

Woman: Joint Heiress With Christ

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I've been asked to speak on the topic of women who have inspired me, how they've helped me, and how I honor them in my life.

I want to start with a remarkable experience I had in this ward, when a group of Primary girls inspired me in a life-changing way. I was teaching the senior Primary about the stories of Jesus, and they were very squirmy so I decided to harness this energy into a spontaneous form of kinesthetic learning. I said: "Let's act out things people do to show they are following the Savior's example!"

First a boy stood up and acted like he was teaching or preaching. "Great job! Yes, we all need to share the gospel. Jesus was a master teacher! Very good!"

The next boy acted out reading scripture. "Absolutely! Jesus read his scriptures and knew them by heart! Next example!"

Enter, the girls. They came in groups, of course.

The first troop of thespians gave a rather clever, funny, G-rated account of the Savior's birth. I was impressed to note that Jesus's umbilical cord was neatly cut and tied. I wasn't quite sure how to respond to this, though, so I said, "Um, yes, the Savior had to be born! Getting a body is important!"

The next girl placed her hands on another girl's head and acted out healing the blind. It was arresting to see these girls going through priesthood motions. I couldn't exactly say, "Yes, you can heal the sick with the laying on of hands," could I? I muttered a bit breathlessly, "Um, yes, it takes a lot of faith to be healed!"

Next girls acted out bestowing the priesthood. I simply said,

“Next group!” The next girls acted out administering the sacrament. At this point I wondered if I should say something. Did I need to elucidate that the girls could do none of these things to follow Christ? I decided to simply let their skirts reflect that they knew the stories of the Savior, and not to expound on how boys and girls follow him differently.

The next girls marched up . . . and in a moment I will never forget, Amber raised Naishma from the dead. I was speechless, stricken dumb, to see these little girls play out a symbol of atonement and resurrection. I squeaked out something like, “You all know a lot about Jesus! Let’s do music time!”

With gusto they belted out the first strain: “I’m trying to be like Jesus, I’m following in his ways. I’m trying to love as he did, in all that I do and say.”

I have spent months, even years, trying to parse out this experience and answer the question, “How can women be like Jesus if we don’t have a priesthood? What is my power?” I studied. I learned that many of the qualities that were celebrated in Jesus were not what would be considered classically male: He did not sit on a throne, carry weapons, or lead armies. He did not perform feats of physical prowess, he did not marry the princess or have a quiver full of children. His celebrated virtues were classically feminine: gentleness, kindness, unconditional love, forgiveness, service, and strikingly, he kept the company of women. It was like he was a sister. He even once called himself a mother, in the imagery of a hen inviting her children to shelter under her wings. (We do not usually consider chickens to be nature’s most noble animals, but in scripture, wings are the symbol of power.) Jesus obviously understood inspirational womanhood, and he embraced it without hesitation, incorporating women into the fabric of his dispensation unlike any prophet before or since. I pondered further and learned more—the reason female spirituality matters, the reason you should listen to a woman when she speaks.

The female experience of life is a very vulnerable thing. I went visiting teaching once to a jolly sister in Ithaca, who, when I sat down with her and discussed the procession of her long life, solemnly declared to me, “I believe women are placed on the earth to suffer.” And she meant it. She chose to assign meaning to her tragic experiences by attributing them to God’s will—by believing that

He wanted her to suffer. She had chosen to believe in an abusive Heavenly Father, not a being of whom we say “God is Love.” This is an absolute tragedy. The eternal nobility of womanhood is one of the Restoration’s great recalibrations in Christianity. Woman’s suffering is the condition of mortality and the result of the abuses of agency. It is not a holy calling. But I could not turn to a scripture that read, “Woman is that she might have joy.” This sister’s reaction to her life experiences is not an anomaly for women. Often when a woman tells me of a personal tragedy, her sensemaking narrative reflects some form of “What have I done to deserve this?” or else, “This must be God’s will. Thy will be done.” I believed for years that my own multiple miscarriages had somehow been God’s will, and this prevented me from fully trusting Him. I think I have a much better idea of God’s will now. God does not want women to suffer. I can, however, kind of see where we, as women, would get this idea. It is the result of our collective reality.

The female condition is appalling. The majority of people in poverty are women and their children. Professional women face an exhausting host of challenges and injustices—many of which are humiliating—and those are exponentially increased if they become mothers. Every mother who is not independently wealthy faces financial vulnerability whether or she is married or not. Centuries of political, philosophical, scientific, and cultural and religious leaders have perceived and portrayed the female form as broken, incomplete, subordinate, or as a source of sensuality and temptation. The story of Eve has been a tremendous burden on my gender, as women are often blamed for all the problems there are in the world and sometimes even as the source of evil itself. Women have often been measured and classified solely by the status of their sexual activity. Women are often penalized and denigrated for rearranging their lives in self-empowering ways. They are luridly portrayed as victims in media. Around the world, female babies receive less nutrition than their brothers. Exponentially more female fetuses are aborted. And overwhelmingly, it is women who are most often the victims of intimidation, harassment, extortion, pornography, violence, rape, abuse, trafficking, slavery, and other atrocities. And yet, even with all this, the present day is the best time it has ever been to be a woman. These are not uplifting things, probably not the kind of stuff you want to hear in sacrament meeting on Mother’s Day. But we declare

a gospel that we claim is equal to the task these burdens represent. I list these things not to cast women as victims, but to present a narrative of spiritual opportunity

Woman's collective vulnerability and experience in the world impacts her spirituality. It affects us on many levels, including how we interact with men (including God the Father), and with our own power. It is part of my everyday calculus as I navigate life to figure out how to keep myself and my daughters safe. There is a very delicate balance between trying to maintain a girl's innocence and also giving her the awareness and assertiveness she needs, between protecting her but not stifling her, and between teaching her how to defend herself while maintaining that she does not bear the responsibility of others' sins against her. I do not want to underprepare my daughters and leave them vulnerable, but neither do I want to fill them with fear.

I submit to you that women continue to descend beneath unspeakable things, even in our modern day, even in our local places, and this brings them very close to Him who descended beneath all things. Just by being women, we breathe the air of Gethsemane. I am a privileged woman, yet I feel an echo of empathic mourning for my sisters, as do most women. Each of us knows how easily "that could be me." Our Savior Jesus Christ descended beneath all things, and also experienced a collective pain, and He used this to empower Himself with the profound empathy for the human condition that He needed to enact the atonement. He did not say, when crucified, "thy will be done" and then simply accept His death as God's will, resignedly moving into His tomb. Despite suffering, He knew it was God's will, not that He should die, but that He should LIVE, and spread that life to everybody else. He rose again and offered us the power to do the same.

The empathy that arises from pain is one source of Christlike love, and the culmination of it is the healer's art. There are better ways to obtain it—for example, we can grow empathy and love by living up to our covenant to mourn with those who mourn and by bearing one another's burdens, or by fighting evil outright. I knew a woman in this ward who used her training as a lawyer to fight against child pornography. This was a painful burden to bear, since she learned of great tragedies, in order to fight it. She grew in empathy and the healer's art through this heavy service—which, while

difficult, was far less destructive than being a victim of it herself. I reject the idea that woman has been called to suffer . . . but the woman's collective experience has unfolded as it has, and it is undeniably powerful. Though tragically obtained, this empathy and healing we carry is one thing women have to offer. This is Amber raising Naishma from the dead, as sisters raise every one every day in a thousand resurrections. Yes, we have things to teach you.

We learn in church that men and women are fundamentally different. If we follow this assertion to its logical conclusion, it would mean that men and women have different spiritual contributions to make. I cannot, of course, speak for every woman, but I am confident in declaring that female mortal experience is not the male mortal experience and that the female spiritual experience IS NOT the male spiritual experience. Most of our leadership, scriptures, quotations, publications, and teachings reflect the male spiritual experience, and the price of this is, I believe, that we have not yet figured out how to institutionalize inspirational womanhood.

We have not made women's words required reading. When female leaders speak in general conference, they speak to their stewardships . . . so if you are not in the Relief Society, Young Women, or Primary, you may easily turn off your attention when those leaders speak, as I have done myself. There is no declaration: "This is my beloved daughter, hear Her." Nor do we sing, "Come listen to a prophetess's voice." Without an outright commission to do so, we may only rarely hear women speak of their personal inspirations or allow them to inspire us. In reality, inspiring women surround us like oxygen; but like oxygen, though it sustains every breath, they can be invisible and easy to ignore. If you are to be spiritually inspired by women, the burden is often upon you to notice and to seek it out.

Despite all this, Mormonism has started to heal the female wounds and welcome inspirational womanhood. We have, I believe, rhetorically adopted a theology of gender equality. We have established a narrative that Eve's act in the garden was purposeful and necessary, even heroic, or in the words of Sheri Dew, "Were it not for Eve, our progression would have ceased."¹ Because of this, the hearts of the children are turning again to the parent whom they reviled—Eve, the mother of all living, their own mother. Until we recaptured Eve, we could not recapture sacred motherhood or

womanhood, so this is key. We Mormon women have a history of empowered matriarchy, where women healed and prophesied and had visions. I have learned over the past several years that the same such charismatic spirituality actively continues in the lives of LDS women, though usually very quietly. We are encouraged as women to seek after spiritual gifts and to be educated. And very significantly, we have a Heavenly Mother doctrine. Female spirituality remains theologically and institutionally undeveloped in Mormonism, but the foundation has definitely been laid. As it unfolds through ongoing revelation, it will be wonderful to behold! In the meantime, women need to practice expressing their feminine spirituality. So here I go—I'll share with you a vision I had while preparing this talk.

I had a dream of a depiction of the *Pietà* sculpture. In my dream, the beautiful stone Mary held the crucified Christ. Tears fell from her stone eyes. Then Jesus's eyes opened, and He smiled at her and said, "Mother, I am reborn," and then, now resurrected, he walked away. Mary's eyes continued to pour tears, and I realized that the *Pietà* reversed . . . that Mary was a dead female form, held in the arms of Heavenly Father. She continued to weep with the pain her sisters endured, and as I watched, became a young girl of twelve years old—representing all of womanhood in her adolescence, and Heavenly Father wept with her. Then Jesus returned to her and said, as he had to the twelve-year-old daughter of Jarius, "Damsel, I say unto thee, arise." And she did rise. Jesus then said, "Mother, you are reborn."

Women's visions are powerful and revealing. And they are often whispered. You may never encounter one unless you seek it out.

I want to share a specific example of an inspiring woman. I do so with some trepidation. It is a fraught thing, to hold up an inspiring woman, because women may see her as one more impossible standard to live up to. For those who venerate her, they may say "I could never do that." I know this because I feel it a lot myself. The Spirit is in the process of convincing me that this is the wrong reaction to an inspiring woman. I should say, "She is an example of my potential—I could totally do something, Liz-flavored, as awesome as that!" Sisters and brothers, I think we need to take our matriarchs to heart and see in them the power that we ourselves wield in our own time and our own ways. And when we behold one inspiring woman, we are invited to ponder what a queendom of matriarchs could do. So with that in mind I give you Judy Dushku.

Judy Dushku is a former Relief Society president in this stake. She is a political science professor at Suffolk University in Boston, and several years ago she focused a class on the plight of child soldiers. She chose Uganda, because they speak English and the materials about it would be accessible for her students. At the end of the semester, the students went to Uganda and built a house for a former child soldier. There she met many other survivors and heard their stories. They are the kind of stories you don't want to hear. I was surprised to learn that half of the children kidnapped to become child soldiers were girls. As part of their initiation, they were required to perform acts against members of their own families, so that they could never return home. They were forced to be soldiers as the boys were but also had to do all the cooking, cleaning, and campwork, and they were used as nighttime slaves. It was common for these girls to have four to five children by the age of twenty. They've only known desperate poverty and lives of untold horror. How does one even begin to approach a problem like this?

Judy Dushku opted to believe in the women, their inspirational womanhood, and their power to heal each other. She realized that what they needed even as much as homes was actually something profoundly doable: they needed a new community and new families with new family relationships. These women needed sisterhood. And she thought to herself, Who better to build community, to foster family, to create sisterhood, than Mormon women, who are raised in the language of home, family, and Zion? So she returned to Uganda with Mormon women and built more homes, and eventually, at the request of the Ugandan women, she built them a community center, where visiting therapists offer therapy through art, sports, film making, and recording the women's stories . . . gathering their histories—or in Judy's words—their “herstories,” so that they are not lost or forgotten. Judy did not tell them what they needed—her act was to follow their lead, to truly hear, in capital letters, *What The Women Said*, and to validate that with action.

I only know about Judy and her organization, which is called Tharce-gulu, from the periphery. But when I read about it, or watch videos online, it is striking to me that Sister Dushku is spontaneously called, by men and women alike, “Mother Judy.” She takes a crushing burden and believes that these women know the pathway through their own pain. She offers a safe haven, a womb even,

where they can enter and start over, gestating from “victim . . . to survivor . . . to thriver.” This is the healing all women need—this is the healing all women do, and this is this healing, this is the rebirth, that makes them mothers in Zion.

In the book *Words of Wisdom: A Collection of Quotes for LDS Women*, one woman named Susan Harriss said:

Families are not an end, but a means to an end, which is the transcendent principle of love: As mothers, as fathers ... we may set aside our interests time and again; we may practice watching the interests of others. But if that sacrificial love starts with our children and stops there, we will have lost our opportunity to fulfill Christ's commandment, and so have everything that he has promised. Christ's commandment is that we love, not just our children, but one another! Having loved our own, we now can love the world. Now we rise to the task for which parenting prepared us.²

You can read about a diverse array of captivating mothers in Zion online at the Mormon Women Project, which profiles sisters who practice their inspired womanhood (www.mormonwomen.com).

Inspirational womanhood will never be crushed out—but the world has long been a desert for women, and if we want a rose to bloom here—if we want acres full of them—then we need many gardeners, and a lot of purposeful care.

To inspire, women need to be inspired. Here is my recipe for the inspired woman, which I call, “The Care and Feeding of Matriarchs.”

Women need to gather as women, unscripted.

Women need safety, on a community level. It can be difficult for women to be truly honest when in public.

Women need to discover, not just be taught. Women need to teach. Women's words need to be written, archived, and studied. Women need to be quoted by others. The first time I heard myself quoted, which was by Linda Eastly, it was riveting. I had said something profound, and I had been heard, remembered, and recycled to the community as a source of inspiration. It was not a pride thing—it was a moment of clarity when I knew my inspirational worth.

Women need legacy—a connection to our social, historical, and religious foremothers. Right now, many mothers are shadowed in the silence and confusion surrounding polygamy—we don't want

to talk about it, so we don't talk about them, or have any interest in what they have to say. I have spent many hours reading words penned by polygamous pioneer women—and found them to be phenomenal. We need to raise the mother's teachings to prominent places in our spiritual genealogies if we are ever to really start delving our female theology in this gospel.

Women also need vision—an idea of what we are becoming. A woman will never “be like Heavenly Father” because she can never be a father—a woman needs a peek behind Heavenly Mother's veil if she is to ever see her own reflection. This is a righteous desire.

Women need matriarchs. They need others to recognize their matriarchs.

Women need people to recognize that female spirituality is divine, and not to dismiss it as “emotion.” We have truth, even if it sometimes comes through a literal veil of tears.

Women need time and space to mourn. They should not always be expected to smile. Women also need high adventure.

Women need their spiritual concerns to be brought before the Lord in their homes, in their wards, and at the general level. Also, women need ecclesiastical leadership to legitimize and speak the language of inspirational womanhood. We need them to utilize female spirituality when making stewardship decisions.

Women need to be trusted to solve their own problems—given the chance, they will innovate and execute inspired solutions through the Spirit, as they always have, and contribute these solutions to the spiritual life of the Church. We can look to them to heal not just women's problems, but the world's problems.

To do so, women need the raw materials of creation. A woman, like God, cannot create something out of nothing. In recent years, the world has awoken to the now-established fact that, when women control economic resources and when they participate in social and political power, society at large benefits in such ways and at such a magnitudes that similar results cannot be obtained with any other approach.

And finally, women need skills to expand their influence and power to enact their spiritual truths. This means they need time to develop skills and to pursue high-impact opportunities, without being burdened by guilt that they are neglecting their families, without the dread of perfectionism, and without being forced to choose

between their relationships and the causes they believe in.

When woman is healed, when Jesus declares, “Mother, you are reborn,” what could women do then? It is a question worthy of fasting and prayer.

I hope I’ve made a case that women have a female spirituality to offer, that they are worth listening to, and that in the status quo you have to go out of your way to truly comprehend and develop their power. The effort is worth it, though, and let me tell you why. I believe that, just as in the account of creation, the work will never be finished until woman is complete and fully alive. Perhaps there is a reason that Zion, the modern family of God, is portrayed not as a kingdom, but as a woman.

Doctrine and Covenants 82:14:

For Zion must increase in beauty, and in holiness; her borders must be enlarged; her stakes must be strengthened; yea, verily I say unto you, Zion must arise and put on her beautiful garments.

Later in the Doctrine and Covenants 113, it is asked what Isaiah means when he says, “Put on thy strength, O Zion.” The answer follows:

[Isaiah] had reference to those whom God should call in the last days, who should hold the power of priesthood to bring again Zion, and the redemption of Israel; and to put on her strength is to put on the authority of the priesthood, which she, Zion, has a right to by lineage; also to return to that power which she had lost. (D&C 113:7–8)

The last thing a woman in Zion should ever feel is powerless.

Our duty is to build Zion, in every woman here, and in every woman everywhere. I am grateful for my many mothers and fathers, some of them in this room, who have built me.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. “It Is Not Good for Man or Woman to Be Alone” *Ensign*, November 2001.
2. *Words of Wisdom: A Collection of Quotes for LDS Women* (need rest of cit.) . . .