussions implemented church-wide in 1985, President Gardiner planned a three-day mission conference, chartering buses to carry us all to a resort at the southern tip of the island. The two missions in Taiwan were among the last to switch to the new discussions because it took so long to translate them into Chinese. It was the first time since the MTC that I'd been in a large group of missionaries; it was jarring to be one out of 130, and although I enjoyed the conference, I was relieved when it ended.

On the bus ride back to our area, Sister Bingley and I sat in front of Elder George and one of his friends, Elder Lavender, who only had a few weeks left. Elder George was teasing him about dating and marriage, and said something, loudly enough that I could hear, about "finding a nice submissive wife." I turned to scowl at him; he raised his eyebrows and grinned.

"Are you trying to make me mad again?" I asked.

"Sister Welker's a *feminist*," Elder George said to Elder Lavender.

"So what if I am?"

Elder Lavender actually gasped. "A feminist? So you hate men?"

I sighed. "No, I don't hate men. That's not what feminism means, any more than a black person fighting for civil rights necessarily hates all

white people. It just means that I recognize that sexism has certain negative consequences in the world."

Elder Lavender was not reassured. "But we know that God made men and women different for a reason. . . ."

"How God set things up and how people implement what he set up are different things," I said. "I don't believe that God wants men to make all the decisions and women to acquiesce."

"What does *acquiesce* mean?" asked the elder across the aisle from Elder George.

"It means go along with."

"Well," Elder George said, "there are some things that I think men *should* be in charge of. For instance, I don't know if I'll let my wife have a checkbook."

I nearly fell off my seat. "You don't know if you'll *let* her?"

"My mom doesn't have a checkbook."

"How does she go shopping? Who buys the groceries in your family?"

"Well, she does. At the beginning of every month, my dad gives her two checks. But he doesn't give her more because she might bounce one."

"What if she needs to buy something else?"

"Oh, he'll give her another check if there's an emergency. And he lets her have a credit card."

"Wow, how magnanimous of him," I said.

"I don't think he's doing her a favor," Sister Bingley said. "What if he leaves her? Or dies? Then she doesn't know how to balance a checkbook, and there's no one to help her do it."

"She could find someone to help her," Elder George said.

"Maybe she could and maybe she couldn't," I said, "but wouldn't it be easier if she just knew how to do it herself in the first place?"

"Look, marriage is like companionships: there's a junior and a sen. . .," another elder began.

Sister Bingley and I exchanged a look. "Yeah, yeah, yeah," I said. "I've heard this. But the whole point of junior and senior companions is that there's one companion who's more competent, more experienced, and better equipped to make decisions and lead discussions simply by virtue of having been here longer. That's not true in real life. I mean, surely, at some point in your life, you've met a stupid *old* person? Have you ever met a couple where the wife is older than the husband? Who should be senior companion in that case?"

"But it's the man who. . .," the elder started.

"Look," I interrupted, "are you telling me that I'm less competent, less intelligent and less well equipped to make decisions than you are, just because I'm a woman? I mean, come on, I'm one of those smart

chicks. Always have been. Ultra competent, gets good grades, very organized, all that crap. Are you telling me I should become stupid, just so I can achieve a traditional Mormon marriage? Women have been taking care of themselves *and others* in all kinds of ways for centuries, and I think the church should acknowledge that."

"But it's actually good for women not to have to make decisions," said an elder who'd come up from the back of the bus. "They need to be relieved of those responsibilities because they need to devote their time to bearing and raising children."

"Oh, so because I have a uterus, I'm perfectly well-equipped to make decisions for someone who has virtually no autonomy—an infant—but even as an adult I can't be trusted to make decisions for *myself*? You have to see that that's ludicrous."

"What's *ludicrous* mean?" asked the elder who didn't know *acquiesce*.

"It means ridiculous."

"I don't think it's ridiculous," Elder Lavender said.

"Well, I do. And I don't intend to be a docile wife. . . ."

"What's *docile*?"

"It means submissive. Anyway. I want someone who has enough intelligence and backbone that he doesn't *need* a docile wife."

"Well, anyone who would marry you would have to be pretty brave," someone said.

"Thank God for that," I said.

"We have to deal with the practicalities of life," Sister Bingley said. "One of my friends is dealing with her parents' divorce, and it's ugly. They've been married for 30 years, and the wife has never worked outside the house or dealt with money at all. She can't balance a checkbook, and there *aren't* that many people around willing to help her. It's really sad."

"Why are they getting a divorce?" one of the elders asked.

"He fell in love with his secretary."

"Oh, so it's because he's being unrighteous," one of the elders said with satisfaction. "So if he was just righteous, everything would be okay and would work like it's supposed to."

"Maybe," Sister Bingley said. "But do you always know when you get married that your husband will stay righteous? I mean, you might as well be prepared to take care of yourself."

"Well," said an elder from the back, "you know, right, that women just are more righteous than men. And men have the priesthood and women don't because men have to learn to accept responsibility and how to be in charge and still be righteous. Women don't need it because they already understand responsibility and righteousness."

"Wow," I said. "I'll agree that a lot of men don't seem to handle responsibility or power all that well. But the situation you're talking about

is absurd, where you've got one developmentally advanced person taking orders from one developmentally delayed person. It's like some kindergartner telling his teacher, 'Okay, now we'll go to the zoo, and then we'll eat chocolate, and then you'll take me to the store and buy me lots of toys, and there's no way I'm spending any time learning to count or say the alphabet.' The kid doesn't learn what he needs to know, and the teacher has to be bored and frustrated out of her mind."

"Well, at least that gives you guys an idea what it's like to deal with DL's sometimes," Sister Bingley said, laughing.

Elder George laughed too. "It doesn't matter. You'll both learn to deal with things when you get to the celestial kingdom and your husbands have 15 other wives."

"Oh great," I said. "Is that the best you can do? Cop to polygamy as a way to end an argument about gender?"

"I'm not convinced that we'll all have to practice polygamy," Sister Bingley said.

One of the elders from the back of the bus—a dozen elders (only elders; the few other sisters on the bus remained involved in their own conversations) had clustered around us, listening to me and Sister Bingley argue with Elder George—interjected, "Well, if you read Doctrine and Covenants Section 132, it says. . ."

"Yeah, I know," I sighed. "Why do elders always quote scriptures to us, as if we don't know them ourselves? 'If a man have 10 virgins given to him, he cannot commit adultery, for they are his.'¹ I have polygamists in nearly every branch of my family, so you don't have to tell me that people really did it and sometimes it worked well. But why did it work? Polygamy seems like it's all about men being in charge of a lot of women, but it actually gave women a lot of autonomy. Autonomy is, you know, being able to do stuff on your own," I said, noticing that the elder who'd asked me to define the other words looked perplexed. "For instance: the first woman elected to serve in a state senate was a plural wife in Utah.² Women often pooled their resources and shared labor. There's a story of wives stuck out in the middle of nowhere, without a doctor around, so they pooled their money and sent the smartest one off to medical school in Chicago, and the other wives took care of her kids while she was gone."

"I've never heard of that," Sister Bingley said.

"I'm not all that thrilled about the idea of polygamy," I said, "but it's interesting to know that women were able to make it work for them in

1. See D&C 132:61-62.

2. Martha Hughes Cannon, the Democratic candidate, elected in 1895. Her defeated opponents included her own husband.

certain ways. And you know, it's not like it did anything to create a lot of sympathy for fathers. I mean, Dad shows up, he spends a week sleeping with Mom, and then he disappears for a few months. There's always that story about some man who pats a kid on the head and says, 'Who's little boy are you?' and the little boy says, 'I'm yours, Daddy.' Is that the kind of father YOU want to be?"

Elder George and Elder Lavender looked at each other, grinned and shrugged. "If that's what the Lord wants me to do, I'll do it," Elder George said, with a mixture of coyness and conviction.

"Me too," said Elder Lavender, with more conviction than coyness.

"Gee, it's nice to know I'm surrounded by men so willing to exercise their priesthood in righteousness," I said dryly. "Anyway, you're still copping out. You know what I'm saying makes more sense than what you've said."

"That's not true. What we've said makes a lot of sense too," interjected one of the elders from the back. I only rolled my eyes.

Anxious to prove that they weren't mad at us for disagreeing with them, the elders invited us to stop for ice cream when we finally got back to Tainan. The fact that we had stronger arguments, a more logical and consistent position, didn't matter: doctrine was on their side. I was glad merely that Sister Bingley and I had managed to make some of them think about questions such as whether or not to *let* their wives have a checkbook. But I still felt sorry for the women who would eventually marry them.