

“Dear Brethren”—Claiming a Voice in the Church

Carol Lynn Pearson

IN THE SEVERAL DECADES in which I have heard LDS women discuss “women’s issues” as they pertain to the church, I have found it remarkable how much fear there is among so many to speak their minds about the things they find upsetting. Time after time, after hearing a story of personal hurt or of general distress about “the place of woman,” I have said, “Write a letter. Raise your hand. Speak to your bishop.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that!” There is fear in the voice.

I acknowledge that too many women and men have been punished in large ways or small ways for speaking their minds about issues in the church, but because I have not been punished and because I have reason to believe that many of my words have been well received and helpful, I would like to encourage my favorite form of critical response—writing a letter.

I do this by sharing a letter I wrote fifteen years ago to my bishopric, with copies to my stake president and to President Hinckley and to Dallin Oaks. Something had happened at church, so huge in all that it symbolized, that I knew I could either chew on it for weeks or just sit down and write a letter. I sat down and wrote.

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Dear Bishop and Counselors,

Knowing, as I do, that the three of you are good and caring men, I believe that you have concern for the feelings of the members of the ward. Consequently I feel comfortable in sharing some feelings with you.

One of the roles that life has assigned me is that of defender of women, which role I am happy to take. I have for more than thirty years been a careful observer and documenter of the various ways in which our society and our church demean women and consistently value things male over things female, despite rhetoric to the contrary.

Of all the things I have observed, none has been more remarkable than what happened in our ward yesterday on Mother's Day. I love our ward. When people ask me why I don't move back to Utah, a major part of my response is that I love my ward in California. I have wonderful memories and great appreciation for this ward and for this ward's bishopric. But the memory of yesterday will remain with me as an enormous sorrow. I will start at the beginning.

A year ago, as I was sitting in sacrament meeting on Mother's Day, it suddenly dawned on me that all of the talks, *all* of the talks, were in commemoration of the priesthood. I could not believe my ears. I thought to myself, this is not happening. They would not do this to us. Here we have one day—*one* day out of the year—on which it is legitimate to focus on women, on the powers of the female, possibly on the eternal and theological implications of motherhood, and instead we devote that day to honoring the *priesthood*? Surely this is not happening. But every talk was on the priesthood. The printed program, of course, informed us that the "theme of the month" was priesthood restoration, but that was thin justification for what was happening. By the time the meeting was over, I was fairly shaking. I wished that the talks had been on food storage; we could have forgiven that as an oversight. But to have talks on the priesthood on Mother's Day conveys the unavoidable feeling of insult, rather like spending Martin Luther King day talking about how blessed we are to have been born white. After the closing prayer, carnations were handed out to the mothers. I had to wonder what the flower meant.

I was not the only woman in the ward who noticed the problem. Both of my visiting teachers, without my bringing it up, said, "How did you like the way they snubbed us on Mother's Day?" But women are good and forgiving and supportive and take what they're given and make the best of it. However, I did convey to the bishopric through a respected third party that I felt a real mistake had been made.

That was last year, and on the Sunday before Mother's Day of this year, one of the women in the ward said to me, "What do you think we're going to have on Mother's Day next week? Do you think they'll give us the same treatment?" I assured her I was certain they would not.

Can you imagine my surprise when, later that evening, my son John poked his head in my door and said, "Mom, would you remind me—I was just asked to give a talk next Sunday. On the restoration of the priesthood."

If I had not been sitting down, I might have fallen down. "You're kidding. You've got to be kidding. John, next Sunday is Mother's Day."

"Oh. Oh, yeah."

"John, would you please call Brother Manning back and tell him next Sunday is Mother's Day and ask if you can talk on that."

Brother Manning was highly apologetic for not having noticed the date himself and said that certainly John should speak to a theme of Mother's Day. When I got on the phone and recounted the past year's Mother's Day history to him, Brother Manning said, "Sister Pearson, you sound just like my mother. Those are things she says all the time."

I could not believe that we were going to have a repeat of previous year's performance. In fact, I made some phone calls to find out what the talks were going to be the next week. I was told I could expect the major addresses to be themed to Mother's Day. I then asked John if he would like to talk on the subject of the Heavenly Mother, something we have talked about frequently in our family, and he said yes. The talk that John subsequently gave was drawn from the huge research I have done on this subject over the last many years.

Much to my amazement, after the two youth speakers gave their talks themed to mothers, the two main speakers addressed themselves fully to the priesthood. I was embarrassed for Brother Curtis, who made a difficult attempt at the beginning of his talk to acknowledge that it was Mother's Day and tried somehow to tie that in with the subject he'd been asked to speak on. I could only shake my head, amazed that this was happening. When next the brother who was conducting gave particular thanks to those who had spoken to their assigned theme, I felt a shock from which I am still reeling. And then came the statement, "Isn't it wonderful that motherhood and priesthood work so well together?" I sat in disbelief. After the prayer I was asked to stand, so I could receive a pink carnation.

I may be the only one in the ward who is writing a letter to you, but be assured that I am not the only one who is feeling precisely what I have expressed. Many women and many men found it to be a sad day. Directly after Sacrament Meeting, a member of the Relief Society Presidency grabbed me and asked if I could please take ten minutes at the end of Relief Society and give some thoughts to the mothers, as they had noticed that nobody had prepared anything really to commemorate the day, and they were also grabbing some Primary children to come in and sing. I told her that of course I would.

Brethren, what a shame!

But, even as I write this, I know that the bishopric is not the enemy. Consciousness is the enemy. Each member of the bishopric is a good man, whose hard work and kindness have been appreciated by me and my family. The problem here is not just the simple one of a failure to plan ahead with a little sensitivity. And the result is not just somebody's hurt feelings. What happened yesterday is symbolic of something so vital and profound that it demands our very best attention. Why is our collective consciousness of what we do to our women so low? How can we, year after year, decade after decade, allow one half of the human family to be placed in a secondary position and consider this appropriate?

Today in the newspaper I read, under the heading, "Why Women Can Wear Pants but Men Can't Wear Skirts," something I have known for a long time: "This double standard exists because men have higher status than women in our society. . . .It is acceptable to take on the trappings of those who have higher status than we do. . . .But if men dress like women, it's not acceptable. After all, why would anyone want to look like or act like or live like someone who is less respected? We aspire to upward mobility, not downward mobility."

And we wonder why many women are opting against motherhood and in favor of traditionally male pursuits. Or why many women who do devote themselves primarily to traditionally female pursuits do so with the vague feeling that, much as they love it, they are viewed as holding second prize. The church should be actively engaged in promoting the status of women, the respect given women, not in continually diminishing these.

On page 92 of the current *Ensign*, Elder Hinckley is quoted as saying, "Woman is God's supreme creation. . . .Strong and able women today fill responsible posts in industry, government, education, and the professions. The whole world looks with respect to the Prime Minister of Britain, a woman of demonstrated ability and great capacity in carrying forward a program designed to strengthen her nation and its people. We were all impressed when Golda Meier served as Prime Minister of Israel. It is wonderful to witness this great renaissance. I think it will continue to grow for the blessing of people everywhere."

There is indeed a "great renaissance" going on in the world, in which women are being acknowledged and empowered, and it is and will be a blessing to everyone. But is there such a renaissance going on in the church? Many of my close women friends have left the church, despairing that such a renaissance is possible. I have chosen to stay in the church, determined to be a force in assisting that renaissance to happen.

And slowly it is, I think. Slowly more and more people are asking questions: Where are the women in our history? Why did all the prayers in the Bible go up for a boy child instead of a girl child? Why are women in the scriptures so invisible or so clearly second class when they are visible? Why do we so emphasize the eternal family, but not find it strange to worship God as a Single Parent? Why are we given the impression, through scripture and story, that everything really important on this earth has been done by a male God and his male children? Why does the historical suppression of the knowledge of God as Mother look like "a conspiracy" (to quote a fine review of a BYU symposium as reported in the *Church News*)? Why are Mormon women who go to work to send a son on a mission or perhaps to send a child to college or to insure music lessons for their children made to feel guilty when they deserve all the support they can get? Why are Mormon women so subject to depression?

Why did the husband of a friend of mine say, when she asked him what he would do had he been the one in the relationship born a woman, "I guess I'd just make the best of a bad deal"? Why do so many Mormon women go through the temple once and refuse to go back again or go back with great reservations? Why did I notice last year in a Relief Society lesson, given to women by a woman, that thirteen examples and statements cited were from men and not one was from a woman? Why did it take Sonia Johnson to point out that women were not allowed to pray in Sacrament Meeting? Why do other indefensible policies still exist, such as that requiring an inactive husband to give permission for his wife to go to the temple, but not for an inactive wife to give permission for her husband to go to the temple? Why can a non-member male serve as Sunday School president, but a faithful woman member cannot? (A woman can rule Great Britain or Israel, but not the Sunday School?) Why did the General Presidency of the Relief Society and the entire General Board have the distinct feeling, when organizational changes were made a few years ago, that they were being asked to step further to the back of the bus? Why has a recent church-sponsored survey shown that the more educated a man is, the more likely he is to stay in the church and the more educated a woman is, the more likely she is to leave?

The questions that are being asked go on and on. It may be possible to dismiss this letter because, as we know, Sister Pearson has this thing about women. Dear Brethren, this thing about women is one of the most profoundly important issues that exist today, affecting the family, the nation, the world, and surely the church at the very center. Maleness and femaleness, on every level, are out of balance, and the resultant ills are frightening. To say more would require a book, not a letter.

My goal is to raise awareness. My wish is that each of you would look at every program, every policy, every talk, every lesson and ask if it promotes or undercuts the self-esteem, the general status of women. I know that you love your wives and that you want the best for your daughters and that you feel concern for the well-being of all the women in the ward. The women in this ward are marvelous people. I love them. They deserve the very best.

The renaissance of women that Elder Hinckley spoke of is a reality and is not going to be reversed. With or without the church it is, with all its confusion and possibility for excess and error, going to move forward and sort itself out and bless the world. I sincerely hope that we can all be a part of it.

As to the immediate incident that prompted this letter. The obvious justice would be to take next Sunday, which is the official day to commemorate the restoration of the priesthood, and devote it to a belated celebration of womanhood and motherhood, not a "program" with little ditties about how perfect our mothers are, which sometimes makes them feel worse going out the door than they did coming in, but powerful,

dignified discourses on womanhood and motherhood in history, in our lives today, in our eternal tomorrow. If you could do something so magnificent as that, how proud of you I would be!

I thank you for reading this letter. I thank you for being the good men that I know you to be. If I have made you uncomfortable, I do not apologize. Discomfort, even pain, as all women know, is the only way a birth takes place. We are in the process of giving birth to a new and better vision of women, and we must go through our labor.

Again, I offer you my appreciation and pledge you my support. I want to continue to give service in the ward and in the church in whatever way I may be useful.

I send this letter with my very best wishes and hopes for increased understanding.

Very sincerely,
Carol Lynn Pearson

POSTSCRIPT

This letter bore good fruit. My bishop, a fine man, called me the night he received the letter and said, "Sister Pearson, my consciousness has been raised. I don't pay much attention to what people say about the way I run the ward, but I have a great deal of respect for you and I listen to what you say." The bishop and I spoke for some time, and the upshot was that he suggested that August's "theme of the month" should be "Women and Mothers." He asked me to help him plan it and also to be a major speaker. I gave a very strong talk on valuing femaleness as much as maleness, which I later expanded into an address I gave to the Mormon Women's Forum called "A Walk in the Pink Moccasins."

I am still asked to speak in my ward, frequently in fact, and my colorful comments are looked forward to in Relief Society and other meetings. And I still write letters to the Brethren, most recently about how it feels to be handed a Relief Society manual that is only a priesthood manual in disguise, making not the slightest effort to include me as a woman.

This morning, as I read the first lesson and examined the entire text, I remembered the old English law of marriage that said when male and female join together, they become one, and the one is him. I felt I was holding in my hands an anachronism. How can we be at this level of consciousness in the year 2003?

Maybe someone gave a little thought to what I wrote. But more important to me, I went to sleep that night knowing that I am not a woman without a voice. That's a good feeling.