

EXPONENT II: EARLY DECISIONS

Claudia L. Bushman

Last year was the fortieth anniversary of *Exponent II*, a “modest, but sincere,” as we called it, little newspaper begun in Massachusetts written by and for LDS women. That brings it within two years of the lifetime that the old *Woman’s Exponent* was published from 1872 to 1914. All indicators suggest that *Exponent II* will last longer than the earlier paper.

A student at Berkeley who was doing a thesis on *Exponent II* recently contacted me asking for some basic information about the paper. I said that she should try to look at early accounts, as later ones tend toward the extravagant. I told her that the paper was my husband’s idea, that we wrote the paper for ourselves and friends, and that we were not trying to reform Salt Lake. She said I was wrong, that it was inspired by Susan Whitaker Kohler’s discovery of the *Woman’s Exponent*, and that we had sent copies to the wives of General Authorities to enlist them. What is more, she cited my writings as evidence. She said if I didn’t know how things had happened, could I please direct her to someone who did.

Well, history is malleable. I write history. Innocent little things in the past turn out to have big meaning. *Exponent II* is now old enough to have a mythic past. I add to it whenever I can. I don’t like to repeat myself, although I certainly do.

Exponent II was part of big movements of its day, an LDS expression of the then current women’s liberation movement and also part of the Church’s New Mormon History. The magazine was closely linked to the Mormon History Association and its founder Leonard Arrington. My husband was a founding member of MHA and one night after meetings,

Richard told Leonard about our LDS consciousness-raising group in Boston. None of us women would have presumed to attend meetings with those real professionals, but I soon received a long, detailed letter from Leonard offering suggestions, sources, and help. We could not believe that he actually was writing to us. We became an outpost of the Church History operation and the MHA. The MHA honored two of our early publications, the pink issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*¹ and our published essays, *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah*,² with special commendations: not money, but honor. We dedicated *Mormon Sisters* to Leonard because, as we said, “He takes us seriously.” Not many people did then.

My husband was inspired to suggest a newspaper. I came home from one of our many early events and told him that we had had another great success. What could we do now? He suggested a newspaper like the old *Sunstone Review*. I related this idea at our next meeting and there was enthusiasm. There were, however, some bumps along the way. The one person in our group who actually had newspaper experience felt that she could not edit the paper. Carrel Sheldon, who was more responsible for the publication of *Exponent II* than anyone, turned to me and said, “Well, you’ll just have to do it.” I had a full plate then and suggested that we finish up *Mormon Sisters* first. Carrel said, “No! We have to begin right now.” And so we did.

1. *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6, no. 2 (1971). See also Claudia Bushman, “A Wider Sisterhood,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 96–99; Claudia L. Bushman, “My Short Happy Life with *Exponent II*,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 179–92; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “The Pink Issue and Beyond,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1981): 28–39; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Mormon Women in the History of Second-Wave Feminism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 45–63.

2. Claudia L. Bushman, ed., *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah* (Cambridge, Mass.: Emmeline Press, 1976).

I began to assemble some copy. Carrel worked on publishing possibilities. We actually had in hand the remains of a small grant that Leonard Arrington had given us to help with our library and copying expenses. I think we were given \$250 and, being very thrifty housewives, we still had \$234 left. Our first issue was printed with that grant from the Church History Department. In our first issue—which we sent free to everyone we could think of, with multiple copies to many to give out to their friends—we solicited subscriptions at \$2 for four annual issues. *Exponent II* was an innovation, a new development, and subscriptions poured in to see what we would do next.

It was a lively little sheet with news and features. We quoted from the original *Woman's Exponent*. We had a column called “The Frugal Housewife.” We had short news bits. We did profiles of interesting LDS women. Judy Dushku took on the longest-lasting column of the enterprise, “The Sisters Speak,” soliciting responses to a question she would pose in each issue. The paper still has that very popular feature. We invited articles and book reviews. We wanted wide participation. Carolyn Person did dashing illustrations, since described as subversive. I wondered whether I should hold back on material and good ideas, fearing that we might have nothing for our next issue, but my experience said to use up everything we had freely. There will always be more and plenty to say and print next time.

Many readers responded emotionally to our little sheet. Where had we been? How grateful they were to have the voices of sympathetic sisters, of friends. They sent donations. Their letters made us weep. We were meeting a need. It was a heady experience for us. Suddenly, people took us seriously. They asked our opinions. It was exhilarating.

I was naïve and made two costly mistakes early on. I was interviewed by the *Boston Globe* and spoke frankly and enthusiastically. I thought the resulting article was pretty good. I haven't seen it for forty years and do not remember the specifics, but I know that in my euphoria I stepped on some toes. A copy with sections highlighted in yellow appeared on

the bulletin board at church. People sent copies to Salt Lake City, and I understand that it was discussed in high places. Still enthused and exuberant, we sent copies of our second issue to the wives of all the General Authorities in care of the Church Office Building. We thought that they would be interested in what we were doing and wanted them to know about it. The staff at the COB was appalled by all this newsprint, and we received firm instructions never to do that again. I think they felt it unseemly that we should presume to send our grassroots musings to those at a higher level. They may have feared that we were seeking an implicit endorsement, something that had not occurred to us. I had honestly thought that they would be pleased. Ah, well.

Our group had never been exclusive and we constantly invited new people to come along with us. The talents of all could be utilized. People could spend some or a lot of time with us. I think we were really open. But some began to define us as illegitimate. Others said they were too busy, as we certainly all were. They disapproved of our taking on this public life when the domestic one was a woman's ideal. They perceived rebellion against leaders. Some even wrote anonymous letters to Church headquarters to warn them of this Cambridge rebellion.

Eventually there was some response from Salt Lake. My husband was the Boston stake president. He had not opposed the paper. After all, it was his idea. But some deemed it inappropriate that his wife should lead this marginal endeavor. Elder Robert D. Hales, visiting for conference and staying with us, made an appointment to talk to me. We stayed up until the early hours discussing the situation. He was a person we knew, who had been in our midst, and so a friend as well as an authority. He advised me to close down the paper which, he felt, would do us irreparable harm with the authorities. His repeated phrase was "No good can come from this."

I told the group of this encounter at our next meeting and suggested that we close down. But the feeling was strong against that. After much discussion, we decided that all active members should write letters detailing

what the paper had meant to them. A large sheaf of impassioned prose made its way to Elder Hales. I didn't write one of those letters, but they still exist somewhere and would make very interesting reading today. We need to find them.

Our visitor took the letters to Elder L. Tom Perry, then a new General Authority, who had been our previous stake president and said that he thought that these women deserved a response. And so forty years ago, the now late, great Elder L. Tom Perry made a special trip to Boston to talk to this little group of housewives, urging caution, saying that better things would come our way if we gave up the paper.

From these two encounters I took away two major phrases that I remember and frequently think about. The first was "No good can come from this," a damning judgment of our little venture. Can that be right? One supporting reason was that we would be damaged in the eyes of the people in Salt Lake when important and interesting opportunities came for women. I agree that we had been damaged in some eyes, and that it was already too late. But what are those good opportunities that would arise for women? Did I miss them?

I cannot agree that no good has come from it. There have been forty years of deep friendship in the changing group. The paper has provided interesting positions for many women, working together over the years, encouraging writing and publication, always a good thing. It is a voice for women in the Church when women's public voices in the *Relief Society Magazine* and Relief Society classes have been hushed. And it includes many voices, many points of view.

I had faced the fact that, although leaders would never act to close the paper down, I could not be involved in it because my participation suggested support from the Boston Stake because of my husband's position. The other takeaway was that, "It's just the facts of life." That one I agree with.

Elder Perry told us that he could find no fault with the early issues of the paper, which he had read on the airplane on the way out. But he, and

other brethren, he told us, were concerned with what it might become. They hoped that the workers would be wise enough to discontinue it when it began to do harm. Again, they feared that involvement would do damage to our good names. But it is just the facts of life. And of course, they were right. Just look at all the terrible things I have done since.

Leaving *Exponent II* was very painful for me, but I don't engage in wars that I cannot win. Instead, I try to keep my head down and shift to other projects. My leaving to save the reputation of the stake calmed the minds of our visitors, and they said no more. *Exponent II*, wiser and more careful about what they say and how they say it, has survived for forty years, remaining useful to the many people it serves as a vehicle for expression and information. I do not believe that anyone has bothered the publication again over these forty years.

The whole episode with *Exponent II* and the women's group was hugely transforming for me. I was not a writer. I did not like to write. I could not write. But in those activities, I had to write. So I wrote. I still don't like to do it, but I write a lot. *Exponent II* changed my life. I do things now that I never thought I would or could do. *Exponent II* was one of the greatest experiences of my life.